Part One: The Railroad is on its last legs after the attack on Switchboard. After hearing some rumors about the Institute's activities around an abandon vault, Deacon goes there to investigate. What he finds there sparks his curiosity – a woman two centuries out of time.

Part Two: Nora brings a breath of fresh air to the isolated society. But not everyone tolerates her outsider view. Can she change the Institute, one scientist at a time?
Ghost of Yesterday

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*The Railroad is on its last legs after the attack on Switchboard. After hearing some rumors about the Institute's activities around an abandon vault, Deacon goes there to investigate. What he finds there sparks his curiosity – a woman two centuries out of time.*

**Project Wanderer**

**Chapter One: Ghost of Yesterday**

The sun was shining from the clear blue sky. No rain, no radiation storm, not even a cloud in sight. The gentle wind was a nice touch, cooling the sunburnt skin on his arms as a man with sunglasses leaned back on the chair with his hands laced behind his head. All in all, it was a perfect day for outdoor activities. And what he was doing certainly counted as one.

**Stakeout.**

Sitting under a tree on top of a gentle hill, Deacon lazily reached for a pair of binoculars and scanned the area below. Nothing. No signs of any movements, except for a few birds landed on the dirt patch, pecking at the dead grass to find some worms or nuts, or whatever the hell they ate.

Things were quiet, as they should be. After all, the ruin below had been long abandoned. Two centuries, to be exact. Nothing left but two empty trailers, rusty cars, skeletons of those who'd perished when the big one dropped. The center piece, of course, was a giant, circular concrete pad on the ground – the entrance of Vault 111. That was his target.

Putting down the binoculars, Deacon opened the cooler on the small table and grabbed a certain content from within. Fancy Lads Snack Cakes. No, he didn't have sweet tooth, nor did he find a big delight in every bite like their billboards would suggest. But it'd become a habit to have one every once in a while. Because it reminded him of Barbara.

His wife. The woman he loved the most. The most beautiful and amazing woman... who had been murdered because of him.

Barbara used to love these cakes.

Deacon took a bite. It tasted as stale as he remembered. Perhaps these junk foods used to be as good as it'd been advertised two centuries ago. Perhaps everything was simply much better before the bomb dropped. The old world, with its books and magazines, musics and gadgets, fancy outfits and beautiful women. Unlike some aspects of his life, his love for all things pre-war was not exactly a secret. Those antiques reminded him there was once a better time, a better place. Sometimes, he wished he were born two centuries earlier. Then, maybe Barbara would still be alive...

Deacon shoved the remaining cake into his mouth in one big bite, and swallowed his daydream along with the sickeningly sweet lump of sugary flour. Forcing himself back to his duty, Deacon stood and stretched, reaching for the binoculars once more to do his duty. No activities
whatsoever. Even the birds were gone.

There had been sightings of synths activities near this vault ruin. Hard to miss, really. Chrome domes didn't exactly come with camo paint job. Having a bunch of metallic skeletons charging up the hill would alarm even the most oblivious wastelander. Deacon was curious, to say the least. What the hell was the Institute doing in the vault?

For a long while, there was not a single movement down below. So far, he hadn't seen one single synth. Hell, he hadn't seen anything but birds. Doubts began to set in as the shadows on the ground grew longer. This stakeout could be a giant waste of time. Still, years of chasing this elusive ghost called the Institute had honed his senses. The Institute was here; he could smell them.

Under normal circumstances, he would do a quick recon. Sneaking in and out, quiet as a shadow. But it's not even remotely an option today. As good as he was, there was no way he could operate the elevator without waking up half of the Commonwealth.

And so, Deacon settled back onto the chair and waited.

Waiting was part of his job as a spy – or he preferred to call it intel gathering. But sometimes, boredom would get the better of him. His mind would wander, and he wasn't careful, he'd find himself lost in the past he'd rather forget.

Even the best damned liar couldn't lie to himself 24/7. At some point, he would slip, and the ghosts of yesterday would catch up with him.

And so he ran, nonstop for two decades. Running mission after mission, changing one face after another. But no matter how much he'd changed, what face he's wearing, he still hated what he saw in the mirror. For he knew the truth, the fraud that he was--

Then, a thunderous noise broke the peaceful silence and halted his dangerous train of thought. The center of the circular pad began to descend. Someone had called for the elevator from within. With bated breath, Deacon watched like a hawk through the binoculars. Moments later, the pad once again ascended back to the surface. But this time, it wasn't empty. Right in the center of the pad stood a figure in blue. A woman.

A grin slowly spread on Deacon's face. Bingo.

Her body shivered uncontrollably, her teeth clicked within locked jaws, her breaths coarse, shallow. But she was breathing. She was breathing while her husband was not.

The elevator slowly brought Nora closer and closer to the surface, away from the tomb where Nate permanently laid to rest. Blue, frozen, and dead. This same, goddamned elevator had brought Nora and her family down to the vault not long ago, perhaps an hour tops. And within sixty minutes, her entire life had changed. She was frozen, her husband was killed, and her son... kidnapped.

Whoever took Shaun could not have gone too far. She would find her baby, and kill that son of a bitch who murdered Nate.

The sun began to shine on her face. Raising up a shaky arm, Nora blocked the blinding light. The warmth of the sun burned her frozen skin. When her eyes finally adjusted to the daylight, what she saw was complete, utter horror.
The cars, the fences, the trailer, everything that had been there an hour ago was now abandoned and rusted. Bodies littered the ground, no flesh, no blood, but only skeletons. Skeletons with torn outfits she could recognize. The guards, the soldiers, and a few civilians. They'd been here not long ago. But now...

Her eyes looked up. All the trees were dead. The giant brand new billboard Vault-tec had put up there last week, was now falling apart. Colorful paints somehow had chipped and faded in less than an afternoon.

What the hell was going on?

Nora stumbled out of the platform, feeling as though she was walking into twilight zone. This had to be a dream, a nightmare. When she woke up, Nate would be snoring softly next to her, and Shaun would be sleeping in his crib.

Yes. This was just a nightmare.

Wake up, Nora. Goddamn it! Wake up!

A/N: Confession: I never planned on getting addicted to a character in Fallout/Elder Scroll. Those two are my favorite series, but I was always in for the loots, the environment, the sandbox playground. Until I met Deacon.

So here's another story with the best liar in the Commonwealth.

Also, I don't have a beta reader, so please excuse the typos and mistakes.

More to come. I'm posting all my stories on both FF.net and AO3 (currently in a process of moving stories to AO3, it'll be a while until they are all there), as well as putting updates on tumblr. Thanks for reading!

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It's All Over But the Crying

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Two: It's All Over But the Crying

This had to be a dream.

Nora stumbled down the path that she'd walked on only one hour ago. Step after step, she headed down the hill towards her home. Her legs trembled, her body shook uncontrollably. The sun was shining bright above, yet she was freezing. It didn't make sense. None of these did.

This had to be nothing but a vivid dream.

Across the creek, she saw familiar houses. The Callahan’s home was where it's supposed to be. The house over there belonged to the Ables. Next to it, the Whitfields. Then, the Cofrans. All the buildings were there, yet... they were all destroyed...

This had to be a nightmare.

Nora hurried across a broken bridge – the same sturdy bridge she'd crossed not long ago, now threatened to break under her weight. The idyllic neighborhood she had called home was now a ghost town. Torn buildings, fallen lampposts, rusty mailboxes, abandon tricycles. Sanctuary Hills was dead.

Nora took a shaky breath and dug her nails into her palms. She could feel the pain.

This wasn't a nightmare.

She took a hesitant step towards her own house, too afraid to find out what it looked like. It's the place where she'd moved in while she's pregnant, where they'd brought Shaun back from the hospital, where they'd built a life, a dream upon.

Nora stopped in front of a house. Her house. Light blue panels were torn or peeled from the frame. Bright red door left ajar, hanging from a skewed frame. Through the broken windows, she could see the damages within. The couch Nate had insisted on buying was now covered with dirt and burned marks. The antique armoire she'd inherited from her mother – although still standing – was broken. The curtains she had painstakingly chosen were all gone. Her favorite rug was half-burned, half covered with moots. The globe Nate’d bought for Shaun was now lying sideways on the damaged kitchen counter, its base missing.

Nora tore her gaze from the house to stop herself from digging further. The longer she looked, the more she's convinced it wasn't the same house she'd left an hour ago. It was as if she had entered the Twilight Zone. Only that she wasn't playing a part in her favorite TV show.

This was real.

Her husband was murdered. Her son was kidnapped. And her house was destroyed.
This was all painfully real.

Then, she heard a noise. A light hum of propeller engine, accompanied by a few metallic clicks.

Nora knew this familiar sound. “…Codsworth?”

Around the corner came a Mr. Handy. He stopped in his tracks when he saw her, all three of his ‘eyes’ turned towards Nora. “…As I live and breathe…”

The spotless, shiny Mr. Handy was now far less polished. Grimes and dirt covered his chrome body. But Nora knew it was the same Mr. Handy that had become part of her family.

“Codsworth!”

“Oh! It's.... it's REALLY you!” Codsworth floated to her, sounding like he was about to cry. “Miss Nora!”

“Oh god! You're still here!”

“So good to see you again, mum! You've no idea how horrible it's been without anyone to talk to, no one to serve. Where is sir, by the way?”

Nate... The lump in her throat almost suffocated her. “…He's... he's dead…”

“Oh dear god! …But I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised, it's been two hundred years, after all.”

Nora could only blink hard. “…What did you say? ...Two hundred years?”

Deacon blinked.

Carefully hidden out of sight, Deacon had heard every single word from the reunion between the woman and the Mr. Handy.

And it was a tale so crazy even he couldn't make up. Frozen for two hundred and ten years, husband murdered, baby kidnapped. If he hadn't watched her crawled out from the vault, Deacon would have called bullshit.

Still, those were just words. There's one way to find out if she was telling the truth, or this was a very elaborate lie weaved by the Institute. Leaving the woman with her robot friend, Deacon quietly sneakedit out of her backyard and headed back to where it all started. Vault 111.

The vault was down right creepy. It didn't take long for Deacon to locate both cryogenic chambers. The larger one contained more than a dozen pods with frozen corpses trapped forever within. The smaller chamber housed eight, only one of them was left open, empty.

A quick check at the terminal nearby told him about the equipment malfunction that inevitably killed everyone.
Except Nora.

Either she was the luckiest (or unluckiest) woman in the Commonwealth, or there was some foul play going on. And Deacon would bet all the caps in the ‘Wealth that it had nothing to do with luck. Her pod had been unlocked intentionally. By whom? He had a pretty good idea. But the question that had been bugging him was why. Why did the Institute release her?

Right across from her now-empty freezer was a pod with a man inside. One bloodstained bullet hole decorated his blue vault suit. Nate, the husband, Deacon deduced and recalled his name from the conversation he’d eavesdropped earlier. Curiosity made Deacon studied the man for a brief moment. Masculine, square jaws, strong nose. A visible scar on his cheek told Deacon the man had seen some recent battles. Perhaps a cop, or a soldier, definitely a protector.

A man in his prime, who had been murdered after his infant son had been ripped from his arms.

Deacon didn't even want to imagine how devastating the last few seconds of the poor man's life had been.

Who the hell would do something like that?

The chill within the chamber made Deacon shiver. Or perhaps it was because he's standing in the middle of a murder scene. A massacre.

“Your wife is back home with your Mr. Handy.” Deacon told the frozen man within the Vault-Tec tomb. “Rest easy, pal. I'll keep an eye on her.”

Holding in her shaky hands was a picture frame. Within the frame was a faded picture of a young couple, smiling. One in a beautiful white dress, the other in a sharp black suit. Nora ran a trembling finger across the photograph, gently stroking Nate's handsome face. It'd been a few years, but she remembered her wedding day as clearly as if it was only yesterday. The adorable way Nate had stuttered through his vow, or how she had almost twisted her ankle by skipping down the steps of the church wearing high heels and clumsy wedding gown. Their first dance, their cake...

Now all she had left from Nathan was this wedding photo, and his ring.

This was the only picture that had survived the bomb. Codsworth had found it and carefully preserved it, hoping against hope that one day the mister and missus would return. In the end, Nora did, but without Nate, without Shaun.

Sitting on the floor by the baby crib, Nora held the wedding ring tightly inside her fist, and pressed the picture frame onto her heart, hugging it as though she was clinging onto her husband for dear life. As the stars began to shine outside, alone in her son's room, the cruel reality finally set in. Her life was gone, her family was gone, the world she knew was gone. Everything, gone. For the first time in her adult life, Nora broke down and cried.
From a distance, Deacon heard some noise. His ears guided him through the neighbor's yard and into the backyard of the vault dweller's house. Now closer, he could hear the sound – a heartbreaking sound of a woman crying.

Noiselessly, he sneaked up closer. Staying in the shadows, through the broken window, Deacon peeked inside a room. A broken blue crib and a destroyed changing table told him this room used to belong to the missing kid. At the corner, slumping against the wall was the grieving mother – the woman who had everything had been taken from her after waking up from a two-century long nap.

The paranoid part of him told Deacon this story had yet to be verified, warning him to observe but not get involved. Yet, a tiny part of him that had been long buried saw a kindred spirit in the weirdest way. For he, too, had his whole life ripped from him overnight. Many, many years ago...

*Stay away from the Pandora box,* his instincts told him. Even after two decades, old wounds could still hurt like hell when provoked. Pain might subside, but the scars? They're here to stay. His never-talked-about nightmares were solid proof to that theory.

The road to recovery after a life-changing loss was a never-ending journey. Deacon knew all too well. And tonight was the first of many, many nightmare-filled nights to come for Nora. The first night was always the hardest. Ignoring his self-protective instincts for once, Deacon lingered in the shadows longer, observing – and if he could be honest to himself, guarding.

Moments later, the Mr. Handy flew into the room. The noise from the robot's engine thruster was the only sound in the entire Sanctuary for a long moment as he hovered near his mistress.

“We will go to Concord, Miss Nora. First thing tomorrow,” the robot promised as he draped an old blanket over the woman's shoulders. “We will bring young Shaun back home. Don't you worry.”

“...Thanks, Codsworth,” the woman whispered, her voice coarse from crying. “You are all I have left.”

“Hush, mum. It's so good to have you back. Welcome home.”

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A/N: It's fun to write two Deacon/Nora stories simultaneously, with them in different stages of the story. If you're also reading “Trust No One,” this story is not a prequel to that. At least for now, I intend for them to take a different path when time comes. But who knows? Characters can and do take the steering wheel from me and take the story to whichever directions they see fit. Shepard and Kaidan have done just that. I suspect Deacon and Nora might.

Anyway, thanks for reading!

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Crawl Out Through the Fallout

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Three: Crawl Out Through the Fallout

Steel blue eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses glanced up and down the street of Quincy. No one was within eavesdropping range, but it didn't mean they were alone. Far from it. Perching on a dead tree branch, or a leaky roof, the Watchers were... well, watching. Those beady-eyed synthetic little bastards had the best vantage points. As long as the sun was still up, nothing's safe.

For now, though, the coast was clear.

From a dark alley, a man in sunglasses emerged and approached another man who was taking a cigarette break by the local cafe.

"Hey you," said the man in sunglasses with a casual nod, "you got a geiger counter?"

"Mine is in the shop."

Deacon had known this man for more than a year. Still, a code phrase was needed. There's no telling whether this was his old informant or a perfect synth replacement. In his line of work, you could never be too careful or too paranoid if you wanted to see another sunrise.

"I've been looking for a package," said Deacon quietly. "An old one."

"Yeah, took some digging," said the man under a smoky breath. "But finally tracked it down. Raiders intercepted it." He took another drag, covering his mouth as he continued, "Not the other guy. Package destroyed."

Another package lost. Son of a bitch. Swallowing a sigh, Deacon muttered only loud enough for the man to hear as he walked away, "Mailbox. Two blocks down."

Deacon disappeared back into the alley, detoured to the previous mentioned mailbox, and dropped a small package of caps inside. With that, his business in Quincy was concluded. Or so he thought until he crossed the street and walked past a gun shop.

"You," a raspy old voice called after him. "You are a man of many faces."

As if a thousand spotlights were suddenly shining on him, Deacon stopped dead in his tracks.

With his face remained perfectly still despite the horror that turned his stomach, Deacon turned to the owner of the voice and saw a tiny old woman sitting on chair outside the gun shop.

"Yes, I can see them all," the old woman continued, nodding to herself. "But none of it is you, is it?"

Deacon made a show of glancing around, looking as innocent as he could be. "Er, you talking to
“Yes, you, you poor kid... You've been running for so long, you don't even know how to stop.”

That sent a chill down his spine.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” said Deacon with a shrug and every intention to run the hell away from this crazy old psychic.

But what she said next nailed his feet on the ground. “I know what you're looking for, kid.”

His sunglasses concealed the eyes that were lit right up. He'd been searching for the Institute for years, but to no avail. How could this old woman know where it is?

Keeping his poker face intact, Deacon replied, “You mean the hidden treasure marked on a map I won from a poker game? All right, you got me. Where is it, then?”

“What you seek lies in the past,” she told him. “I can see it... I can see your salvation. Buried so deep within the earth... so cold...”

Barbara...

The old woman let out a long sigh. “That's all I can see right now. If you want more, bring me some jet.”

Deacon stifled a sudden laugh. Psychics and their vague predictions, tricks as old as time. He couldn't believe he almost fell for this bullshit. She was creative, he had to give her that.

He didn't have the heart to call her out, though, as a professional courtesy from one liar to another. “Sorry, I don't have any.”

“Come back when you have some, kid. The path you walk is a dangerous one. The Sight could help you.”

The office was spotless. Stark white walls, polished floor, simulated early morning sunlight shone softly from the ceiling. Fresh-cut flowers in a simple yet elegant vase was the only decoration in this otherwise sterile room.

Sitting behind a terminal, an old man in tailored white coat had already begun his work early this morning. His full head of dark hair and beard had long turned silver, but his fingers on the keyboard were as fast as they had been for the past decades, and his posture was just as straight.

Next to the computer was a neat stack of folders, a half-empty glass of water, and several little pills the man had forgotten to take.

A knock on the door interrupted the man's work. Not at all irritated, he glanced at the door as it opened and a middle-aged woman in pressed white lab coat stepped in.

“Good morning, Director,” the woman greeted.

“Status?” asked the old man, skipping the pleasantries.
“She made it back to Sanctuary Hills and reunited with the robot.”

The old man nodded. So far, everything was within parameters.

“Also,” the woman added, “feedback from one of the Watchers shows a man following her.”

“The same man who was waiting outside the vault?”

The woman nodded to confirm. “So far, he’s made no direct contact with our subject.”

A new variable? Interesting.

“Your orders, sir?”

“Observe for now.” The old man reached inside one of the drawers to retrieve a vacuum-sealed package. Within was a box of cigar and some bandages presoaked with blood stored in the lab. “It's time to leave the bread crumbs, starting from the old house.”

The woman took the package. “You think she'll find him?”

“I don't know. We're about to find out. One more thing, make sure M7-62 keep his men away from the house.”

“Already done.” The woman glanced at the pills by the glass of water. “And sir, don't forget your medicine.”

“Thank you, Allie. I know I can count on you.”

Sanctuary Hills. The perfect little suburb northwest of Boston. An ideal place to raise a family or to enjoy retirement after a fulfilling life.

But that was more than two hundred years ago.

Although the houses were either completely destroyed or falling apart, it's nothing a little imagination couldn't fix. As he quietly walked down the street, Deacon could see pre-war Sanctuary Hills in his mind's eye.

One-story houses in various pastel colors lined up neatly along either side of the street, each with a car parked in the garage on the side. Smaller cars for retired couples, bigger ones for families of four. At the end of this cul-de-sac community was a giant tree, where neighbors gathered around for a nice summer neighborhood block party. Endless supply of beers and Nuka-Cola stashed in several coolers, all iced cold and refreshing. Barbecued steaks from their own backyards were brought to one long table set underneath the tree. And, let's not forget, pies and cakes freshly baked from their kitchens – not the store bought Fancy Lads Snake Cakes, of course.

Life was good, until the bombs dropped.

But, of course, every moon has a dark side. From what Deacon had found in his little early morning recon, one of the friendly neighbors was a drug dealer. Not even worth batting an eye in wasteland standard, but a blemish in the otherwise idyllic pre-war setting.

Still, what he wouldn't give to be born two centuries earlier and lived a peaceful, mundane, domestic life here with someone he loved.
Barbara would have loved this place...

*There's no synth two hundred years ago,* said a voice inside his head.

Sometimes, Deacon really hated that voice. That gentle reminder effectively slapped him out of his reverie. The sun was rising; it wouldn't be long until his target woke up from a restless sleep. What a rude awakening she was about to have, when she opened her eyes and realized her nightmare continued. It was not a dream.

Deacon knew. He knew it all too well. Two decades had passed and nightmares still refused to leave him alone. Every time it started in a different way, but in the end, it was all the same. Blood coated his hands, dripping from his fingertips. Barbara's bloodshot eyes stared into his, burgling, accusing. It was his fault, his goddamned fault.

A tiny sound from a distance made Deacon jump. Someone was talking. His ears pointed him to the direction of the only house with occupants. It was a voice of a man. The sound became more prominent as he noiselessly stepped over the fallen white pickle fence and entered her backyard.

“...Everything we do,” said a man from within the house, “no matter how hard, we do it for our family. Now say goodbye, Shaun.” A baby gurgled, and the father continued to probe, “Bye bye, say bye bye. Bye honey, we love you.”

With a click, the man and the baby disappeared. Carefully peeking inside the house, Deacon saw the woman in blue vault suit standing by the kitchen counter, her head hanging in sorrow, her eyes shut.

There was no baby, no father. The only remnant of the family she had left was in the holotape.

Deacon felt his heart sink to his stomach.

Then, after taking an audible, shaky breath, Nora replayed the tape once again.

“Oops.” The man chuckled as the baby giggled in the background. “No, no. Little fingers away. There we go. Just say it. Right there. Right there. Go ahead.” The baby made a noise and the man laughed. “Yay! Hi Honey! Listen... I don't think Shaun and I need to tell you want a great of a mother you are... but we're going to anyway. You're kind, and loving...” The baby suddenly laughed. “...and funny! That's right, Shaun. And patient. So patient. Patience of a saint, as your mother used to say.”

Deacon stepped away from the house, away from the man's loving voice, the baby's innocent babble, and the woman's heartbreaking quiet sobs.

It was then he suddenly realized that, somewhere in between the twenty-years worth of nightmares, he could no longer recall his wife's real voice.

“Bottle caps?” Nora asked.

“Yes. That's the standard currency,” Codsworth explained as they headed down the road. “Rather odd, isn't it? Come to think of it, I must have thrown out hundreds of them. If I'd kept them, we'd be rich, mum.”

The robot's lighthearted comment was his way to lift her spirit; and for that, Nora was grateful.
This world wasn't the same one she'd left behind. The water was irradiated, the air smelled wrong, the trees were dead. The occasional plants that had managed to thrive in this harsh environment were species Nora had never seen.

This was the end of the world. The end of her world.

Two hundred years had come and gone. Although, to her, it was only yesterday that they had planned a trip to the park, that Nate had nervously practiced his speech on war over and over again.

*War. War never changes.*

“Ah, Red Rocket,” said Codsworth at the sight of the station. “I remember when Miss Rosa brought her car in after fixing it herself-- Look what we have here. Well, hello there, pooch.”

A dog approached with its tail wagging. German shepherd. Nate’s favorite.

“Hey, boy,” said Nora to the dog when he stopped by her feet. “Are you lost?”

The dog barked twice, turned and walked a few steps, then looked at her with another bark.

“I think he wants us to follow him, mum,” said Codsworth.

The dog barked again as if in agreement, then headed down the road towards Concord.

Nora nodded. “Lead the way, boy.”

Staying at a safe distance behind, Deacon tailed his unsuspecting targets. A woman in vault suit, a robot, and a friendly dog. And here he thought he’d seen all the strange things the Commonwealth had to offer. The woman’s latest four-legged friend led the way to Concord, every so often he’d stop and wait for her to catch up.

Concord. Home of the never-ending turf war between raiders. Rifle in his hands, Deacon followed in shadows, as wary as ever. The way the woman walked right in the open made him cringe. If there’s any sniper around who’s worth their salt, her head would have been blown off by now. Lucky for her, most raiders weren’t capable snipers.

Or perhaps not so lucky, as a series of gunshot echoed through the quiet town, announcing the beginning of a fight somewhere. The dog bolted towards the sound. Then, much to Deacon’s dismay, after a brief hesitation, the woman followed.

Muttering a curse, Deacon had no choice but to tail them, moving from shadow to shadow, keeping his main target constantly in sight. Outside of a museum, a group of raiders were attacking three injured men guarding the entrance. A man in cowboy hat and long duster returned fire from the balcony above.

“Hey, up here! On the balcony!” yelled the man in cowboy hat to the woman approaching. “I’ve got a group of settlers inside! The raiders are almost through the door! Help us! Please!”

*Great. Thanks for painting a giant red target on her forehead.*

“Reinforcement!” warned one of the raiders.
Deacon hurried inside an empty shop and quickly made his way to the second floor. A decent vantage point was easily found by one of the many broken windows. From there, he peeked through his scope and found a raider flanking the woman in blue.

“Oh no you don’t,” Deacon mumbled and aimed. “She's under my protection until further notice, asshole.”

Trigger pulled. The raider dropped on the ground before he could ambush the walking pre-war relic.

One down. Nine more to go.

“Come on out,” Codsworth yelled, going after their attackers. “I've got a buzz saw with your name on it!”

She was not trained for this, she was definitely not ready for this. Yet Nora found herself holding a pistol, her back pressed to the brick wall of a building acting as her cover. The gun weighted heavily in her hand. Last time she'd fired a weapon was a trip to the shooting range with Nate for his birthday.

She was a lawyer, damn it, not a soldier. Her weapon of choice was wits and words, not guns.

Around the corner, she heard shots fired. Then came footsteps, approaching closer and closer.

Her own heartbeats were deafening.

*It should have been you, Nate. It should have been you who's out here looking for our son.*

Just then, everything seemed to stop.

*You can’t die here, honey,* she heard Nate's voice whispered gently as if he was right by her side. *Shaun’s out there, waiting for you. He's scared, he's hungry, and he's defenseless.*

For Shaun. Nora took a deep breath and focused.

*You have to find our son. Then you have to kill the bastard who murdered me.*

She swallowed hard, pushing all the fear aside, then clicked the safety off.

*You can do this, honey. I know you can. Just aim and shoot, like I taught you. Watch out for the recoil.*

“You can't hide from me!” a woman yelled, her voice closing in. “Oh, I know you're here--”

For Shaun. For Nate. Nora stepped out of corner, aimed at the startled woman's head, and fired.

Another raider down. No one saw him coming. Deacon shifted from balcony to balcony, sniping the raiders from a safe distance, staying out of sight. On the street below, he saw the woman in
blue gunning down her third kill – a raider that had been pinned down by the dog. Her Mr. Handy's kill count was higher, although the loyal robot never strayed far from his mistress.

In the heat of the battle, no one would ever question when a random bullet from above killed another raider. No one noticed his existence, and Deacon meant to keep it that way.

Soon, the last raider dropped dead. The man in cowboy hat disappeared into the museum and reemerged with a ragtag group a minute later. Three men, two women. One of them was an old woman who looked vaguely familiar. Staying in shadows, Deacon moved closer to listen in.

“Man, I don't know who you are,” said the man in cowboy hat to the woman in blue, “but your timing is impeccable. Preston Garvey, Commonwealth Minutemen.”

*Minutemen?* Deacon frowned. Great, another player entered the game. Welcome to the party.

The old woman from the group approached and studied Nora. “You're not what I expected Dogmeat would find in that little neighborhood.”

“Dogmeat?” Nora looked at the dog that had helped her in her very first fight. “That's an... interesting name. He's your dog?”

“Oh he ain't my dog,” said the old woman. “Dogmeat... he's what you'd call his own man. You can't own a free spirit like that. He chooses his friends, and sticks with 'em. He'll stay by you now. I saw it.”

Dogmeat barked.

“You... 'saw' it?” asked Nora.

“It's the chems, kid,” the old woman replied. “They gave ole Mama Murphy the 'Sight.' Been that way for as long as I can remember. I can see a bit of what was, and what will be. And even what is, right now.”

Psychic. Nora never believed in it.

Mama Murphy brought her wrinkly face closer. “You need to stay strong. Cause there's more to your destiny. I've seen it. And I know your pain.”

“My 'destiny'? What do you mean?”

“You're a woman out of time. Out of hope. But all's not lost. I can feel... your son's energy. He's alive.”

Eyes widened in shock, Nora froze at those words. “...How did you know?”

“I saw you leave that ice box. This whole world is like some bad dream you can't wake up from, isn't it?”

Less than a minute ago, Nora'd never believed in divination. But right now, she wasn't so sure. “Can you help me find my son? Do you know where he is?”
“Oh, I wish I knew, kid. I really do. But it's not like that I can see your son. I can just... feel his life force, his energy. He's out there. And even I don't need the Sight to tell you where you should start lookin'. The great, green jewel of the Commonwealth. Diamond City. The biggest settlement around.”

“What's in Diamond City?” Nora demanded, perhaps more forcefully than she should. “Is Shaun there?”

“Diamond City holds the answer,” said Mama Murphy. “But they're locked tight. You ask them what they know, but the people's hearts are chained up with fear and suspicion. But you find it. You find that heart that's gonna lead you to your boy. Oh, it's... it's bright. So bright against the dark alleys it walks.” The old woman shivered. “That's... that's what you need to do, kid. Follow the signs to the bright heart.”

A/N: Different than the in game sequence. Changes will be made to make the story flow better. Hope you'll stay tune for more.

Thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
It was Valentine's Day early evening. A young woman in red swagger coat hurried into a police office. Perfectly curled dark brown locks bounced on her shoulders with each step as she descended a short flight of stairs and headed straight to the information desk. The rapid clicking of her stiletto heels turned the heads of the remaining officers on duty in the precinct.

Aqua blue eyes glanced up and checked the clock hanging on the wall. 6:13pm. She had a date at seven – a very first Valentine's Day dinner with a young man she’d met only a few months ago.

“How can I help you?” a man asked.

She turned and saw a tall man in his thirties approached. The sleeves of his slightly wrinkled white shirt were rolled up to his elbows. She recognized him. Not because of a particularly handsome face or any distinguish features, but his name.

“Detective Valentine,” the young woman greeted with a polite smile on her painted lips.

“Yes?” Valentine arched an eyebrow, studying her with his keen eyes.

“I'm Nora Bennett from the district attorney's office. I'm here for the files for the Stanton vs. Laszlo case.”

“Ah, yes. I can get 'em for you.”

Nora followed the detective further into the office. “You don't remember me, do you? We met at my dad's retirement party last summer.”

Valentine took a longer look at her face, then recognition set in. “Bennett! You're old Bennett's kid. Yes, I remember now. You look... different.”

“Can't wear shorts to work now, can we?”

“You're with the D.A now, huh?”

“I'm an intern.” Nora flashed an easy smile. “All work, little pay.”

The detective nodded sympathetically. “That's how everyone starts. Even the judges.” He opened one of the many drawers and searched through the folders as he asked, “So how's your old man doin'?”

“Bored,” said Nora, scanning the office out of curiosity. Most of the detectives had left. On one particular messy desk, the lamp remained on, and there was a bouquet of flowers sitting by the typewriter. “Sitting at home is driving him crazy.”
Valentine chuckled. “Must be it's hard to sit back and relax after chasing bad guys all his life.” He pulled out a folder among many and handed it to her. “There you go, kid.”

“Much appreciated. I'll bring this to work tomorrow morning. It's nice to see you again.”

“Like wise. Before you go...” Valentine waved her to follow him to the desk with the bouquet. He took a notebook and scribbled a phone number on it, then handed it to Nora. “Take this. If you need any help, don't hesitate to call.”

“Thank you, sir. I might take you up on that.” Her gaze landed on the flowers – a dozen of red roses wrapped in a plain white paper. “But I think you are the one who might need help right now.”

He followed her gaze and asked, “How so?”

“The flowers are nice, but something's missing.”

The man held the bouquet in his hand and studied it as if it's a piece of evidence. “What's wrong with this?”

“You bought this from the flower stand around the corner, didn't you?”

“How did you know?”

“The white paper. I saw a man buying a bouquet on my here, he was complaining about the same white paper. The owner said they ran out of the usual pink ones.”

“Not bad,” said the detective with a small grin. “So what should I do, Miss Bennett?”

“Add a thick red ribbon to it. The flower stand should still have some, but they usually don't give it to you until you ask.”

“Red ribbon, huh? All right, if you say so.”

“Trust me, the devil's in the details, Detective. Your girlfriend will love it.”

The grin on Valentine's face widened a tab. “And how did you know it's for my girlfriend, not my wife?”

Nora gave a pointed nod at the man's left hand. “No ring.” Her gaze traveled up to his outfit. “Wrinkled shirt, old coffee stain on your tie.”

Valentine laughed. The voice was as warm as the man. “You are Bennett's kid, all right. You sure you don't want to be a detective?”

“And give my mom a heart attack? If I were born with a Y-chromosome, I might follow my dad's footsteps, but...” Nora shrugged, resigned to her fate. “Guess I'll fight my battles on the judiciary side of the system. With words, not guns.”

The Great Green Jewel of the Commonwealth was ahead. Painted signs pointed to the one and only entrance. Turrets were set at strategic locations high above. Guards were seen patrolling, wearing
old uniforms that had seen better days.

From afar, Deacon saw a guard approaching the rag tag team he'd been following. Hugging the shadows, Deacon quickened his steps until he was within hearing range.

“You from one of those vaults?” the guard asked, eyeing the woman in blue vault suit.

Why, yes, Deacon answered with a high pitched voice inside his head. *I wonder what gives me away.*

“I'm looking for Diamond City,” said Nora without answering the question.

*Good. Don't give them any more info than you need.*

“It's straight ahead. Follow the signs.” The guard's gaze followed the woman's retreating form much longer than he should, and Deacon knew just what exactly he was looking at.

*Enjoying the view, pal?*

Snorting in mild annoyance, he took a detour and left his target to her own devices for now. As incompetent as the guards could be, she should be safe as long as she stayed within the fortified perimeter.

Deacon entered what used to be the concession stands of the old stadium. From there, he ducked into a hole through a wall and headed into an abandon room lined with lockers, one of which held his own secret stash. He retrieved the DC guard uniform, and quickly changed into it, then quietly moved back into a side alley.

A block down, he saw his target heading his way. Squaring his shoulders, Deacon pulled out the baseball bat and marched down the street as if he had every right to be there. He allowed his posture to relax a bit as he headed to the entrance of Diamond City, looking every bit like a tired guard who was coming back from patrol.

No one ever suspected a thing.

“We were supposed to come here for game four,” Nora muttered as she glanced up at the high walls of the stadium. “Nate was so excited when he got the tickets from his former CO.”

“Ah, the World Series,” Codsworth replied. “Three to nothing lead against Texas, if I remember correctly.”

Nora nodded wistfully. “And game four at home. Nothing could possibly take our championship away... Beside a war.”

Ahead, she spotted a green statue outside the stadium entrance. The familiar sight brought her some sort of comfort. Decades – no, centuries ago, she had a photo taken by the statue during her very first trip to the ball game as a little girl of six.

Up close, though, the illusion of the pre-war world was shattered by the turret next to the statue.

“Welcome to the Diamond City,” said a guard returning from his patrol. “Head on inside.”
“I suppose a ticket is not necessary,” Codsworth commented with a faint chuckle. “This way, mum.”

With a faithful dog at her heels and her only remaining family leading the way, Nora entered what used to be Fenway Park. What greeted her was a yelling match between a plump, middle-aged man in suit and a slender dark-haired young woman in rusty red coat.

“You devious, rabble-rousing slanderer!” yelled the man, his face red with anger. “The... the level of dishonesty in that paper of yours! I'll have that printer scrapped for parts!”

“Oooh, that a statement, Mr. McDonough?” the reporter huffed and taunted. “Tyrant mayor shuts down the press?”

Politician versus reporter. Some things never changed. As a lawyer, Nora had more than her share of bad experiences with both.

Before Nora could quietly sidestepped the circus, the report caught a glimpse of her and told the mayor, “Why don't we ask the newcomer?”

*How about no?*

The woman pressed on, “You support the news? Cause the mayor's threatened to throw free speech in the dumpster!”

“I support the First Amendment,” said Nora in a well-rehearsed flat tone, her lawyer's voice. Annoyed with the situation, she couldn't help but quickly added, “Although my favorite is the Fifth.”

Somewhere, Nora heard a faint laugh in the background. Her reply seemed to temporarily throw the report off, long enough for the mayor to seek the opportunity to turn the tide.

The mayor quickly approached with an apologetic, yet fake smile. “Oh, I didn't mean to bring you into this argument, miss. No no no... You look like Diamond City material.” He waved his arms and presented his town with an overly jolly tone, “Welcome to the great green jewel of the Commonwealth. Safe. Happy. A fine place to come, spend your money, settle down. Don't let this muckraker here tell you otherwise, all right?”

The reporter snorted. “Greatest house of cards in the Commonwealth... until the wind blows.”

Pointedly ignored the comment, the mayor coughed and focused on Nora. “Now, was there anything particular you came to our city for? We have the finest restaurants, shops for all your needs, and a house available. Talk to my security if you are interested.”

“I'm looking for a missing person,” said Nora as calm as she forced herself to be. Yet her heart started to beat wildly inside her chest. “My baby boy. Shaun. He's less than a year old.”

“Wait...” the reporter interrupted, for once solemn and serious, “your son's missing?”

Nora nodded. “He's been kidnapped.”

“Oh god.” The reporter scowled at the mayor. “You hear that, McDonough? Is Diamond City Security just going to stand by while a mother, searches for her infant son, all on her own?”

“Don't listen to her,” said the mayor to Nora. “While I am afraid that our security team can't help following every case that comes through, I'm confident you can find help here. Diamond City has
every conceivable service known to man. One of our great citizens can surely find the time to help you.”

“This is ridiculous!” the reporter snapped. “Diamond City Security can't spare one officer to help?” She stepped up to the bigger man and demanded, “I want the truth, McDonough! What's the real reason security never investigates any kidnappings?”

“I've had enough of this, Piper!” warned the mayor, his cheerful facade instantly turned dark. “From now on, consider you and that little sister of yours on notice!”

“Yeah, keep talking, McDonough!” the reporter yelled after the retreating man. “That's all you're good for!”

Nora noticed the guards around merely watched the scene with little to no interest. It was as if they were forced to watch a rerun of the same old show.

Huffing, the reporter turned her attention back to Nora with a tired smile. “A big Diamond City welcome from the mayor. You feel honored yet, Blue?”

“Blue?”

“Your vault suit. And your eyes-- Not that I'm staring or anything.”

“Nora.” She extended a hand which the reporter took.

“Piper Wright. Reporter, Editor in Chief, and owner of Publick Occurrences. The only newspaper in Diamond City.” Piper quickly scanned her twice and declared, “I have an idea about an article you'd be perfect for.”

“An article?” Nora resisted a frown. “Sorry, but I don't have time for that.”

“Right, your son's missing...” Piper thought for a very quick moment then offered, “How about this? I'll help you find your son. In return, I want an interview. Your life story in print. I think it's time Diamond City had a little outside perspective on the Commonwealth.” She finished by flashing a charming smile. “So... what do you say?”

“It's always nice to have more friends, mum,” Codsworth commented gently.

“All right. I'm in,” Nora agreed. “But first, I need to find my boy.”

“And I know just the person you should talk to. Come on, Blue, I'll show you the way.” Piper leaded the way into the stadium. She paused at the top of the stairs and showcased the settlement. “The 'green jewel'. She's a sight, isn't she? Everyone who's anyone in the Commonwealth is from here, settled here, or got kicked out of here. A big wall, some power, working plumbings, schools, and some security goons are what make Diamond City the big monster it is. Heh. Love it or hate it.”

The hustle and bustle of city life was shrunk down to fit inside a baseball stadium. The once green field was now filled with mismatched metal shacks forming a giant maze. People weaved around the tiny alleys in between buildings, going on about their daily lives.

“I can't believe they turned the stadium into... this...” Nora muttered to herself as she headed down the long flight of stairs.

“You've been here before?”
“Last month. I came here with husband--” Nora stopped herself. No, it wasn't last month.

“Wait.” Piper turned to her. “Last month? I thought you're from the vault. You know, the suit, dead giveaway.”

“I'm not from the vault,” said Nora with a bitter taste in her mouth. “I was only there for less than half an hour before they...”

“They, what?” Piper prompted, her hazel eyes were as keen and sharp as any reporter Nora had encountered.

“...Before they put us in cryogenic pods. My family and I were frozen. For two hundred years.”

“Two hundred years?” Piper stopped dead in her tracks so quickly she almost stumbled down the stairs.

“Two hundred and ten years,” Codsworth corrected.

“Are you saying you were alive before the War?” the reporter fired a quick question, then another. “You saw everything before they blasted it into pieces?”

“Right before my eyes,” said Nora quietly. “I saw the mushroom cloud in a distance just before the elevator took us into the vault.”

“Oh my god!” Piper grabbed the older woman by the arms as if to see if she's real. “‘The Woman Out of Time.’ I cannot wait to write this article!”

“Miss Piper,” said Codsworth, “I believe we have a more urgent matter to attend to.”

“Sorry. This way, let's go talk to Nick. If your son is out there, Nick can find him. A word of warning, though. Don't let his appearance scare you. Nicky's a good guy, one of the few good ones left here in the Diamond City.”

“I won't judge the book by the cover.”

“This isn't any cover you've ever seen, Blue. Nick is... Well, he's a synth.”

Frowning slightly in confusion, Nora asked, “What's a synth?”

Piper arched an eyebrow up high. “Right. You're from the good ol' pre-war. Oh boy... Ready to hear about the Commonwealth's biggest boogeymen?”

Of all the people his walking pre-war relic could possibly meet.

Piper Wright. The infamous trouble maker. That woman had a nose of a hound, and an unhealthy amount of curiosity that could get her killed. And judging from the volume of her voice and the excitement on her face, the self-made journalist had just found the scoop of her lifetime.

The Woman Out of Time.

Deacon scowled at the upcoming title of Piper's article. Soon enough every one would know
there's a 200-year-old woman walking among them – one who was not a ghoul, but a perfectly preserved genuine pre-war smooth-skin with a full head of hair, a cute nose, pouty lips, and both ears still very much intact.

So much for being inconspicuous.

Well, at least that nosy reporter was pointing his target to the right direction: Nick Valentine.

The two women headed to the other side of the market place. One in red, one in blue. Neither knew they were being watched by a man in guard uniform. Together with a Mr. Handy and a dog, they turned the corner and disappeared.

As much as it bothered him to lose his visual on his target, Deacon forced himself to settle down. They'd be back soon enough, all he could do was wait.

As he made his way to the noodle shop, a boy suddenly bowled past, yelling, “You can't catch me!”

Right behind the boy, a sandy haired girl gave chase. She shot Deacon a very quick look, then pursued the other kid down into an alley.

Deacon watched the kids for a second then settled at the noodle bar. “Hey T-bot, what's new?”

“Nani-ni shimasu-ka?”

“The usual. I'm starvin'.”

“Piper?” A man in patched trench coat and fedora hat spared a quick glance at the vistors, then turned his attention back to the files on his desk. “No, I can't talk about my latest case no matter how many times you ask.”

“Not here for a scoop, Nick,” said Piper, leading the way into the cluster-filled office. “We have a mother here looking for her missing baby.”

That made the detective looked up from his files. A synthetic man, Piper had warned her. But Nora was not expecting this. A man with grayish complexion and glowing yellow eyes, part of the synthetic skin and flesh on the both sides of his face had fallen off, metallic jaws and wires underneath could be seen in plain view.

What threw Nora off completely was not his appearance, but his voice. She'd heard it before...

“Missing kid, huh?” said the detective. “Well, you've come to the right place. The name's Valentine.”

Then, Nora remembered. “...Detective Valentine.”

“Yes?” said Nick, casting a curious look at her.

“Nick Valentine?” Nora repeated. It couldn't be the same Valentine she once knew, but this man sounded just like him... “Nicolas Valentine? The lead detective of Operation Winter's End?”

The detective stood up so fast that the chair fell back onto the floor. “How did you know? Who are you?” He stepped closer to study her, wary but curious. “You look awfully familiar...”
“Nora Taylor, DA’s office,” she replied automatically out of habit. “I was Nora Bennett when we met. But that was...”

“Bennett?” Nick repeated that name, then looked up sharply in realization. “My god, it’s you! Detective Bennett’s kid. You’re still alive?”

“It’s really you, isn’t it?” She stared at the man in trench coat in utter confusion. It was the same Valentine, no doubt, for he remembered her father. Yet, this man was a synth. “But... how?”

“That’s the question I want to ask you. Come,” Nick beckoned and waved at an empty chair by one of the desks. “Have a seat. We have a lot to talk about.”

By the time Deacon finished his noodle, the sandy-haired girl returned and claimed the empty stool next to him. “Mister D.”

“Hey, lil sis.”

The girl snorted to cover her smile. “I’m not your sister.”

“Right you are,” said Deacon. “Hungry?”

“For caps.”

“The usual, then.” Deacon turned to the protecton. “Hey T-bot, one nuka-cola for the little lady.”

“Gary's wife is missing,” the girl mumbled while biting the straw, pretending to drink her cola. “The suspicious middle of the night stuff.”

“Who did it?” Deacon asked, taking a sip from his own bottle. “You think it's... well, you know.”

“That's what everyone says. Gary quit. He was super angry.”

“Huh. Maybe I should pay him a visit.”

“Until it cools off, bad idea,” the girl chided.

Deacon hid a smile at her reaction. That was only a test, and the kid passed with flying color.

He put a pack of gum drops on the table. “Here. Don't eat it all at once.”

“Oh I won't.” The girl was quick to grab it and gave it a shake. Satisfied with the amount of noise made by the caps within, she pocketed the candy with an impish grin. “Easy caps.”

“Keep it up, sis, and I'll double it next time.”

“Later, Mister Doe.” The girl left with a spring in her steps, looking as innocent as any wasteland kids could be. Looks, though, could be deceiving.

The girl was one of his many eyes and ears. Men and women, boys and girls, old and young. Known as Mr. Doe to most, Deacon’s business connections were well-established. But still, even with his extensive connections, Deacon had yet to find the exact location of the Institute.
But, he wasn't about to give up. Those bastards were out there, somewhere. And his latest find from Vault 111 might just be the break he was looking for. So far, no one had come forth and contacted the vault dweller yet. But the connection had to be there – his target was related to the Institute somehow, and he would dig it up sooner or later.

Out of the corner of his eye, Deacon saw a silvery floating ball gliding across the market place. A step behind was his target and her new friend. Deacon remained at the noodle stand, slowing finishing his Nuka-Cola as the two women headed back to Piper's office.

“Give him some time,” said Piper as they walked past him obliviously. “Nick will dig something up. Why don't you stay with us tonight, Blue? It's just me and Nat. My couch is cleaner than any bed at the Dugout Inn. Trust me.”

*Blue?* Deacon almost snorted at that nickname.

It's time to pay his old friend a visit. “Best noodle ever, T-bot.” He put some caps on the table. “Stay you.”

No one bat an eye when the guard returned to his duty after a well-deserved lunch break. Deacon made his way through the market place and followed the bright pink neon sign. The covered alley was dark, just the way he liked it. With a subtle check over his shoulder to make sure the coast was clear, he quickly disappeared into a threshold and opened the door at the end.

Deacon had an easy grin ready the moment he stepped into the detective's office. “Nick, you old dog. It's been a while, how's business?”

“Well, look what the cat drags in,” said Valentine, looking up from his notes. He gave his visitor an once over. “I don't even want to know where you got that outfit.”

“What, this?” Deacon gestured to his guard uniform. “Two words: Strip. Poker.”

The old synth shook his head, too used to Deacon's antics to take any words from him seriously. “So, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

Wiping his smile off, Deacon sat down by the detective's desk. “Your new client.”

Valentine's poker face was impeccable. “I have a few.”

“So you have pre-war relics walking into your office all the time?” Deacon leaned closer, resting his elbow on the table. “Look, I know where she's from, and I know she's looking for her son.”

The synth merely gave him a leveled stare, as tight-lipped as ever.

“Maybe I can help,” Deacon offered with a tone so sincere even he believed himself.

The detective studied him with his keen yellow eyes. “What is it to you?”

Valentine was way too shrewd to fall for most lies. Deacon knew if he didn't put the truth on the table, the man would never budge. Not the whole truth, of course. Not even half.

“I've been following her all the way to Diamond City,” Deacon told him.

“Why?”

“A woman in vault suit wandering with a Mr. Handy. A giant yellow 111 on her back. Wouldn't you be curious?”
Valentine's expression didn't reveal a thing. He only prompted, “Go on.”

“From what I've seen, she wouldn't last long in the Commonwealth. It's a miracle she made it here.”

“That still doesn't explain why you'd even bother to help. She's not a synth.”

“I'm doing this on my own, Nick. My boss doesn't even know I'm here.”

“You free-lancing now?”

“Things are quiet after... you know, what happened...”

Valentine nodded with a grimace. “Yes, I've heard. It was brutal. Sorry about that.”

“We're slowly getting back on our feet. While they're setting things up in our cozy new home, I've some free time.” Deacon shrugged. “The truth is... I've always thought we should branch out and help humans too. Sometimes, a little bit of help goes a long way.”

“No arguments from me.”

Gotcha. If there's one thing Deacon was good at, beside lying, it was reading people.

“You probably know this...” Deacon deliberately shifted in his seat before he continued with just a hint of an embarrass smirk. “I'm a sucker for pre-war things. Books, gadgets.”

“Women?”

That's not what he was going for, but Deacon sat back without saying a word, neither confirmed nor denied anything. If that's what Valentine wanted to think, let him.

“Never pegged you as the romantic type,” said Nick half-teasingly with a faint chuckle.

That's because I'm not.

Valentine's guard finally was now down, Deacon went in for the kill. “I checked out the vault and saw her husband, Nick. One shot in the chest, poor bastard never had a chance. His pod was right across from hers. That woman saw everything.” He paused and used a quieter tone, “...I know what it's like to have a loved one killed in front of you. That's why I want to help.”

Valentine studied him for a long moment. Deacon held his gaze steadily behind the sunglasses, never once flinched. Every good lie has some truth in it. And his? It was top-notch.

Eventually, the detective nodded. “All right. Here's what we know...”

Bingo.

“Kellogg.” Deacon scowled. “You sure?”

“She didn't hear a name. But bald head, scar across the left eye.”

for dangerous mercenary work, but no one knows who his employer is.”

_The Institute._ “Could be a coincidence,” said Deacon out loud, although he didn't really believe it.

“There's only one way to find out,” said Valentine. “He vanished a while back, his house in town is still empty.”

“In the abandoned West Stands,” Ellie added. “He had a kid with him. The boy was around ten years old.”

“Where's the kid?” Deacon asked.

“Gone,” Ellie replied. “No one's seen him since.”

“If it's Kellogg,” said Deacon after a thoughtful pause, “this is bad, Nick. You're in way over your head, pal.”

“So you gonna lend a hand or what?” asked Valentine.

“What's life without a little excitement, right?” said Deacon. “I'm in.”

“We should go Kellogg's last known address and see if we can snoop out where he went.”

“The sun's still out there,” Deacon pointed out. “Best do it while everyone is sleeping.”

The detective nodded. “We'll go before sunrise.”

“Security doesn't really go to that part of the town,” said Ellie. “But you two should still be careful.”

“I need to make some preparations,” said Deacon, leaving. “I'll be back by dawn. Don't start the party without me.”

The sun was slowing sinking when Deacon headed back into the market place. On his way to the one and only exit of the city, Deacon stopped by the store front of Publick Occurrences.

“Get your latest news here!” a dark-haired girl yelled, waving a copy of the paper in her hand. “We expose the truth behind the Institute!”

“A copy here, lil' lady,” said Deacon, dropping a cap in the box.

“There you go, Mister.” The girl handed him his paper. Natalie Wright, Piper's sister. Unbeknownst to her big sis, little Miss Wright had long established a working relationship with the man she only knew as Mr. Doe.

Deacon scanned the paper as he casually commented, “Heard your sister got a new friend.”

“The entire town knows by now. Piper is letting her stay with us, in return she's gonna give us an exclusive interview.” Nat flashed a proud grin. “This is gonna be huge!”

Under Piper Wright's watchful eyes, his target should be safe, at least for tonight.

“Keep an eye on her for me, will ya?” said Deacon.

The grin dissipated in the blink of an eye as the girl put her business face back on. “Five caps.”
“Five is it, but I want to know everything.”

“Deal.” The girl hesitated for a bit before she asked, “Hey, Mr. Doe. You think she's really from the vault?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. What do you think?”

Her face scrunched up thoughtfully for a moment. “I think she is. She doesn't look like any of us. She's too... clean.”

“Good eye, kiddo. Maybe you have what it takes to be my full-time partner some day.”

The girl snorted. “No thanks. If I leave, who's gonna expose the truth? Now, off you go. I've paper to sell.”

A/N: Pre-war Valentine = Humphrey Bogart.

Deacon is doing what Deacon does best. Nora is starting to show a little bit of her lawyer side.

This chapter is longer than the previous ones. But compare to the Mass Effect behemoth I've been writing, it's a normal length. Hope it's not too long.

And, if you're waiting for the ending chapter of Trust No One, it's coming. Writing fluffy scene isn't my specialty, so it takes a little longer.

Thanks for reading.

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“A cop.”

“A devil.”

“But, honey,” said Nate, “think about this: Shaun dressing up as a cop, just like your dad. How cute is that?”

“He can't even walk yet,” Nora countered. “Have you ever seen a cop being carried around?”

“Aw...” When her husband’s face started to morph into something very much resembled a sad puppy, Nora knew she had to look away.

“How about this?” she counter-offered, “He’ll be a cop next year. And the year after that, he can be a soldier, just like his daddy.”

“I like that.” A grin slowly spread on Nate's face. “By then, he'll be old enough to go trick-or-treat with a toy gun. And I'll put on my uniform. We'll represent the 108th platoon and patrol the neighbor.”

“And sing 'The Snows of Anchorage' as you march down the street?” Nora added with an arched eyebrow.

“Good idea, honey.”

Nora snorted but smiled at that mental image. “So that settles. Shaun is dressing up as the cutest tiny red devil this year,” she concluded. Another case closed. “I'll go get some supplies and start on his costume.”

“What about ours?”

“Ours?”

Nate draped an arm around her shoulders. “Just because we're mama and papa now, it doesn't mean we can't have fun like we used to.”

She knew that look on his face: A disarming grin and a sly twinkle in the eyes. It could only mean one thing: Her dear husband already had a plan. “What do you have in mind?”

“I'm thinking, I'll be...” He deepened his voice. “The Silver Shroud. And you, my dear, is my Mistress of Mystery.”

Nora didn't know what tickled her more: His deadpan impersonation of the Shroud, or the thought
of him in that silly costume. She laughed.

“C’mon honey.” Her gave her shoulder a squeeze. “You’ll be perfect!”

“If you can come up with a Silver Shroud costume,” said Nora, trying to compose herself, “I’ll be your Mistress of Mystery.”

Their discussion was cut short when the sound of wailing from their little devil suddenly echoed throughout the house.

“I will get that, sir,” said Codsworth, zooming his way down the hallway. He then switched to a singsong tone as he entered the nursery, “Someone’s making a stinkie...”

Nate looked at the Mr. Handy and let out a content sigh. “I’m so glad we decided to get Codsworth.”

“He’s really good with Shaun,” Nora agreed.

“Sir.” Codsworth peeked his head out of the room. “We are low in diapers. Perhaps you should get more before young Shaun makes more stinkies.”

“I’ll head to the store,” said Nate with a stretch. “Anything you need, hon?”

“You’re almost out of Nuka-Cola.”

“Oh, that reminds me. They’re releasing Quantum tomorrow.” The veteran turned incredibly child-like when he talked about his favorite guilty pleasure. He then promptly recited from the advertisement, “It has twice the caffeine and twice the taste.”

“Twice the calories and twice the carbohydrates.”

“It glows in blue.”

Nora made a face. “It can’t be good for you.”

“Hey, like my mother used to say, don’t turn your nose up at something new until you try it at least once.” Nate paused, then nodded to himself. “That’s a good line. I need use it on Shaun when he’s older.”

“If our son is like you, he’ll eat anything.”

“Nuka-Cola Quantum and tickets to Game 4 of the World Series. You know, honey, tomorrow is going to be the best day ever--” He glanced at his wife who was shooting him a fake warning glare. “Er, not as good as the day we got married, of course, or the day Shaun was born.”

“Don’t forget, tomorrow is also the day you get to give your big speech.”

“Please don’t remind me of that.” The man deflated. “Is it normal to have stage fright the day before? How did you do it in court?”

Nora shrugged. “Just imagine they’re all naked.”

“Right. Picturing my former COs all naked... That’s gonna help.”

“Don’t worry. You look absolutely dashing in your uniform, sweetie. No one’s gonna notice if you stumble through your speech.”
“Nice strategy, hon. Let's kill it with my good looks.” Nate flashed an easy grin and put on his jacket. “Oh, right, almost forgot... Could you go through my speech again? I made some changes this morning.”

“Sure thing.” Nora checked the pantry and said, “Hey, sweetie, grab a bottle of wine while you’re at the store. I’m cooking steaks tonight.”

“Mmm, mmm, can't wait.” He grabbed the car key from the counter and gave her a peck on the cheek. “Off to my acquisition mission, General.”

“You forgot your wallet, Soldier,” said Nora jokingly as she handed it to him.

“Thanks, honey! Where would I be without you?”

With a content smile, Nora headed to the terminal and loaded a particular file. “War. War never changes.”

“Well, here is it,” said Piper as she led her guests into her house. “The headquarters of Publick Occurrences. And my home... Don't mind the clutter.”

A printing press took up a good part of the small living space. While a couch, a small table, a stove, and endless stacks of newspapers shared the rest of the room.

“It's so delightful, Miss Piper,” commented Codsworth as he floated to the printer, “to see someone practicing the freedom of press in this day and age.”

“Someone's gotta do it,” Piper replied with a tiny proud grin.

“Should I start preparing for dinner, mum?” Codsworth asked. “Or perhaps a light snack?”

“You know how to cook?” asked Piper.

“Oh, do I?” The robot chuckled. “I am programmed with a sorts of recipes. From simple fares like meatloaf, macaroni and cheese, to more elaborate dishes such as roasted turkey with chestnut stuffing, crab cakes—”

“Okay, okay.” Piper held up a hand to stop him. “You're making me hungry, Codsworth. Even though I've no idea what turkey tastes like, sounds delicious.”

Nora's legs gave in. She sank onto the couch as Codsworth tirelessly introduced pre-war cuisine to the curious reporter. It's been a day since she'd stepped out of her frozen catacomb, yet the chill in her bones still refused to leave her. Nora couldn't suppress a shiver, until something warm and furry pressed against her legs.

“Hey Dogmeat.” Nora patted the dog as he laid his head on her thigh, looking up at her with big, round, dark eyes. His presence was soothing. “Nate would have loved you...”

The dog whined as if he could sense her.

“You okay there, Blue?” Piper handed her a bottle. “Here, some pick-me-up.”

Nora stared at the dark bottle with red label. “Nuka-Cola? It still exists?”
“Oh yes. Life saver, if you ask me.”

“Nate used to love Nuka-Cola.” Her breath stuck at her throat, she had to swallow hard before she could continue, “He was looking forward for Quantum...”

“I'm so sorry, Blue. I really am. If you need anything, you let me know, okay?”

“Thank you, Piper. I appreciate your help.”

“Hey, anything for my most precious source. ...I did say that out loud, didn't I?”

Nora managed a weak smile for the reporter's endless effort to cheer her up. She twisted the cap open and took a sip. She's never a big fan of Nuka-Cola, but even though it was warm and flat, the familiar taste was comforting. Nora took another long drink, that tingly taste brought back memories of the movies they'd watched, the picnics at the park, the walks along the beach. It reminded her of happy times; it reminded her of Nate.

“So, your husband, Nate,” Piper started, pulling Nora out of her reverie. “What's he like?”

“Nathaniel,” Nora breathed a name, then smiled faintly to herself. “He hates-- hated that name. Everyone either called him Nathan or Nate. He was a soldier, fought in Anchorage. He always knew what to say to make me laugh. Even when I was sad, he had this... magic touch to make me smile again.”

Piper pulled out a notepad and a pen, and started to scribble every word. “Did you live around here? What was life like back then?”

“We moved into this new neighborhood called Sanctuary Hills after he was honorably discharged. We had a beautiful house, white picket fence, and a lawn with the greenest grass you'd ever seen. Things around the world were far from peaceful, but I had my husband and my son. Life was good. It was... perfect.”

The sound of saxophone solo echoed from the basement as Deacon entered the Third Rail. Then came a few notes of piano before a sultry voice started to sing.

“I see you looking around the corner. Come on inside and pull up a chair. No need to feel like a stranger, 'cause we're all a little strange in here.”

“God, I love this song...” mumbled a drifter on the couch.

“Don't mind me.” Deacon settled down on the empty seat next to him.

“Have you got a history that needs erasing? Did you come in just for the beer and cigarettes? A broken down dream you're tired of chasing? Oh, I'm just the girl that makes you forget.”

When he was sure everyone's attention was on the woman on stage, Deacon asked the drifter, “Hey pal, got a geiger counter?”

“Mine is in the shop.”

“About Dutchman...”
“No rumor, I'm afraid,” said the man. “Dutchman's gone. Understand? Package sent back to the
sender. Sorry I don't get better news.”

Goddammit. Another agent gone.

“Stay safe out there,” said Deacon, who then discreetly put a small package on the couch. “Keep
an eye out, and no heroics.”

His business here was far from over. Heading to the bar, Deacon ordered a beer and waited.

“...Are you running from yourself? You thirsty for brand new kind of pleasure? Or are you hungry
to be somebody else?

So sit down your pretty face. You came to the right place. Oh, where every night starts once more.
I'm telling you, friend. Your search is at an end. 'Cause I'm the one you're looking... for...”

The song came to an end. The audience woke up from the spell the stunning woman in red had put
them under. Whistles and applause rose from the floor.

“That's right Goodneighbor. I'm the one you're looking for.” The singer chuckled very lightly into
the microphone. “We'll be right back after a short break.”

“Beautiful as always, Mags,” said Whitechapel Charlie as the songbird stepped off the stage and
approached the bar.

She caught a quick glimpse of Deacon then promptly ignored him. “Thanks, Charlie. Can I get
some water?”

“No need to even ask,” said the robot. “I always set aside a stash of the good stuff just for you.”

“You are such a sweetheart, Charlie. Thank you.”

“Can I buy you a drink?” asked Deacon after she settled on the barstool next to him.

Magnolia raised the glass of purified water. “Sorry sweetheart. Charlie's got it covered.”

“I was thinking... something a little stronger.”

“Oh? How strong?”

“Something even our friend Charlie doesn't offer.”

“I might have what you are looking for.”

“Should we go somewhere more... private?”

“Eager, aren't we?”

The star of the Third Rail took Deacon's hand and led him to the back room. Many pairs of eyes
were on him as they crossed the floor, all full of jealousy. Deacon's skin crawled at the attention,
but he played the role of the luckiest bastard in Goodneighbor to perfection.

As soon as the door close and locked, Deacon asked, “How much time do I have? Fifteen?”

One corner of her painted lips twisted up. “You? Five.”
“Ouch.” Deacon chuckled, not at all offended. “All right. Let's get down to business.”

The woman in red lounged on the couch, taking a much-needed break. “Now, what can I do for you today?”

“Heard anything about Kellogg lately?”

The songbird persona was dropped in a flash. When Magnolia replied, her usual sultry and slow speech pattern was quick and precise. “Nothing you don't already know,” she told Deacon with a shrug. “After he left Diamond City, he headed west. No one has seen him ever since. Some say he's out of the Commonwealth for good.”

“Out of the Wealth?” Deacon shook his head. “Doubt it. His employer's still here, and they need someone to do their dirty work. Anything else?”

Magnolia thought for a second longer. “There is something. The boy he had with him in Diamond City... No one saw the kid walked out of the gate.”

Deacon frowned. A person couldn't just disappear, unless... “You think he's dead?”

“If so, his body is still inside the house.”

“That's a disturbing thought.” Deacon's brows knotted tight. “The kid's about ten, right? No baby?”

“Only one boy. Why do you ask all of a sudden?” asked Magnolia, but she held up a hand before Deacon could make up some random excuse. “Wait. I don't want to know.”

Deacon gave her a knowing smirk and moved onto the next inquire on his list. “That MacCready kid, what have you found out?”

“More than you want to know.”

“Trust me, Mags. I want to know everything. Even the size of his... shoes.”

The woman snorted at his attempt of a joke. “The kid's from the Capitol, grew up in a place called the Little Lamplight. Left when he's sixteen.”

“Is he with the...”

“No, not a spy. His story checks out. He's here for caps, and he has a good reason to be desperate: A sick kid at home.”

Deacon listened, filing every bit of information inside his head.

“His wife died,” Magnolia added. “Poor thing was killed by ferals.”

Deacon's imagination suddenly ran wild. He could almost see it — a young woman ripped apart by a pack of ferals, a young man screaming, helpless, horrified... He blinked hard behind his sunglasses and mentally slapped himself to focus on the mission at hand.

Taking a subtle deep breath to wipe any leftover images inside his head, Deacon continued to ask, “He used to run with the Gunners, right?”

Magnolia nodded. “The kid didn't have the stomach for it. Made a clean break, and set up shops here.”
“With the blessing of Mayor Hancock...” No one operated inside Goodneighbor without their mayor's approval. “Heard he's a sniper. How good is he?”

“Very. Even Hancock has his eyes on the kid.” The woman studied Deacon curiously. “Look, if you're thinking of recruiting him, don't. All he cares about is caps. He's not your type.”

“I'm not looking for a tourist. I know someone who might need his gun.”

“A package in trouble?”

“Not a runaway. You will know when you see her. She's one of a kind.”

“Really? Now you're making me jealous.” Magnolia chuckled and stood from the couch with the grace of a cat. “Anything else you need tonight?”

Deacon flashed a charming smile. “Come to think of it, I'm starving.”

“Do I look like Charlie to you?” Her voice turned lower, her words slow. The famous songbird persona was back on in the blink of an eye. Magnolia sauntered to him and smoothed his collar. “Sorry, sweetheart, time's up.”

“Thanks, Mags. Owe you one.”

“Just one?” she teased, tapping his cheek lightly with one long finger. She stepped back and headed for the door, but stopped and added, “The kid is a good friend with Daisy. If you need to do more background checks, talk to her.”

“You know me too well,” said Deacon, grinning.

Painted red lips curled up. “No one really knows you, sweetheart. And it's just the way you want it.”

“Tell MacCready to stay put,” said Deacon. “A friend of yours might end his dry spell pretty soon.”

With a nod, she left the room.

Deacon waited for the music to start once again. When all the eyes were glued to the flower of the Third Rail, he sneaked out of the room and headed for the exit.

“Never thought I'd walk on the field in Fenway Park,” said Nora as she strolled through the streets of Diamond City marketplace.

“Haven't heard that name for a long time,” Nick commented as he walked beside her. His steps matched hers perfectly in sync.

She looked beyond the shacks, beyond the sign said Dugout Inn, and glanced up at the stadium. At the rolls of seats, at the spotlights, then at the stars in the sky. “Everything looks so different, yet... it's the same.”

Nick quietly glanced at her and let her continue thoughts at her own pace.
Nora pointed up at what used to be the grandstand. “We were there, not long ago--” She paused, then corrected herself, “No, two hundred and ten years ago...”

“Take your time, kid,” Nick told her in his calm, soothing tone. “It’s a whole hell of a lot to process.”

She nodded her thanks, grateful for his company, for his patience.

Nora paused at an intact plate in the middle of the alley. The first base. “This is the first time I’ve seen it up close.”

“Well, they kept all four plates. Let’s continue our home run.”

They resumed their walk as she reminisced quietly, “We were supposed to come here for the game after Nate gave his speech at the Fraternal Post.”

“It was the day the bombs fell?”

She nodded.

“How’re you holding up?”

She glanced up at the familiar sight far above, at the stars peeking through the velvet sky. “Feels like I’m walking in a nightmare. Everything has changed, two hundred years gone. My family, my life... One minute we were eating breakfast at home, then the next...” She shook her head. “If I hadn’t signed up with Vault-Tec that morning, we'd be long dead.”

“You're lucky, kid.”

“Was I?” It sounded more bitter than she'd intended.

“You're given a second chance. Your son is still out there, and we will find him.” He put a comforting hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze as they strolled down the alley. “Now, I know I'm a synth, authentic Institute handiwork. But my memories, my personality, they're all lifted from the Nick Valentine you knew. I remember you, kid. Good ol' Detective Bennett's little girl. So, if you don't mind, you have a friend right here.”

However sad she was, his words brought a smile to her face. “Thanks. You're the only friend I have, Nick.”

“I'm sure I'm the first of many.” The old detective chuckled. “You know, it took me a long time to realize that home is where you make it. With some time and effort, this place can be home for you, too.”

The doubtful look on Desdemona's face was completely expected. “This better not be another one of your lies.”

“Come on, Dez. Even I can't make this level of bullshit up.”

The leader of Railroad put Deacon under intense scrutiny for a long moment. This, also, was expected.
Deacon chose a relaxed stance, his arms hanging loose at his sides. Hidden behind his ever-present shades, his eyes roamed around to study the leader – or alpha, as PAM would call her. He recalled recruiting this woman into their fold more than a decade ago. Time had taken a toll on Dez, more so after she'd become the new leader after Pinky stepping down.

“Two hundred years old,” Desdemona chewed those words over again and took a long drag of her cigarette.

“Two hundred and ten years inside a freezer,” said Deacon. “That'd make her two hundred and forty, according to her file in the vault. But hey, who's counting?”

Silently, Desdemona took one drag after another, the knot between her brows tightened further. It was quite a tale, Deacon let her digest for a moment.

Below the Old North Church lied a catacomb, undis turbed for centuries until lately. The final resting place for some was now the Railroad makeshift headquarters. Deacon was never fond of the idea of disturbing the dead. Poor bastards probably had to buy their way into being buried within a church, and now, they had new neighbors. A ragtag team of underground freedom fighters who were living on borrowed time.

His gaze dropped to a semi-open stone coffin nearby, the skeleton within looked right back at him with its hollow eyes. Sooner or later, one way or another, Deacon would join them. And, from the looks of things lately, his time might come sooner rather than later...

“And her son's kidnapped by Kellogg?” his boss eventually asked.

“Nick seems to think so. We'll find out soon enough. If Kellogg is involved, that means...” Deacon trailed off, allowing her to come to the conclusion.

“The Institute is behind the kidnapping.” Dez scowled at that thought. “Let me get this straight: They took the baby, killed the dad, and refroze the mom.”

Deacon nodded. “I checked inside the vault. The files in the terminals match her story. There's an empty pod across from the dead husband's. The guy was the only one died from gunshot wound. The rest died because of equipment malfunction.”

“And she's the only one who made it out there alive.”

“Sole survivor. And the Institute is behind her release.”

Desdemona took one last long drag before tossing the stub away. Her fingers drummed on the table as she pondered with a deep frown.

“It doesn't make sense,” she said. “If Kellogg has her son, why would the Institute release her?”

Deacon could only shrug. The same question that had been bothering Deacon was now plaguing his boss. Welcome to the club.

To her credit, Desdemona was quick to refocus. “Has anyone from the Institute contacted her?”

“None. I had my eyes on her the whole time. They defrosted her but left her high and dry.”

“Doesn't mean they're not watching her.”

He agreed. Just like their human synth counterpart, the Watchers were indistinguishable from the
real birds. And those beady-eyed bastards were always watching.

“Where is she now?” asked his boss.

“She's staying with the reporter in Diamond City tonight.”

For a long moment, Desdemona remained quiet as she processed through all the information. In the end, though, she gave up and shook her head in frustration. “Nothing adds up. Something’s missing.”

“I will find the missing pieces to our giant, mysterious puzzle.”

“What's your next move?” his boss asked.

To that, Deacon merely flashed a disarming grin.

“Right, forget I asked,” said the alpha. “Just find out as much about this woman as you can.”

“That's my plan.”

A/N: Five chapters, and the two main characters still haven't met. As much as I want to see how long the story can last before they interact, I'll start changing the canon story bit by bit starting next chapter.

I've done extensive research on Deacon and related topics for this fic. The story is a mix of canon info and stuff I made up. For example, the devil/cop costume debate was from the deleted content of Nora/Nate terminal in Sanctuary Hills. While the Silver Shroud/MM part was something I made up. The Watchers, I didn't make that one up. The title of the story is also based on a terminal entry by Dez.

So, with that in mind, it's time to give credits to a few sources I used.

(In no particular order) Tumblr sites: thelastleviathan, sola-you-nerd, and farfromdaylight – for all their Deacon and Fallout meta. And youtube: danaduchy, FluffyNinjaLlama – for all the in-game conversations. Those wonderful people saved me a whole lot of time, they've done the legwork for me. So, thank you!

And, as always, thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
“You... Deacon?”

“Yeah. New face,” Deacon told his contact. “Listen, change of plan. We need to get our friend out of the 'Wealth tonight.”

The man frowned. “But he's not ready.”

“Pinkerton will take care of him.”

“He won't make it there on his own.”

“He won't be on his own. Go get him, we're running outta time.”

The runner headed back inside the basement of the abandon shop. Moments later, he came back with a tall and well-built man with thick dark hair.

“Sorry, pal,” said Deacon to the runaway synth. “As much as I love to chat, we have to move or you'll miss your ride to freedom. Come on.”

The synth followed without question.

Deacon made a turn into a dark alley and hugged to the shadows. Coursers were out to retrieve this one. Judging from his size and his build, Deacon had to wonder if this runaway was a potential candidate for the elite group of Institute killing machines.

“You know how to use a gun?” Deacon asked as he leaded the synth to the rendezvous location.

“Yes,” the runaway replied, “I'm programmed with the ability.”

“Good. You'll pose as a new guard to the caravan.”

“I'm not familiar with guard duty.”

“It's easy. Just keep your mouth shut and look tough. If anyone asks where you're from, tell them your family was killed by raiders, and your town was wiped off the map. And leave it at that. That should keep people from poking.”

“...Does that happen?”

“What?”

“Raiders killing families.”
“Far too often than it should. And that’s why it’d make such a convincing tale.”

The caravan was a few blocks ahead. Deacon took a detour to an abandon restaurant. Satisfied that they were safely out of sight, Deacon waved the runaway to follow him to the storage room.

“Our contact should be here any minute,” Deacon told the man. “He’ll introduce us to the caravan.”

“Us?”

Deacon flashed a friendly smirk. “You think I’d leave you high and dry? I’m coming with ya. Got some business to take care of in the Capital.”

The man seemed relieved.

“Listen up. You'll get your pay up front. And when you do, give a third to our contact. Standard practice. Do it, and no one will suspect a thing.”

“One third,” the man repeated to himself. “Got it.”

“Relax. The key to this is to blend in.” Deacon took a few items from his bag and put them on the counter. A pipe rifle, a pipe pistol, and a set of leather armor. “Which means... time to put on your disguise.”

The runaway did as he was told.

Deacon continued as the man suited up, “Our contracts end at Rivet City. If everything goes well, I'll take you to Dr. Pinkerton. But, if some shit happens – and they often do – we might get separated. In that case, go find the doc. Here's the direction to his secret lab.” Deacon placed a note on the counter. “It's in the bow of the city.”

“Bow?”

“Did I tell you Rivet City is a giant ship? Don’t bother asking the locals where he is. No one knows.” Deacon then give the man a sealed letter and a tin box. “Give this letter to Pinkerton, he'll know what to do. Here are some caps. This should be enough to cover the cost for the doc, and with a little extra to get you started.”

The man nodded his thanks. “I cannot thank you enough.”

“That's what we do.” Deacon waved a dismissive hand. “Pinkerton's weird, but he's good at what he does. You're in good hands.”

“...What exactly does this doctor do?”

“Face swap, memory wipe, among other things.”

His thick brows furrowed, the runaway looked apprehensive.

“Hey, the procedures are totally optional,” Deacon told him. “It's up to you to decide if you want any. You can have either, both, or none. Pickerton will give you the details, but feel free to walk away. No pressure.”

The man stared at Deacon as if he was speaking another language. “...I can choose?”

“Of course,” said Deacon, smiling. “Remember, you're your own man now. You get to choose your
path. One more thing, you got a name in mind?"

“A name? Do you mean my designation?"

Deacon chuckled lightly. “Not your serial number, pal. We need to come up with a name for you, or your cover is blown right off the bat.”

“...I see.”

“Think of it as a temporary identity for our little field trip. You got plenty of time to come up with a better name from here to the Capitol.”

The man’s gaze landed on the faded poster on the wall, in which a cartoon smiling pre-war pastry was holding a cup of coffee. Behind it, there were two words in red: Slocum Joe's. “What about Joe?”

“That’d work.” Deacon gave his travel companion a quick nod and a grin. “Hi Joe. I’m Jack. Welcome to the Brave New World, pal.”

He always hated mirrors, always hated the man staring back at him. No matter which face he was wearing, he could see the bastard behind the guise, the monster within in.

Deacon put on a padded blue jacket then donned a brown cap. The man in the mirror could be Drummer Boy's twin – well, his older brother at least. Sunglasses came on last, hiding the deep set steel-blue eyes. He then quickly cycled through a long list of aliases when a sudden inspiration struck.

“Carton,” he said to the man in the mirror, thinking of the tragic character in Dickens' book. “Sydney Carton.”

For a second, Deacon wondered if he should adopt an accent but decided against it. Not like a pre-war relic could tell the difference.

He took a final look at the mirror and made one minor adjustment to his latest character. “Syd. Just call me Syd.”

The sound of rain drumming on the metal roof woke Nora up from a restless sleep. The disturbing images of her nightmare seared into her mind – images of blood seeping through a bullet hole in Nate’s chest, of the light in his eyes dimming while his blood-stained lips whispering two words: Find Shaun.

Nora pushed herself up from her makeshift bed. Her body protested against every movement, demanding more rest on the old sofa. But her mind refused to stop spinning long enough for her to get proper sleep as Nate's words in her dream echoed again and again inside her head.

Find Shaun.
Sleeping on the floor by the couch, Dogmeat opened his eyes and peeked at her. Nora patted behind his pointy ears and whispered, “Go back to sleep, boy.”

His tail lazily wagged twice before settling back to another round of puppy dream. The lights were off, the Wright sisters were both sound asleep. Nora carefully stepped over Dogmeat and quietly headed for the door. Outside, the largest settlement in the Commonwealth was quiet. The streets were empty, the stores were closed, with the exception of one where a Mister Handy was tirelessly taking the night shift from his owner.

She was all alone in this strange new world.

Nora took a deep breath. The cold, humid air woke all her senses. The vault suit didn't do much to fend off the predawn chill. As if her mind was read, the door behind her opened and a warm blanket was draped on her shoulders.

“Good morning, mum,” greeted Codsworth. “Should I get breakfast ready?”

“No. You'll wake them up.” She pulled the blanket closer. “Besides, I'm not hungry.”

The robot handed her a can of purified water. “I understand your lack of appetite, but please, do stay hydrated.”

Nora took a good look at the robot, the only family she had left. “Codsworth...”

“Yes mum?”

“Thank you.”

“For the water? Oh, there is no need to thank me, mum.”

“No. Thank you for not giving up on us... on me.” She reached out to the metallic surface. The once shiny chrome finish was now dull, part of it had turned into rust. “You've waited for two hundred years. It must have been terrible.”

Nora swore if the robot could blush, he would be bright red by now. “It was hard at first. I was able to eventually move on.”

“How did you do it?” she asked. But what she wanted to know was: How the hell am I going to get through this?

“At first it was the work, busying myself day and night, and believe me there was plenty of it. But eventually, the work became light chores. What truly saved me was my memories, mum. Memories of you and the hubby, young Shaun. Of your love and kindness. I soldiered on, fueled by hope that one day if not you and the husband, Shaun, or perhaps Shaun's children would one day emerge.”

Nora nodded, taking in every word.

“Never give up on hope, mum. Miracles do happen. Look at us, reunited after two hundred and ten years. We will find young Shaun, and we will be a family again.”

Nora took in a deep breath, nodding, when she noticed two men approaching. One in trenchcoat, the other in faded blue jacket.

“You are up already,” said Nick, greeting with a gentle smile.
The man in blue stopped a step behind the detective. Brown cap covering his bald head, the man would have seemed rather unremarkable except for the fact that he was wearing dark sunglasses on a rainy predawn morning.

Nick motioned at the man behind him. “This is a friend of mine...”

“Carton,” the man introduced himself. His voice was surprisingly pleasant. “Sydney Carton.”

The name sounded oddly familiar. “Nora Taylor.”

Out of habit, she extended a hand without thinking. It was a pre-war ritual that was as out of time as she was. Nora instantly regretted it. But before she could retreat, the man took her hand for a polite shake. His grip was firm yet gentle, and his hand was soothing warm against her frozen one.

“Mister... Carton here agrees to help us to crack our case,” said Nick who then waved at the far end of the former stadium. “We're going to check out this house Kellogg left vacant. It ain't far. Wanna join us?”

“Lead the way,” said Nora.

“Shall I accompany you, mum?” Codsworth asked.

“I'll be fine, Codsworth,” said Nora while handing the warm blanket back to him.

“Very well. Do be careful, Miss Nora.”

“I did some more digging last night,” said Nick to Nora as they headed to the house, “Everything I dug up about Kellogg before his disappearance is bad news.”

That's an understatement, Deacon thought as he quietly followed them.

“He's more than just a mercenary,” the detective continued. “He's a professional. Quick, clean, thorough. Has no enemies, because they're all dead... Except you. But nine to one odds says he's our man. It's more than just you identifying his distinguishing features. The MO is all him as well. Leading a small team to kidnap a baby, and leaving one of the parents alive for later? Not many mercs in the Commonwealth can pull that off.”

The house was located in an isolated corner of Diamond City. The first thing Deacon noticed was that, unlike the rest of the well-lit settlement, the lights along the path to this house were all switched off.

“There we are,” said Nick as he approached the door. “Keep an eye out, will ya? Let's see if we can get this open. ...That's one heck of a lock. Got something to hide, Kellogg?”

Two bobby pins later, the detective gave up.

“Need a hand?” asked Deacon.

“Go ahead. See if you have any luck with that door.”

The sun had yet to rise. The area was dark, just the way Deacon liked it as he began to pick the lock. His sunglasses remained perch on his nose. His sharp ears guided his steady fingers and bobby pin to find the elusive sweetspot hidden behind the metal plate.
At last, there was a faint click.

“Open sesame,” Deacon mumbled, but he didn't open the door. Instead, he checked the gaps for traps. “Looks clean. Let's see what our boogey man is hiding.”

He opened the door and fumbled for a switch along the wall. Seconds later, a single light bulb that was hanging from the ceiling lit up the house.

So this was the Den of the Devil. Beside a desk, a small table, and an armchair, the living area was empty.

“Let's take a look around,” said Nick. “Kellogg must have left something behind.”

Deacon headed for the desk while Nick and Nora took the loft upstairs.

Inside the drawers were nothing but junk. Screwdriver, duct tape, empty clipboard. Hidden underneath those was something colorful. Deacon dug through and pulled out several magazines. Massachusetts Surgical Journal, Tesla Science Magazine, and... Grognak the Barbarian?

None of them fit Kellogg's profile. Curious, Deacon flipped through the pages. At the corner of the comic book, he saw a name scribbled in pencil.

*It can't be...*

“Hey, lady,” he called for Nora's attention. “What's the name of your kid?” He knew, of course. But he had a role to play.

“Shaun.”

“Is it S-e-a-n, or...”

“S-h-a-u-n,” the mother replied, approaching the desk. “Why?”

*Son of a bitch.* He held up the comic and showed her the page with the same name at the bottom.

Nora scowled at the childish handwriting.

“Either this Kellogg likes to kidnap kids with the same name as your son, or...”

“It can't be...” Her face turned white as she came to the same conclusion. “...But Shaun's not even seven months old.”

“That bastard refroze you, didn't he?” Deacon pointed out. “Two hundred years felt like a nap, what's ten years then?”

“That boy's name is the same as Nora's baby?” said Nick. “What a hell of a coincident.”

“We can ask around,” said Deacon. “The kids in town are bound to know a thing or two.”

One thing Magnolia had told him made Deacon uneasy. No one had seen the kid leaving the city.

“Found anything, Nick?”

“Nothing. The dresser is empty.”

*Good, no dead body.* But still, something didn't feel right. The house looked bigger on the outside. To confirm his suspicion, Deacon stepped out and studied the front of the house, and found the
missing piece of the puzzle.

“There should be a room here,” he said, knocking on the wall to the right of the entrance.

“The wire,” said Nora, pointing at a stray wire coming from a tiny gap behind the wall.

It was too dim for them to notice at first. Deacon's eyes traced the wire from the ceiling to the wall and down to the floor behind the desk.

“Find the switch,” said Deacon.

But Nora answered almost simultaneously, “Found it.” She crawled underneath the desk and pressed it.

The wall next to Deacon suddenly slid open. “Kellogg you sneaky bastard.”

“Well... That's one way to hide a room,” said Nick.

The hidden room was better furnished than the rest of the house. Shelves lined along one side of the wall, with a generous stock of food, guns, and ammo. At one corner, two boxes stuffed with folders were abandoned behind. Deacon made a mental note to haul them back to HQ later. However trivia the leftover documents might be, any intel could add to the giant puzzle he had been chasing after for more than a decade.

On the small table by the armchair were a few bottles of Gwinnett Stout and a box of cigars.


“Interesting?” asked Nora.

“It's rare,” Nick explained. “Have to ship them all the way from the West. Ain't cheap. But it won't lead us anywhere on its own, though.”

“He's left some files behind,” said Deacon. “I'll go through them and see if there's any leads. It'll take some time.”

“I'll help you,” said Nora.

“In the meantime,” said Nick, “let me go ask around, see if anyone knows anything about the boy.”

The detective put his good hand on the woman's shoulder. “Hang in there, kid. We'll find your son. Whether he's a baby or a ten-year-old.”

Deacon hauled the files out of the hidden room as he heard Nora say, “Thank you for helping me, Mr. Carton.”

“Just call me Syd,” he told her, putting the box of files on the desk. “So, Nick told me about you. Quite a shock, huh? One day you wake up and the whole world has turned upside down.”

Her movements were subtle but Deacon noticed she froze for a few seconds. She then nodded and flipped through some files. “This Kellogg... Why would he leave documents behind?”

“Good question,” said Deacon. “Could be a trap, or at least a decoy to send whoever goes after him on a wild goose chase. Nick was right about Kellogg. He's is not just a merc, he's a professional hitman.”

“Why would a hitman take my son?”
“That's the million-cap question.” Deacon felt bad when he saw a knot forming between her brows. The truth was harsh, but he needed to prepare her for the truth. “I don't mean to scare you, but... if Kellogg is involved, chances are the Institute is behind this. That bastard has been working for them for years.”

“The Institute... Do you know anything about them?”

*Do I?* “No one knows anything beside the fact that they create the synths.”

“Synths. Like Nick.”

“There are different types. The chrome domes are basically robots. They're the shoot first ask never type. Then you have the Gen-3 type, they look exactly like human. I know what you might have heard by now, but not all synths are bad. Some of them don't even know they're synths.”

“They don't?”

“No, they don't. They're programmed with... fake memories. Memories of childhood, of friends and family. Just like us, they're living their lives as best they could.”

“Why are people so afraid of them?”

“People are afraid of the unknowns. It's true that the Institute kidnaps people and replaces them with a perfect synth replica. But those are Institute spies. Not all synths are spies. They are good ones and bad ones, just like humans. And then, there's the coursers. Those are bad news.”

“Coursers?”

“The Institute's super agents. Stronger, faster than any synths, and they're completely ruthless. A lot of good people died because of them.”

When Nora studied him, Deacon knew he'd said too much. “You know a lot about synths,” she commented.

Time to do what he did best. Deacon started with a deliberate yet quiet sigh. “My family was killed by synths.”

As he'd expected, Nora was taken aback. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--”

He waved a hand. “That was years ago. I'm still alive because I was out with the caravan. When I got back home...” He trailed off, dropping his gaze with a slight shake of his head.

From her horrified expression, Deacon knew she bought the story. Hook, line, and sinker.

“Since then,” Deacon continued oh-so naturally, “I've been trying to find out everything about them. Sounds stupid, I know. But it helps me sleep at night.”

To his surprise, Nora said, “Know your enemy. Sun Tzu's The Art of War.”

Deacon couldn't hold back a smile when she had come to the conclusion of his impromptu lesson all by herself.

“Information is very hard to come by,” he continued, “No one knows where the Institute is, who they are, or what they want. All I know is random bits and pieces.”

“Every bits and pieces count when you're trying to form a case. The devil is in the details.”
“Case?”

“Sorry, old habits,” Nora mumbled, shaking her head. “I'm-- was a prosecutor... A lawyer.”

Another piece of puzzle was added to the scattered bunch. “Ah, a lawyer. Say, will you defend me in court if I ever get in trouble?”

Something in her eyes lit up at the mention of familiar things. “If there's still a court.”

“Oh, the building is there. Heard the current judge is a giant green mutated man. He's a man of few words.”

“Hasn't changed much since my time, then.”

He noticed her expression had softened. A breath of life had started to return to the shell of a woman. Deacon decided to give one more playful nudge, with another survival lesson hidden underneath.

“We've streamlined the system since the big one dropped,” he told her, studying her very closely behind his sunglasses. “The judge, jury, and executioner are now all in one. We are an efficient bunch.”

“All you need is a gun,” his student concluded.

Grinning, Deacon nodded. “Welcome to the Commonwealth, Mrs. Taylor.”

Tiny black fonts on crisp pages, the sound of papers flipping through her fingers, the slight sting of strained eyes, all made Nora feel right at home for the first time since she'd woken up from her two-centuries nap. She had taken over the single desk in the abandon house. The box by her feet was empty, its contents now placed neatly on the desk in two piles. Unread and finished.

What she'd read so far were heavily redacted documents loaded with scientific terms she was not familiar with. There was one thing in common among all the documents, it was a logo of sort. A circle with a figure within, an insignia that resembled Leonardo Da Vinci's famous drawing.

She reached for the last folder on the unread pile as she glanced over to the rest of the living area. Files scattered across the floor where Sydney Carton sat. What seemed to be a disorganized mess was actually a very well-controlled chaos, Nora noticed. Although the room was far from being well-lit, the man's sunglasses never left his face.

Conventional wisdom told her when a man had his face half-concealed, he could be hiding something. But Nora had seen enough from her line of work to know not to judge a book by the cover. The most notorious criminals were often those in tailored suits and charming smiles.

Whoever Sydney Carton was, Nora was thankful for his assistance.

Just when Nora was about to turn her attention back to the document, Carton jolted and sat up straight.

“What is it?” asked Nora.
“Found you, you son of a bitch,” he muttered, scanning the paper over again. Then a frown followed. “You've gotta be kidding me...”

“What?” Nora prompted again, joining him on the floor.

He handed her the file and said, “That's why he's gone. He's going after some deflected scientist.”

“The Glowing Sea?” Nora read. “Never heard of it. Is it along the coast?”

“The opposite side. Southwest of here.” He gathered the files on the floor and shoved them back into the box.

“But that's the inland.”

“Don't let the name fool you. It's not a sea,” he told her. “It's the ground zero of the big bomb. The radiation level is through the roof. You go in there, you either die or come out as a ghoul.”

Oh god... “He's taking Shaun there?”

“Doubt it. The Institute has sent Kellogg on a suicide mission. Your son has to be somewhere else. But we wouldn't know until we find the bastard. Let's go talk to Nick, we need to come up with a plan.”

The sun was already up when they left the house. Deacon grimaced at the giant fireball rising above the horizon. The sun had always made him feel too exposed. He so preferred the shadows.

As they headed back to the marketplace, he saw people gathering as he heard one man shouted, “Don't move, synth!”

Almost instinctively, he pushed Nora behind him.

The shouting man pointed a gun at another man and demanded, “What have you done with the real Riley? Where's my brother?”

“I swear, I'm not a synth, Kyle!” said Riley. “Don't shoot! For God sakes, we're family!”

The guards rushed to the scene. “Put the gun down! Now!”

“He's a synth!” said Kyle. “He'll kill us all!”

Then a shot was fired. The crowd screamed and gasped as the man with a gun fell onto the ground.

“Kyle!” Riley howled and dropped to his brother's dead body. “No!”

“Oh, show's over!” yelled the guard. “There are no synths in Diamond City, you hear me? Just you folks and your damn paranoia!”

“I'm... I'm not a synth,” the man on the ground cried. “I told you, Kyle. Why didn't you listen to me? I'm not a synth!”

I'm not a synth, the man in Deacon's memory begged. Another man from another time. I'm not a
Although the well-trained muscles on his face never once moved, the scene had kicked the Pandora box he had sealed and buried. Memories flooded and started to drown every bit of his senses. Everything faded until all he could see was the bulging eyes of his first and only victim, all he could hear was the dying plead, the final breath...

A gentle bump of a soft body pulled him away from the sudden waking nightmare.

“Sorry,” Nora mumbled, steadying herself from the pushing crowd.

“Let's get out of here,” said Deacon, desperately keeping his voice steady.

Somehow, his head reached out on its own and placed itself on the small of her back, guiding her through the gathering crowd. As much as he hated physical touches, unconsciously he sought it out. He needed an anchor, and she happened to be right next to him.

“Don't look,” he told Nora quietly as they crossed the marketplace. Deacon strategically positioned himself between the woman and scene, blocking her from the view of the dead body. No one wanted to see scattered pieces of brains on the ground. “The guards are on edge, you don't want any troubles from them.”

Right on cue, one of the guards yelled at the gathering mess, “What's everyone still standing around for? Go back to your own damn business! Move!”

Deacon internally fastened the mask of Sydney Carton back on. “Getting attention here in our post-apocalyptic world is not exactly a good thing. The guards are already more curious about you than they should be.”

Nora raised a questioning brow at him.

“What? You didn't notice the way they check you out?” One corner of his lips twisted up slightly despite remnants of the aftershocks he was experiencing within. “We need to get you out of your vault suit before you attract any more unwanted attention.”

The woman quickly glanced down and looked at her skin-tight vault suit as though it's the first time she'd seen it. She was close, close enough for him noticed how long her lashes were. Her skin was smooth, her hair looked soft. And when she glanced back at him, slightly embarrassed by her outfit, the sun hit her eyes at an angle that made them shine like two blue gems.

All good things came from pre-war. The books, the music, the gadgets, even the people. They certainly didn't make women like this anymore.

It was then Deacon realized his hand was still on the back of this precious artifact. He couldn't drop it fast enough.

“You know what they say,” said Deacon, flashing an easy smile for his own sake as well as for hers. “Clothes make the man. We'll get you the latest Wasteland fashion to help you blend in. Think of it as your new disguise.”
A/N: And so the AU begins. Hope you like it.

I want to give a shout-out to tomberi-no for all the Project Wanderer gifs, even though I've only posted one on my blog.

The title “The Great Pretender” because it is so Deacon. Deacon's alias Sydney Carton is from Charles Dickens “A Tale of Two Cities”. As for the runaway synth in the flashback, well... he might or might not be who you think he is.

Anyway, thanks for reading!

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
“How bad is it?” asked the old man in pressed white coat.

“It's spreading,” the doctor replied, solemn.

“How much longer do I have?”

The doctor hesitated before he answered, “Two years. At most.”

The brutal answer didn't faze the old man a bit. “I see.”

“it's not too late to consider a more aggressive treatment,” the doctor urged. “If we start it now--”

“We've talked about this before,” said the old man wearily. “No. We both know it'll merely delay the inevitable.”

“But, sir...”

Sir? Even his old friend wouldn't call him by his name. He was known either Father or Director. His titles summed up all the he was, all that he had achieved.

“I've lived long enough.” The old man now only known as 'Father' leaned back and shut his eyes when dizziness suddenly took over.

In that short moment, he could see fragments of his life flashing behind closed lids. Sterile labs, numbers and data, hypothesis and experiments. Countless of experiments – in which some he was the subject, others he was the researcher.

The old man reopened his eyes. He kept quiet about the latest sudden dizzy spell, for the last thing he wanted was more medications that would dull his mind. “...How long have we known each other, Dean?”

“My whole life,” said Dr. Volkert. “Around sixty years now.”

“Sixty years...” Father still remembered the young Dean Volkert with a full head of brown hair. Now, Dr. Volkert was bald and silver. “Time flies.”

“As your doctor and your old friend, I urge you to reconsider, sir. The Institute needs you.”

A timely knock on the door saved the old man from answering.

A wiry man with a permanent frown etched on his face entered. Father had never liked him. Personal preferences aside, Justin Ayo was thorough, if a bit cruel, which made him an effective
leader of the Synth Retention Bureau department.

“Good morning, Dr. Ayo,” Father greeted. “That will be all, Dr. Volkert.”

“Kellogg has gone offline,” Ayo reported, skipping any pleasantries.

“And the team that was assigned to him?”

“All twenty units are currently within Fort Hagen. I can override Kellogg’s command and recall the team back.”

“Let him keep them for now,” Father decided. “Any action we take will only alert him. Continue to monitor.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve deployed two Watchers outside the fort, in case Kellogg abandons the team and flees.”

The old man nodded. He expected nothing less from the acting director of the SRB.

“Another thing,” Ayo added. “We have confirm sightings of our vault subject at Diamond City. She has established contact with a discarded unit who is now called ‘Valentine.’”

“Valentine?”

“A discontinued prototype we tossed away decades ago. Somehow unit had rebooted itself. And now it’s a ‘detective’ in the city.”

A discarded machine that recycled itself? The director somehow found that both amusing and amazing.

“M7-62 is keeping tabs on them,” Ayo continued with his report. “Any activities in and around Kellogg’s old house will be ignored.”

“Good.” The old man nodded. The experiment had gone more smoothly than he’d expected. “Tell me more about this... Valentine unit.”

“Glowing Sea?” Nick Valentine repeated with a frown. “You sure?”

Deacon put a folder on the detective's desk. “Wish I was lying.”

“A scientist gone rogue, huh?” Nick muttered as he skimmed through the document. “And using the radiation as a shield. This Brian Virgil is either a genius or crazy.”

“Or both,” said Deacon. “No one would risk going there. Not even to hide.”

Sitting next to him, Nora asked, “How bad is it?”

“Very bad,” the detective replied. “The entire area is highly irradiated. A person would die in there within a minute.”

“Maybe Dr. Virgil is already dead,” Deacon speculated. “And the Institute is sending Kellogg on a suicide mission to get rid of him.”
“Possible,” said Nick. “Even Kellogg couldn't survive that amount of radiation.”

“Unless he has a hazmat suit,” Deacon added, “and a lifetime supply of Rad-X and Rad-Away.”

Nick nodded. “It'll take some time to gather enough supplies. Which means...” The detective's yellow eyes shone bright as he came to a conclusion. “He is still somewhere outside the Glowing Sea.”

“And we're back to square one,” said Deacon, leaning back on the chair with a stretch. “Isn't that fun?”

“Don't know about you,” said Nick, “but I'd rather search for a person outside the Glowing Sea than within.”

“Dogmeat,” Nora muttered out of nowhere.

“What?” said Nick.

“I remember we had K9 units in the police force,” said the pre-war relic. “I wonder if Dogmeat could help us search for Kellogg.”

“Say, that's not a bad idea,” said Nick. “It won't be the first time Dogmeat has helped me on a case.”

“How long has Kellogg's been gone?” Deacon asked the detective. “A week?”

“Almost two,” Nick replied. “But if any dog could pick up the faintest scent, it's our boy Dogmeat. He can track a man's scent for miles.”

Although the idea was far-fetched, Deacon was game. After all, it was their own lead. “All right. Let's give our pal a chance. If we're going after Kellogg, we need more than a sniffing wet nose. We need backup. And I know just the guy for the job.”

Valentine, however, hesitated. “You think it's wise to bring another person on board?”

“If we want to walk out of this alive,” Deacon pointed out. “You know how dangerous Kellogg is.”

“Where is this... 'friend' of yours?”

“Goodneighbor.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Nick mumbled.

“Where is it?” asked Nora.

“I've heard it used to be called Scollay Square in your time,” Deacon explained and watched as she lit up at the comfort of familiarity.

“The Old State House?”

“That's right,” said Deacon with a friendly smile. “Only now it's the safe haven for misfits. People who have no other places to go in the Commonwealth.”

“That's a nice way of putting it,” Nick commented with a slight frown. “Goodneighbor's the lowest place in the Commonwealth. Everything not nailed down rolls through there at some point.”
“Including the best shot money can buy,” said Deacon.

“A merc, huh?” said Nick. “You sure we can trust him?”

“Don't worry, Nick. I've done my homework. But, first things first.” Deacon then turned to the woman in blue and asked, “You up for some shopping?”

“Mr. Carton?” Nora called once they were alone outside Valentine's Detective Agency.

“Hm?”

“I appreciate your assistance,” she paused, hesitating.

Deacon could sense a 'but' coming.

And there it was. “But...” she continued, “why are you risking your life to help me?”

What do we have here? Deacon hid a grin. A healthy dose of skepticism, huh?

He had expected this question the moment he'd introduced himself as Sydney Carton. A laundry list of lies was ready to fire – from the more convincing excuses such as, “Nick has saved my hide more than a few times,” to some ridiculous lies like, “I had a dream, a vision: You're the chosen one sent to lead the Commonwealth into everlasting peace and prosperity.”

In the end, after spending a few hours with his target, Deacon tossed the list out of the window, and opted for a more personal approach.

He then deliberately waited for a few seconds before he replied in a quiet, soft voice, “Because I know what it feels like to have everything taken from you overnight.”

Looking straight into her eyes through his dark lenses, Deacon studied her very closely. What he saw was horror, pain, and sympathy, all tangled and twisted as Nora fought to maintain her composure.

“Your family,” Nora recalled the tale he had weaved earlier. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up.”

Less is more when it comes to the art of lying. When his target had come to her own conclusion, Deacon knew he should just leave it at that. But he saw an opening. A golden opportunity to say what he'd wanted to tell her ever since he'd seen her crying in her old house.

“One day, the pain will fade,” he told her. “It might take months, years, or even decades. But it will fade. Promise.”

The rare sincerity would scare the crap out of himself if Deacon dared to take a moment to think.

For a long moment, they stared at each other in the dark alley outside Valentine's Detective Agency. Pink neon light from the tacky heart sign shone on the side of her face. Her eyes turned into a deep shade of violet from the pink glow.

What she was staring at, though, was not him, Deacon knew. It was her own reflection on his
sunglasses. He was her mirror, in more ways than she realized.

Deacon noticed her chest rose high – a subtle deep breath was taken to contain the emotions that were hidden beneath her poker face. He had expected her to breakdown more than a few times, or remained at a catatonic stage of shock and grief for a longer while. Yet, what he'd seen was a mother driven to find her son. Perhaps the pre-war relic was stronger than she seemed.

“Hey, no loitering,” warned a guard who walked passed. His attention was quickly caught by the vault dweller as he cleared his throat and added with a grin, “Hello there, beautiful.”

As much as Deacon abhorred violence, the sudden urge to punch the lopsided smile off the guard's face was almost irresistible.

“...Thank you, Mr. Carton,” said Nora after they were once again alone.

Deacon. “Sydney.” He gave a reassuring smile. “Come on, let's head to Fallon's Basement.”

“Fallon's?” Nora asked as she followed. “As in Fallon's department store?”

“The very same. The store's still there. If you don't mind getting your hands dirty, everything at Fallon's is 100% off. You just have to get past their giant green salesmen.”

A quick glance at her profile confirmed him what he'd already noticed: Any mention of the old world would put her at ease. Her stoic mask slipped as nostalgia hit; another breath of life had returned to the frozen woman.

“I used to shop there quite often,” she told him.

“We should go there sometime.” Deacon led her down a flight of stairs and headed into a shop at the basement. “Hey Becks, how's my favorite girl?”

“You're early,” Becky Fallon replied with her trademark scowl. “I've got nothing for you.”

“Nah, not here to trade. Brought you a customer today.”

The store owner eyed the woman behind Deacon. “So you're the vault dweller everyone's talkin' about, huh?”

“I wonder what gave her away.” Deacon then turned to the woman in blue suit and introduced, “Becky Fallon. Proprietor of Fallon's Basement. Suit her up, Becks.”

Mrs. Fallon gave her customer a quick once-over. “What are you looking for?”

“The good stuff you have in the backroom,” Deacon answered for her. “We're heading out.”

When Mrs. Fallon shot him a hesitant glance, Deacon replied wordlessly with a subtle nod.

“I might have something,” said Becky Fallon before she disappeared into the storage room in the back. Moments later, she reemerged with a set of outfit. “This is all I have in your size.”

Deacon inspected the outfit on the counter. A tank top, a button-down shirt, and a pair of cargo pants. He ignored the tank top and paid attention to the shirt and pants. The fabric of the pants were thicker than normal ones – they were ballistic, medium grade. The material of the shirt, however, was a little too thin for his liking. “That's all you have?”

“They're hard to come by,” said Becky who then told Nora, “Head upstairs to my room and
Deacon counterbalanced the grumpy store owner’s attitude with a tiny comforting smile. “Well, I know it's not what you expect from Fallon's,” he said as he handed the outfit to Nora. “But at least you won't be a walking target in blue.”

“It's fine.” Nora looked at her current skin-tight vault suit. “Anything's better than this.”

If Deacon ever claimed he never looked at the pre-war relic in her suit longer than he should, he would be lying. Hidden safely behind the dark lenses, his eyes unabashedly followed her up the stairs, taking in the view one last time.

When the former vault dweller came back downstairs in the latest Wasteland fashion, Deacon scanned her from head to toes twice. The transformation was only half-completed. While she didn't stick out like a sore thumb in blue, the lack of radiation damage from her fresh face remained a telltale sign that screamed 'I don't belong here'.

Deacon picked up a pair of sunglasses and a scarf from display. “We'll take these as well.” He then told Nora, “You're not too attached to your vault suit, are you? We could totally sell it for a pretty price.”

“I never liked it,” said the former woman in blue.

“What do ya say, Becks,” said Deacon to the store owner. “How much are we getting for the suit?”

“I say we're even,” said Mrs. Fallon.

“I say you own us at least eighty caps,” Deacon countered.

“Eighty? You crazy?”

“Hey, I know a collector who's willing to pay three hundred to get his hands on one of these.” He tapped on the blue suit on the counter.

Becky frowned. “Three hundred? It's not even armored.”

“How many vault suits have you come across, Becks? You know how rare they are. It has biometric reading scanners, heat-dissipation thingy, yada yada. And it's not even 85, but 111. One of a kind!”

The shrewd proprietor gestured at the new outfit on Nora. “That's ballistic weaved.”

“Only the pants,” Deacon pointed out without missing a beat, “and they aren't even Mark Three. The shirt is just a shirt. C'mon, Becks, you think I was born yesterday?”

As though she'd been caught in a lie, Becky Fallon offered quickly, “Forty caps.”

“Sixty.”

“Fifty. That's final.”

“Fine. Fifty it is,” Deacon agreed, hiding a victorious smirk. Truth was, that was much higher than he'd expected. Feeling lucky, he pushed his luck a bit further. “Plus, that bag at the corner.”

Although reluctant, Mrs. Fallon retrieved the brown leather bag he was pointing at. “You drive a hard bargain.”
Satisfied with the deal, Deacon put the stash of caps and the scarf in the bag and handed it to Nora, along with her new sunglasses. “Put them on when you're outside the city.”

“Why?”

“To blend in, of course,” said Deacon as they exited the basement.

To both his delight and dismay, she didn't seem to be easily convinced by his words alone. “Does everyone else wear these?” Nora asked, looking at her pair of shades.

He could have told her the truth: To hide her face from the Institute's ever watching eyes. But overdosing her with all the ugly truths might turn her off, like most of the willfully ignorant Wastelanders.

A perfect excuse was locked and loaded in a fraction of a second. “No. But they don't have your eyes.”

The woman frowned, perhaps in both confusion and displeasure. “What's wrong with my eyes?”

To make a point, Deacon by stopped in his tracks and stared into them. “They're too distracting.”

Nora blinked hard but didn't reply. Just as he'd anticipated, she dropped the subject and quickly changed the topic, “So you know someone who wants to buy the vault suit for three hundred caps?”

“Yeah.” A sly grin spread on his face. “Me.”

“...Oh. I don't think we should go back to Fallon's Basement any time soon.”

“Agree,” said Deacon to his partner in crime, his smile widened a tab. “Too bad, I had my eyes on the red dress at the corner.”

To which Nora was quick to reply, “That's a shame. I'm sure you'd look good in it.”

Deacon laughed.

Part of his job was to help clueless souls get a hang of the confusing world. Deacon was no stranger to taking someone under his wings, albeit the arrangements were usually temporarily. This time, though, it was... fun. His tried-and-true instincts beeped a faint early warning, reminding him to keep the pre-war relic at arm's length.

“I have to go and check in with my caravan. See you in Goodneighbor, Mrs. Taylor.”

“Nora.”

The warning beeps rang a bit more insistent just as he was about to say her name. Deacon clammed right up, bidding a wordless farewell with a polite nod.

This assignment was a hell lot trickier than he'd thought. And it was only day two.

“Psst.”
The noise was faint enough, but Deacon prided himself in his exceptional hearing. A mop of dark hair popped out from behind the Publick Occurrences building, peaking at him. Deacon knew who's calling.

“Aren't you supposed to be selling papers?” he asked as he approached.

“Shh!” Nat Wright hushed him. “You want your scoop on the vault lady or what?”

“Let's hear it.”

Little Miss Wright, however, held out her palm. “We ain't charity here, Mister.” After five caps were safely in her possession, the girl signaled Deacon to wait, then disappeared into her house and reemerged a moment later. She held up a notepad and said, “Piper's note. She did her interview with the vault lady last night.”

“Thanks, buddy, you're a life-saver.”

Nat hid the notepad behind her back before Deacon could take it. “You can't tell anyone! And you've to read it here and give it back to me in five minutes. If Piper finds out, I'll be grounded for the rest of my life!”

“Where's your sis?”

“Sleepin'. She pulled an all-nighter to work on her article. It's gonna be great!”

“Well, we can't let her find out, can we? Five minutes,” Deacon agreed and took the notepad from the girl.

The notes had been taken in haste; the handwriting was barely legible, with too many shorthand notations only Piper Wright could understand. But Deacon managed to decipher a few repeated ones. As for the more elaborate squiggle lines, he filled in the blank as best he could. A story began to emerge from the pages and formed a picture inside his head.

A lawyer. A soldier. A brand new house in a new neighborhood. A baby. A perfect life. Then came the bombs. And she woke up to this.

“An extra scoop, free of charge,” said Nat. “The vault lady and Mr. Valentine knew each other before the war. They went for a long walk last night.”

This last tidbit was a solid confirmation that the pre-war artifact was a genuine article. Deacon handed the notepad back to the girl, along with a few extra caps. “Good work, kiddo.”

“Nice doin' business with ya.” The girl waved the notepad and added, “You never saw this.”

“Saw what?” Deacon shrugged. “I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.”

“You're going after Kellogg?” Desdemona looked at him as though he'd just claimed he's going on a long walk with his pal the deathclaw.

“She is,” said Deacon. “I'm just along for the ride to make sure she survives.”
“This is crazy, Deacon, even for you.”

“It is,” he admitted. “But it’s not everyday that we have a chance to get rid of the boogeyman himself.”

To that, the Railroad alpha had no arguments. Desdemona lit up another cigarette and took a deep, thoughtful drag. “Make sure you get your ass back here in one piece. I can't afford to lose another agent.”

“Worried about me?” Deacon flashed an easy grin. “I've a good feeling about this, Dez.”

“Don't forget,” said Desdemona with her sharp eyes peered through his shades and looked right into his eyes, “the Institute is behind her release. She's linked to them, somehow.”

“They are the ones who took her kid.”

“Kellogg did.”

“Kellogg's their favorite errand boy. We know who the real boogeyman is.”

Desdemona frowned as she let out a heavy sigh and a cloudy breath. “I don't want you to get too involved, Deacon. We're severely shorthanded as is. Right now, our priority is to regroup.”

“That's your department, Dez,” Deacon pointed out with a slightly more serious note. “My job is intel. And the best way to pick up secrets is to travel around. What's a better excuse to roam around the 'Wealth than to help a grieving mother find her missing kid?”

His boss took one last long drag of her cigarette. Her silence was the green light he was looking for.

“Hey, it's just a pet project on the side,” Deacon added with a smirk he knew would annoy her. “You're still my number one.”

Desdemona's infamous incredulous sideways glare was fierce enough to make some raw recruits pee in their pants, but Deacon was immune to it.

“Flattery won't get you anywhere,” claimed the alpha, although her expression had softened a little. “I'll keep this pet project of yours under wraps for now. The rest of us have enough to deal with. Check in with Tom before you go, he has something for you.”

“Check out my new toys.” Tinker Tom held up a greaser jacket with a proud grin. “Ballistic weave. Mark Five. Have I outdone myself or what? Try it on, man!”

Deacon put it on; it fit like a glove.

“Guarantee to stop bullets, backstabs, or what have ya,” said Tom, taking a step back to admire his own handiwork. “Haven't tested it with a mini nuke, but if you wanna try, I ain't stopping you.”

Deacon dug through Tom's latest collection and picked up another leather jacket. “This Mark Five too?”

“Four.”

He held the jacket up and eyeballed it. The brown leather was softer than his black one. The cut
was longer too, with a belt around the waistline.

“Too small for you, my man,” said Tom.

“Nah. It’s perfect.” Deacon held onto it and continued to browse through some new prototype weapons. “What else do you have?”

“Been working on a secret project I called ‘Tinker Tom Special.’” Tom lifted up an old bed sheet, underneath it was a half assembled sniper rifle.

Deacon let out a low whistle.

“If you want it, call dibs soon.”

“Save it for me, T-man.”

“You got it.”

“And this?” Deacon picked up a modified syringe.

Tom shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep last night, so I played with it. Lighter weight, better recoil, but optimized for short range. If you wanna play doctor, go ahead. Carrington has the poisons or whatnots for it.”

Deacon pocketed that as well. “You got any pistol lying around? Something light, upgraded, and preferably with a suppressor.”

“Don’t you already have one?”

“Always want to try the dual wielding thing,” Deacon deflected with a disarming smirk as he helped himself with a few Stealth Boys Tom had stashed away.

“You on a long mission, huh?” commented Tom as he procured a modified 10mm pistol with suppressor. “Whatever the hell you’re doin’ out there, stay safe, man. The Institute is watching.”

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A/N: I don’t think I’d get sick of writing Deacon anytime soon. He’s too much fun to write.

If you need a visual: Deacon’s jacket is the black greaser one. The brown one he takes is the surveyor jacket.

The shopping scene was written because skywalker-hiddleston wanted to see it. It might not be too sweet and fluffy, but hey, they just met that morning. If you have any suggestions, feel free to tell me. I might find a way to work it into the fic like the shopping scene. No guarantees, though.

The title “A Little Bird Told Me” is the title of the song by Evelyn Knight in 1947.

Anyway, thanks for reading!

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
“No,” said the runaway.

“This is a lot to take in,” said Dr. Amari. “You should take a moment to consider.”

“The answer is no,” the synth insisted.

There was something different about this runaway, Deacon noticed. She wasn't scared or traumatized. She was angry.

“The doc's right,” said Deacon. “At least take a minute or two to think it over. Sleep on it if you want. You're safe here.”

The synth known as G7-81 turned her sharp amber eyes to Deacon. “No. How many times do I have to say that?”

“A memory wipe will help you transit into the world seamlessly,” the doctor explained in a calm, soothing tone. “If you wish, I could upload memories of happy childhood for you.”

“This is who I am,” said G7. “I'm not gonna change it.”

Amari added, “Think of it as an... instant knowledge that would help you blend in with the rest of the world.”

“I know how to survive,” said the runaway with a snort. “My job at the Institute was combing over ruins and shit for salvage.”

A scavver? Interesting, Deacon thought, studying the synth. The woman was tall, beautiful, and apparently very strong-willed.

“It's up to you,” said Deacon. “It's a life-changing decision. Take your time. Think it over.”

“I have,” said G7, staring right at him. “I want to join you.”

He had been helping runaways for more than a decade, but this... This was completely unexpected.

“...What?”

“I want to join you,” G7 repeated. “I want to join your group to help free my people.”

Oh boy... “Just so you know,” said Deacon, “our line of work is not as fun as it seems. The risk is sky-high and the pay is none.”

G7 only shrugged. “No difference than what I'd been doing for the Institute.”
“You sure you don't want live a normal life?”

“Who says I want a normal life?” The runaway glared at him defiantly. “Listen, I escaped to free my brothers and sisters. I’d be damned if I get my memory erased and forget all about them.”

Deacon shared a look with Amari, who shook her head and said, “It's her life, her choice.”

“Please,” said G7. “Let me join you. I can fight.”

Deacon studied her for a great length. The woman was determined. And that determination was required in his line of work. Deacon had a feeling she would be a good fit.

“I'll talk to my boss,” Deacon conceded. “Stay put. Oh and you should start picking a name. We can't call you G7 forever.”

Goodneighbor. A safe haven for all the misfits in the Commonwealth, and a heaven for addicts. This place put Deacon simultaneously on high alert and at ease. The mayor turned a blind eye on the Railroad's activities, making Goodneighbor a frequent place to conduct business. Yet the constant mugging and murdering added a sour note to this place. Not to mention the persistent smell of urine and rotten garbage.

Deacon hated his nose for reminding him where he was.

He was early. With some time to kill, perhaps he should check in with some tourists in town. But when Deacon spotted a familiar form at Kill or Be Killed, he abandoned the previous plan and made a detour.

His footsteps were deliberately loud as he entered the weapon store. Deacon knew better than to started the Railroad killing machine. “Be sure to give her a better deal, Kleo.”

The assaultron turned her single red eye at him. “I always give the best deal to my best customer,” said the robot merchant.

“Look who's here,” said Glory. “Haven't seen you in a few days.”

Deacon shrugged. “I went back home and took a hot shower and a long nap. Overslept.”

Too used to his random bullshits, Glory ignored that comment as she emptied everything on the counter. Pistols, pipe rifles, leather armors, and some metal ones. Far from the best haul, but Deacon knew she had kept the better gears for the Railroad cache.

“Who're the poor bastards this time?” asked Deacon as he leaned against the counter.

“Raiders,” said Glory.

“Ahh.” Of course. Dez would rather not send Glory to clear a den full of synths, even if they were only chrome domes.

While they waited for tally from Kleo, Glory eyed his black leather jacket. “Is that from Tinker Tom?”

“Mark Five. You should really consider ditching your armor. Ask Tom to make you a ballistic weaved dress. You'll kick ass while looking hot.”
Glory snorted. “Only in a man's fantasy where a woman would go into battles wearing a dress.”

“Hey, if a man's got the legs to rock a dress, I'm all for him wearing it to a fight.”

The Railroad heavy laughed. “So what brings you here? A dead drop?”

“Waiting for my date.”

She arched a teasing eyebrow at him, smirking. “Is that what you call your tourists?”

Deacon grinned at her. “What? You think I can't get a date?”

The tall woman landed her amber eyes on him with a knowing smile curled up on her full lips. “I think you wouldn't let anyone get close enough to be your date.”

His sly grin widened. “You know me, G. Warms my old heart.”

“I hope so, D-man. It's been eight years.”

“Has it been that long? Time flies…” Deacon's attention, though, was stolen by the arrival of a ragtag group at the gate. A synth, a woman, a robot, and a dog. “Finally.”

“Is that Valentine?” said Glory. “What's he doing here?”

Deacon pushed himself away from the counter. “Well, I'm off.”

“Wait. Don't tell me he's your date.”

“I won't tell you then.”

Shaking her head in half exasperated, half amused, Glory sighed, “I don't even want to know what you're up to. See you back at HQ.”

“Don't wait up.” He gave her a casual wave then added, “Oh, and you don't know me.”

From a distance, Deacon checked out his handiwork on the former woman in blue. Sunglasses, checked. Wasteland latest fashion, checked. Yet, she still stood out among the rest, and that could mean danger.

And Deacon was right on the money. He was far from the only person who noticed her.

As he stepped out of the weapon shop, Deacon spotted a scruffy man intercepting the latest visitors. Finn, one of the biggest assholes in the town full of assholes, walked with what he might consider to be swagger. But to Deacon, the big man looked like he was limping with a cramp in his leg.

“Hey, hold up there,” said Finn. “First time in Goodneighbor? Can't go walking around without insurance.”

“Insurance?” Nora frowned.

“That's right,” said Finn. “Insurance. Personal protection, like. You hand over everything you got in them pockets, or 'accidents' start happenin' to ya. Big, bloody, 'accidents.'”

“The word you're looking for is 'extortion','” said Nora, holding her chin up high, without a sign of backing down. The dog at her heels growled, ready to attack.
Son of a bitch. Time to interrupt their party before things got out of hand.

But someone stepped in and stole Deacon's spotlight.

“Whoa, whoa. Time out,” said a voice coming from the alley behind.

A man in tattered red coat and tricorn hat stepping into the light. A ghoul in historic costume from the 18th century, to be more precise.

Goodneighbor Mayor John Hancock waltzed into the scene. The heels of his boots clicked loudly against the pavement, providing an almost musical beat to enhance his grand entrance. While Deacon's disguises made him disappear among the crowd, Hancock's signature outfit flashed a giant neon sign above the mayor's head that screamed 'look at me!'.

Since spotlight was never his thing, Deacon gladly stepped back in the shadows and observed.

“Someone steps through the gate the first time, they're a guest,” said Hancock to the bully who was half a head taller than him. “You lay off that extortion crap.”

“What'd you care?” said Finn. “She ain't one of us.”

“No love for your mayor, Finn?” said Hancock. “I said let 'em go.”

“You're soft, Hancock. You keep letting outsiders walk all over us, one day there'll be a new mayor.”

The mayor merely chuckled at the threat. “Come on, man. This is me we're talking about.” He extended a friendly hand and patted the other man on the shoulder. “Let me tell you something...”

In the blink of an eye, the mayor pulled out a knife with his free hand and drove the blade into the man's torso. Not once, but twice. The attack came so sudden that Finn couldn't even scream, let alone react. When Hancock casually release his iron grip on the Finn's shoulder, the big man slumped lifelessly onto the ground, drawing his last breath.

Gasps rose all around from the gathering crowd. Some nodded with approval, commenting on how the dead man had it coming. Some frowned, but wisely kept their opinions to themselves. Deacon belonged to the latter.

Was that really necessary? Deacon sighed. As much as he hated that scumbag for threatening his vault dweller, death was a little bit too harsh of a punishment.

“Now why'd you have to go and say that, huh?” said the mayor to the corpse as he wiped his blade clean with the man's jacket. Blood had started to seep into the cracks of the pavements underneath the dead body. “Breaking my heart over here.”

Sheathing his knife, Hancock approached his guests.

Deacon held his breath as the mayor came face-to-face with the Commonwealth's latest newbie.

Witnessing a murder up close could do a number on a person's sanity. On top of that, this was the first friendly ghoul Nora had encountered for the first time in her life. As charming as Hancock could be, he was not exactly easy on the eyes. The man was missing his nose, his eyes were all two pools of dark abyss, and his skin was scarred and wrinkled. Without his fancy outfit and his perfect posture, Hancock could be mistaken for feral to the untrained eye.
If Nora freaked, things could go sideways, fast.

“You all right, sister?” asked the mayor cordially.

“I'm fine,” said Nora, her tone perfectly controlled. “Thanks for... taking care of him.”

Potential crisis averted. But Deacon's relief was quickly turned into dismay when Nora took off her sunglasses. If Hancock hadn't been interested in this new comer, 10 to 1 said he would be now that he got a good look at her face.

“Welcome to the Goodneighbor,” said the mayor with a dramatic wave of his hand to show case this shithole of a town.

While Hancock had always been known for his grandiose flair, it seemed to Deacon the man had dialed it up to eleven today.

“How don't let this incident taint your view of our little community,” Hancock continued oh-so smoothly. “Goodneighbor is of the people, for the people, you feel me? Everyone's welcome.”

“Thank you, mayor.”

“Good,” said Hancock, seemingly pleased. “You stay cool, and you'll be part of the neighborhood. So long as you know who's in charge.”

Hard to forget when you just stabbed someone in front of her face, buddy, Deacon thought, holding back a frown.

At last, Hancock switched his attention from the woman to the synth. “Good to see you again, Nick.”

The detective returned the greeting with a curt nod. “Hancock.”

When the flashy mayor in red finally existed stage left, Deacon took it as his cue to emerge from the dispensing crowd.

But as he got closer, he noticed the change in Nora's demeanor now that the show's over. Her arms now crossed, hugging herself. Her face turned pale, her lips pressed thin, her brows furrowed. And those expressive eyes, staring at the lifeless body on the ground, told him everything she'd been trying to hold back. The shock, the horror, and most of all, the disgust.

Deacon kicked himself for not stepping in sooner.

“...He didn't have to kill him,” Nora said to Nick.

“That's one way of reminding everyone who's in charge,” said Valentine, his tone dripped with obvious disapproval. “Hancock appointed himself as the mayor. It's not exactly a democratic system here.”

“What an entrance, huh?” said Deacon as he stepped right in front of Nora, deliberately blocking out her view of the corpse.

Strangely, Nora stared at him blankly for a second without a sign of recognition. It was then Deacon remembered he had traded his hat for his wig.

“Sydney?” said Nora with a blink. “I almost didn't recognize you.”
A hint of a knowing smirk spread on Valentine's face. “That's his game, kid.”

“I've got a bounty on my head with the Gunners,” Deacon told her. “Gotta keep my enemies off my tail. You're not gonna sell me out, are you?”

“Of course not,” said Nora seriously, which made Deacon almost felt bad for lying. Almost. She then asked, “Who are the Gunners?”

“Local mercenary gang,” Nick explained. “They're a bunch of glorified raiders.”

“You must be Mr. Carton,” the Mr. Handy came up and greeted Deacon. “May I say it's a pleasure to finally meet you, sir. Thank you for helping Miss Nora.”

“No problem, buddy...” he trailed off as he sensed something. They were being watched. Flashing an easy smile to cover his discomfort, Deacon quickly suggested, “Well, unless you enjoy the stench here, let's go find our guy.”

“Agree,” said Codsworth, who then mumbled to himself with more than a hint of disgust, “Goodneighbor indeed. Certainly, no one here is trying to win any awards for cleanliness.”

The prickling sensation that made his hair stand on end never went away. He was feeling eyes on them. Many pairs of eyes, some watching openly, some lurking in the shadows. But the attention wasn't on them, nor on him. It was all on her.

Shit.

Fresh meat brought out all the hunters lurking in the dark, ripe for mugging, or worse. For now, they should be safe under the protective shield Mayor Hancock had cast on them. No doubt this protection would wear off as soon as the door to the Old State House closed behind the mayor.

Lucky for them, the mayor had decided to make his rounds around town with his bodyguard trailing behind. No one ever dared to start anything in front of John Hancock. When he wasn't looking, that's another story.

Still, Deacon didn't want to alarm the Wasteland newbie. Soon enough, she would figure out the dangers in the Commonwealth. Right now, she was still on her training-wheels.

As much as he preferred to keep his personal space personal, Deacon kept close to the pre-war relic while the mutt guarded her other side. With Valentine in front and the loyal Mr. Handy covering the rear, the walking antique was as safe as anyone could possibly be in the Commonwealth.

But Deacon knew the town too well. The word 'safe' should never be associated with Goodneighbor, or most of the Commonwealth, really. He sneaked a glance or two above, checking out the windows of the buildings as they passed by, looking for sniper rifles that probably didn't pop up on the window sill. Probably.

Deacon sure as hell didn't stay alive this long for being careless.

Maybe you shouldn't be alive at all.

He drowned the haunting inner voice with his good-humored vocal one. “So how does it feel to be personally greeted by both McDonough brothers?”

Nora shot him a questioning glance. “Both?”
Deacon nodded at the mayor a block ahead of them. “John Hancock, formerly known as John McDonough.”

“McDonough? He's Mayor McDonough's brother?”

“Bet you can't tell. Unlike his brother, Hancock used to be one handsome son of a gun before he overdosed on a radioactive drug and turned into this.”

“I see... Wait. How did you know I met Mayor McDonough by the gate?”

It was a rare slip. Deacon mentally kicked himself and ignored a faint chuckle coming from Valentine. “Words travel,” he told Nora with a shrug, “You're the talk of the town in Diamond City.”

On the other side of the alley, Deacon spotted Glory leaning against the wall, watching them without a hint of subtly. Her amber eyes followed them as they walked past. Drifters stayed far away from her – and wisely so – because on the ground by her muddy boots was her trusty minigun.

The sight of the giant weapon brought both comfort and dread to Deacon. Should the need ever arise, Glory was definitely someone you would want to be on your side. Yet, the Railroad heavy wasn't nicknamed the angel of death for no reason.

While Deacon preferred a subtle, in-and-out-like-a-ghost approach, Glory loved to announce her presence with a hail of bullets. The thing about bullets, though, was that they didn't have eyes. One stray bullet was enough to end an innocent life, Deacon knew. He'd witnessed too many deaths. Way too many. Yet, somehow, the man who didn't deserve to be standing was still very much alive.

Himself.

Fate had such a sick sense of humor.

Nora's voice called Deacon back to reality. “Memory Den?” she asked, looking at the sign across the street. “That used to be a theater.”

“Ah that,” Valentine replied. “It's a place where you can relive the past moments in your mind as clear as the day they happened.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Yes,” said the detective. “Some people spend their whole life savings on it, reliving their golden days again and again.”

Then, Deacon saw it. A look flashed across her face – a thought, a temptation. The same thought that he'd had so many times. Inside the Memory Den was a machine that could let them see their long-lost spouse. A machine that could let them relive the past, whether it was a simple meal they'd shared, or a night under the starry sky. Deacon had fought the temptation for years to a point where he was immune to it. But could the Wasteland newbie resist the urge to see her husband?

“It's a form of addiction worse than all the chems combined,” warned Deacon. “Sure, you get to 'see' people you loved, but it's not real. It's like watching an old video, you can't change a thing. When the program ends – and it will – you've to face this shitty world all over again.”

Nora didn't reply immediately, although he could see the struggle in her eyes. The hope, the
“Let the past stay where it belongs. Come on,” Deacon urged with a gentle hand on Nora's back to steer her away from the den across the street. “Our guy is in this bar.”

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, Nora glanced around and took in the dingy bar with her eyes widened. “Can't believe they built a bar in this station.”

“Hmm, they actually made remarkable use of the subway for this establishment,” Codsworth commented.

“This is one of the few stations not run by feral ghouls or raiders,” said Deacon. “Guess we can thank Hancock for that.”

“Doesn't mean you can let your guards down,” Nick told Nora. “Watch your caps in this place. Folks behind the bar are as likely to rob you as those in front of it.”

“Oh, and only order off the menu,” Deacon added. “Way off.”

“Ah, a fellow Mr. Handy.” Codsworth floated to the bar to meet his counterpart.

“Mister Valentine,” said a low, sultry voice. The flower of The Third Rail graced them with her presence, her hips swayed with every step as she approached.

“Magnolia,” the detective greeted with a smile in his voice.

Unbeknownst to all, there's a long-established agreement between Deacon and Magnolia. And it was very simple: She would always ignore him unless he initiated the conversation.

As such, the singer's eyes conveniently skipped over Deacon and rested on the woman next to him. “Now, who do we have here?”

“A customer looking for MacCready,” said Deacon quickly before Nora introduced herself out of courtesy.

“He's in the backroom,” said Magnolia, who hooked her hand onto Nick's arm. “Why don't you and I sit down for a drink, Nicky? We have a lot to catch up.”

The singer led the detective away, but she glanced back, her gaze lingered on the pre-war relic curiously.

“Who is she?” asked Nora.

“That's Magnolia, the star of town. This place is packed every night because of her.”

“She's beautiful.”

Of course she is. Her face was Magnolia's armor and weapon all-in-one. She was one of Deacon's best tourists, if not the best. With the unbelievable amount of information flowing freely from intoxicated patrons, Magnolia knew nearly everything.
And now, the stunning woman in red wanted to know about the former woman in blue.

But Deacon was not in a sharing mood. He guided his vault dweller to the backroom, away from the singer's inquisitive eyes. “The man we're here to see is a hired gun. That usually means we have to pay him up front.”

“I've brought the cash.”

“Caps,” he reminded her with a tiny smile. “I know. You're used to those pre-war paper money. Personally, I prefer that too. Much easier to carry. But, some idiots decided to use bottle caps for trading after the Big One and started the trend. We've to play by the rules.”

“So the paper money are worthless?”

“On the contrary. Pre-war trinkets are worth a lot more than you'd think. Especially those tiny green papers you guys used as currency. If you have a hidden stash of cash somewhere, you're one rich lady. But don't tell anyone.”

“Do antiques worth that much?”

“You've no idea. We don't make things like they used to. People included.”

Despite her questioning glance, Deacon had no intention of elaborating.

The door to the backroom was wide open. As precaution, Deacon gently pushed Nora behind him as he peeked into the room for a quick recon. A man with green cap was lounging on an armchair, drinking by himself. The empty bottles on the floor told Deacon how long the man had been at the bar, and how early he'd started drinking.

A drunken mercenary? Perhaps it was not the best idea, after all...

“What do you want?” the man blurted out, glaring at his visitors.

*Good. You're not completely wasted.*

“You MacCready?” asked Deacon.

The man in green hat stood from the couch and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Who's asking?”

Intel from Magnolia told Deacon his age and background. But Robert Joseph MacCready was not what Deacon had expected. Barely past the tender age of twenty-two, the kid was short and scrawny, unlike most of his former Gunner colleagues. His features were sharp, his face weathered. At first glance, he could pass as a seasoned mercenary. But his eyes betrayed his real age. Those baby blues screamed 'youth' despite his harsh 'don't-fuck-with-me' expression.

“A potential customer,” said Deacon. “Heard we could find the best shot in town here.”

“You heard right,” said MacCready, folding his arms. “If you need a hired gun, the price is 250 caps. Up front. And there's no room for bargaining. What'd you say?”

“All I have is 150,” said Nora.

“Then no deal.” MacCready waved a hand and went back to his drink.

“Come on,” said Deacon. “Everything's negotiable.”
“250. Or get out of my face.”

Nora hesitated for a moment, then began to take off the ring on her finger. “My wedding ring. You can keep it until I pay you the remaining.”

That got MacCready's full attention.

“Hold up.” Deacon quickly covered her hands with his to keep the kid from snatching the ring. He moved to stand between the two parties and took over the negotiation. “Listen, pal, my friend here is looking for her missing son.”

When Deacon spotted the merc's eyebrow arched up at the last word, he knew he was pushing the right button. If used correctly, intel could be more effective than any weapon. And right now, Deacon had enough ammo to crack this case.

He watched his opponent very closely as he continued, “Her husband was murdered in front of her.” MacCready's mouth pressed into a frown. “The bastard who killed her husband stole her baby.” Adam apple blobbed. “The kid's only a few months old.” Chest rose in a subtle, deep breath. “He can't survive out there for long.”

When MacCready turned his head away, Deacon knew he had it in the bag. Now, for the final push.

“Her son is the only thing she has left in this world. We have to find him before it's too late.”

The tough guy facade was all but crumbled. MacCready silently turned his back on them and poured himself another drink.

_Gotcha, kid._

To his credit, MacCready was stubborn enough to put up a fight. “How do I know I won't end up with a bullet in my back?” he asked, although his eyes were never anywhere near the grieving mother's form.

“You don't. That's the fun part, right?” Deacon shifted gear and aimed at another angle. “Look, buddy, I know Winlock has locked you down. No one in the Commonwealth is gonna hire you, unless they want a visit from the Gunners.”


Deacon merely shrugged. “I'm already on their to-kill list, so might as well piss them off even more.”

A smirk flashed across the kid's face before he quickly switched back to his tough guy persona. “I'll tell you what. 150 caps up front. And I get to call dibs on all the loots we come across until I get the other 100.”

“Deal.”

“Well, consider you just bought yourself an extra gun, boss.”

“Hey, I'm not the boss.” Deacon nodded at the woman next to him. “She is.”

The kid turned to his new employer and introduced himself, “MacCready. From now on, you point,
I shoot. Simple enough?"

“The man we are after is dangerous,” Nora warned him.

MacCready merely shrugged. “A bullet in the head is enough to shut any man up. If your kid's out there, then we'd better get going. Let me get my things. I'll meet you at the bar.”

A/N: Like Travis so helpfully pointed out, Goodneighbor is the place, Good Neighbor is the title of the song.

Are you sick of Deacon's POV yet? The camera is mostly on Deacon for now. We get to see what the liar really thinks, if/when he's not lying to himself. If you're waiting for more Nora's POV, once she gets into the Institute, it's all hers. (And for me, it's where the fun begins because of the AU plot.)

Thanks for reading!

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
A kick in her stomach woke Nora up.

The room was dark. Heavy curtains blocked the streetlights outside her house.

Nora fumbled to find the switch on the lamp.

It was barely past three in the morning. She sighed and settled back onto the soft pillow.

“What is it, sweetie?” She placed a hand on her round belly, soothing it gently. “Can’t sleep, huh?”

The other side of the bed was unoccupied, as it had been for the past few months. Nate had gone to the war without knowing she was pregnant, without knowing their son was on his way to the world. She’d written to him since, sending him pictures of her ever-growing belly. They were here waiting for him to come back – come back to them as her husband, as the baby’s father, come back safely, in one piece...

The baby kicked again, harder this time, as if he could read Nora's thoughts. “Ow...” Nora seethed in pain, struggling to push herself up. “I know, I miss him too.”

And then, she felt it. A contraction that hurt like hell.

Sitting on her bed by herself, Nora muffled a scream that might wake the rest of the neighborhood.

“Not now, sweetie,” she huffed. “Not yet... Daddy's gonna come home soon.”

She’d received words that Nate's mission was over. He should be home in a week.

But the baby had a mind of its own. He moved, he shifted, he wiggled. He wanted to see this world, he wanted to be a part of it.

Her body was about to get ripped in halves. Nora managed to censor a curse but couldn't silent a scream.

The pain soon began to subside. Nora knew she still had a bit of time before the contractions were minutes apart, but not for long. The baby was determined to be born. Today.

She would gladly pay all the money in the world for her husband to be here, but he wasn’t.

“...It's just the two of us,” Nora said to her belly between labor breaths. “We can do this.”

Nora stumbled out of the bed, shoved her swollen feet into a pair of fuzzy slippers, grabbed the bag
she'd prepared, then dragged her heavy body out of the bedroom and down the hallway. She didn't ever bother to get dressed properly as she left the house.

“Hang on, Shaun,” said Nora, taking the car key on the counter. “Mommy's going to the hospital. Hang on!”

Shaun. A name Nate and Nora had decided on. Shaun – a gracious gift from God.

“Loots?” Nora asked Sydney after MacCready had left the backroom of The Third Rail. “What did he mean by loots?”

“Ah, the time-honored tradition of looting,” the man in sunglasses replied. “You see, when your enemies are dead, they don't really need their earthly possessions anymore. So might as well take it. Because if you don’t, others sure will. The key to this, though, is to focus on the valuables, so you won't break your back with all the goodies. Speaking of goodies, I got some for you.”

He headed to the couch and beckoned her to join him. Then, reaching behind his back, he pulled out a gun and handed it to her. The pistol was longer than the one she'd found back in Sanctuary Hills, but it was lighter.

“Modified 10mm with silencer,” said Sydney Carton. “If they can't hear where the shot's from, they can't find you right away.” He then asked her suddenly, “You ever played hide-and-seek as a kid?”

She nodded.

“It's sort of like the game, but with a twist and with guns. Take them out before they see you, and you win.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Practice makes perfect. And, of course, this would help.” Carton fished out a small box-like device from the bag. On top of the devices were some switches and a small red button.

“What's this?” asked Nora.

“Stealth Boy. A magic wand that would make you disappear.” He pointed at one of the switches. “You flip this switch, then press this button. And viola. You're a ghost for the next thirty seconds. Enough time for you to run away, or put a bullet in your enemy's head.”

Nora took the device tentatively. “How does this even work?”

Carton shrugged. “ Beats me. Magic.”

“According to all the fantasy novels, there's always a cost to cast magic spells.”

“There is. Common side effects include – and not limited to – anxiety, paranoia, mood swings, schizophrenia, and dementia.”

The laundry list made Nora blink hard at the seemingly harmless device in her hands. It was then Carton couldn't hold onto his poker face and started to laugh.
“If you're a super mutant,” he added, still chuckling. “You're not green enough and too pretty to be one. Humans react differently. You're safe. That said, these babies are hard to come by. Use it only when it's necessary.”

Studying this thing called Stealth Boy, Nora nodded.

“Last, but certainly not least.” Sydney handed her a brown leather jacket. “Weather's getting cold. You'll need this. It'll keep the chill – and bullets – at bay.”

“This is bullet-proof?” The jacket was a tab heavier than it looked, but other than that, it seemed to be just a normal coat.

“It won't make you invincible. And when a bullet hit, it'll still hurt like a bitch. But you'll have nasty bruises instead of bloody holes. Think of it as a stylish armor.”

“I've never worn an armor before. My husband was the soldier, not me.”

_Nate should have been here. Not me._

“There are many ways to solve a problem,” said Sydney, his cheerful tone took a sudden serious turn. “Violence is not always the answer.”

Nora couldn't see those eyes hidden behind the sunglasses, but she could feel them staring right at her, studying her. It should make her feel uneasy, yet, somehow, it didn't.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked, almost intentionally to divert his attention away from her.

“What?”

“All these. How much?”

There was a very brief pause, a second delay, as if he was taken aback by a surprise question.

“...Er, nothing,” he said, leaning back as if to put a distance between them. “... picked them up from our storage. Items like these are hard to sell; most folks can't afford 'em. They've been sitting on the shelves for months, so I thought might as well put them to good use.”

That was a lie. Nora had seen enough liars in her previous line of work to see right through this. There was a slight change in his tone. The tiniest hesitation at first when he had to come up with a tale, then turning fast and smooth as he had to sell the story.

A lie was usually told to cover another lie, Nora knew this all too well.

Old habits die hard. The wheels inside her head started to spin at full speed as she began to go down the rabbit hole of endless questions.

What if he didn't expect money because he wasn't a trader to start with? What if the story about caravan was a cover? And why, why was he helping her?

MacCready agreed to help because of caps. Nick, because this was his case. But what about Sydney Carton?

Even his name brought up some questions.

Sydney Carton. That's the name of a character from _A Tales of Two Cities_. Either his parents had named him after the tragic character, or it's an alias. Judging from the severe lack of pre-war
literature and the high illiteracy rate, Nora believed it's the latter. An alias for a man who never
took off his sunglasses, even in the dark.

An alias for a man who had read Dickens classic. An alias for a man who had been helping her
every step of the way.

“...Who are you?” Nora heard herself whispered the question.

And immediately, she regretted it. She shouldn't have asked. It was ungrateful, it was rude, it was...

Then a tiny yet gentle smile appeared on his face, almost as though he was proud of her blunt inquiry. “Why, your secret Santa, of course.”

Nora respected his privacy. As long as they'd find Shaun, it didn't really matter why he was here.

“Thank you, Santa.” Or whoever you are.

“Shh. Let's keep my secret identity between us.” He chuckled lightly, then stood and stretched.

“Come on, we should hit the road when the sun's still up. Let's put Dogmeat's nose to the test.”

“You've lost her,” Father repeated the news he'd just heard. His quiet voice contained a sharp edge
that made the head of SRB took an involuntary step back.

“The last confirmed sighting was at Diamond City this morning,” said Dr. Justin Ayo. “Feedback
from our Watchers showed she's among the crowd during a commotion. Then she headed into an
alley...”

“And disappeared?” The old man glared at his subordinate.

“We are combing through every feed around the city as we speak, sir. We're assuming she's
changed out of her vault suit. It will take some time to locate one person among thousands--”

Father waved a hand. He had enough of their incompetence. “Send me the courser that dropped the
bread crumbs.”

When the door closed and he was once again alone, Father let out a heavy sigh and shut his eyes,
trying to ignore the pain that had seemed to spread across his frail body.

An old man with one foot in the grave was leading the future of humanity. Father could see an
irony in this. And now his last experiment had gone offline, lost in the dangerous, filthy,
contaminated, irradiated surface, her fate unknown. That thought made his skin crawl.

No, she wasn't just his final experiment. That woman was his mother. The only link he had left to
his past. His blood...

Wrong. Blood is just plasma that contains red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

Father took a long breath and opened his eyes. He couldn't afford to be sentimental. Not now. Yet,
lately his thoughts often wandered to the dangerous question 'what if'. What if he hadn't been
taken? What if he grew up with his parents? What if--

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. For once, the old man was gracious for the intrusion.
“Come in.”

A tall, well-built man in long, black leather coat walked in. Coursers in their uniforms were meant to be intimidating, but this particular unit was the cream of the crop.

“X6-88, reporting for duty.”

“You're the one who handled the previous assignment?” Father asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Dr. Ayo has lost our target,” the old man told the courser, who was not at all surprised by the news. In face, the man in black did not show a single hint of emotion. “I want you to relay back to each point, see if the evidence has been discovered. We believe she's on her way to the fort. Find her.”

“Understood.”

“When you do, do not engage.”

“And if there's a threat?” the courser asked. “The Commonwealth is a dangerous place, sir.”

“Eliminate any immediate danger if necessary. Make sure she stays alive. But remain out of sight.”

No cars. No buses. No trains.

What would have been a short trip before the war, now took hours of walking to cover the same distance.

The sun had set. Without power, without streetlights, nightfall had forced them to seek shelter. Sydney Carton led them off the path Dogmeat had been tracking, and took them to an abandon townhouse in the neighborhood.

“Let me sweep this place first,” said MacCready immediately upon entering the house.

“Doesn't seem like anyone is here,” said Nick.

“Can't be too careful. Those darn ferals are sneaky ba-- monsters.”

“Knock yourself out,” said the detective. “I'll be here running a diagnostic.”

The mercenary then proceeded to check every corner of the townhouse – under the couch, behind the counter, inside the closet. Satisfied, he made his way upstairs and continued with his diligent work.

They were not the first who took shelter in this house, Nora noticed. The previous occupants had left behind a make-shift stove. Cinder boxes and iron mesh had been set up within the fireplace, with a small empty pot sitting on top.

“You got a hang of the Commonwealth yet?” said Sydney to Nora.
“I’m trying to keep track of the crimes we’ve committed so far.”

“Really? So what’s the tally?” he asked as he dropped his bag and his rifle at the corner and went to start a fire – all done so naturally as though he’d just come home after a long day of work.

“Right now, we're trespassing,” said Nora as she sank down onto the couch across from the fireplace. Her feet hurt from all the walking. “Add larceny when we took some Nuka-Cola from the abandon store. And the raiders we killed in self-defense? That still counts as second degree murder. Justifiable homicide.”

“Ouch. Guess we're lucky the court is in permanent recess.”

A fire started and lit up the dark living room. No electricity, no plumbing, all the thing she had taken for granted was gone. It was as if she was back to centuries back in time.

“All right. We're good,” MacCready announced from the top of the stairs. “And I’m calling dibs on one of the beds.”

“You're safe in here,” Sydney told her. “There's food and water in the kitchen, and two beds upstairs. But the windows upstairs are broken. Take the couch tonight, it's the warmest spot in the house.”

“This place's yours?” Nora asked.

“Yeah. I handed over a sufficient amount of caps and the previous owner gave me the deed of the house.”

She didn't mind the friendly banter. “Was the previous owner a skeleton or a feral ghoul?” Nora countered without much of a thought.

“She was a nice old lady. Sure, her hair was falling off, her skin was all rotten, but hey, not everyone looks as good as you when they're two hundred.”

Whoever Sydney Carton really was, the man was trying to lift her spirit, Nora knew. And he was doing an excellent job at it.

Like Nate.

“When you're on the road as much as I do, you have safe houses across the ‘Wealth,” said Sydney as he picked up his rifle once more. “I'm gonna go for a walk, and commit what may or may not be considered as – what'd you call it? – larceny.”

“Whatever it takes to survive...”

To that, the man in sunglasses flashed a proud grin. “You've got it.”

The sun was finally gone. Good riddance. The moon was up, hidden behind a thick layer of cloud. Just the way he liked it.

Hello darkness, my old friend.

Night time. It's when those Watcher bastards couldn't see him, when his enemies couldn't snipe
him. It was the only time Deacon would feel remotely safe. Although not safe enough for him to remove his sunglasses. Rarely, if at all, would he feel comfortable enough to be without his security blanket, the pair of shades that seemed to sit permanently on his face. Not even in his sleep. And certainly not out in the open like this.

He could see just fine, once his eyes adjusted to the level of light – or lack thereof.

Deacon made his way back to the safe house after checking the dead drops nearby. He lingered outside, though, without entering. He could sense a presence, someone... or something. He wasn't alone.

Then, he felt a bump on his leg. Deacon looked down and saw the mutt glancing up at him.

“Hey buddy, what's up?”

The dog sniffed around him, bumping his soft nose onto his thighs.

“If you're looking for food, I don't have any.”

Not at all discouraged, the dog merely wagged his tail and stayed by Deacon's side.

“For a killing machine, you sure look cute.” Deacon squatted down to the mutt's level. “So your name is Dogmeat, huh? I'm Deacon. But, let's keep that as a secret between the two of us for now.”

Dogmeat tilted his head to the side and whined, as if asking him 'why?'

“I have my reasons. You're not gonna go tell her, are you?”

The dog barked playfully once.

“Of course you won't.” Deacon stretched the back of the dog's ears. “But I think she's on to me. Damn, that's faster than I thought. You think she has what it takes?”

“To do what?” a voice asked, but it wasn't Dogmeat.

Valentine...

Nick Valentine emerged from the abandon store next door. “Don't tell me you want to recruit her.”

With no intention of answering at all, Deacon eyed the detective, now without his signature trenchcoat. “Trying a new look?”

“Gave my coat to the lady. It'll make a decent blanket.”

“How gentlemanly of you.”

“One good thing about being a synth is that I won't catch a cold. Our friend, on the other hand, will.”

“Hey, what about me?”

The detective arched an eyebrow at him. “Something tells me your immune system is made of steel.”

“Are you implying that I'm a synth?” asked Deacon with a smirk. “Because if you are, you're correct.”
Valentine knew better than to encourage more of his bullshits. The authentic synth lit a cigarette instead.

That didn't stop Deacon, though. “So, now that it's just the two of us... Tell me, what do you really think?”

“What about?”

“This whole thing.” Out of habit, Deacon glanced both ways down the street to make sure it's clear before he continued, “Doesn't this feel too easy? The cigars? The bandages? Kellogg doesn't strike me as the careless type. Something's off.”

“You think it's a trap?”

“It looks like a trap, it smells like a trap.”

“I'm not ruling anything out, but it's our only lead.”

Deacon couldn't argue with that. “What about the kid in Diamond City? You found anything about him?”

“The kid's name was Shaun, all right. Dark hair, around ten.”

“Could be the one.”

“I wouldn't jump to that conclusion so quickly. There's a nine years age gap.”

“It's possible. That asshole took the kid and froze her back. Who knows how long it's been since then?”

Valentine took a long moment to consider. “Why would someone like Kellogg leave a loose end? Why didn't he kill her? And who released her?”

Deacon knew the answer to one of his questions, but he wasn't about to share. Not yet. “Well, good thing one of us here is a detective. It's your job to find out, Detective Valentine.”

Sitting patiently on the ground, Dogmeat barked playfully once as if joining in the conversation.

Feeling more at ease with the four-legged companion than any human in and out of his life, Deacon grinned at the pup. “Sorry, my bad. Two detectives. Right, Detective Dogmeat?”

“Woof!”

“I didn't think anyone could make BlamCo mac and cheese taste any better,” said MacCready as he scraped the last bit from his bowl.

“Thank you, Mr. MacCready,” said Codsworth. “Although it's hardly worth mentioning. Perhaps I should start planning for a feast to celebrate once we've found young Shaun. What do you think, mum?”

“I just want to get my baby back, Cods,” said Nora.
“How old is he?” asked the merc.

“Shaun? Almost seven months.”

“Oh god. I'm so sorry,” said MacCready. His voice was quiet and heartfelt. “I wouldn't know what I'd do if I were you.” He paused, seemingly lost in his own thoughts for a moment. “Seven months... That's when they can't even sleep through the night.”

“Tell me about it,” said Nora, remembering all her sleepless nights as though it was yesterday. Because to her, it was. “Shaun's getting better, though. He wakes up only once, usually at two in the morning. Some people say there's a trick to make your kid sleeps through the night.”

To her surprise, MacCready seemed genuinely interested in the topic. “Yeah? What's that?”

“Let them cry. They'll learn to settle by themselves.”

The merc snorted. “C'mon! Whoever said that probably doesn't even have a kid. It breaks your heart when you hear your own kids cry.”

“Yeah, it sure does...” She looked at him. “You have a kid?”

MacCready paused for a long moment, then he finally nodded. “A boy.”

“How old is he?”

“Three...” The merc's face softened considerably when he thought of his son. “Can't believe my little man is already three years old. Still remember the day he was born. All the mess, and the blood. And then there he was. He was...”

“...Perfect.”

“Heck yeah.” The proud father nodded, grinning. “He was perfect.”

For a loving father to willingly leave his son behind, there had to be a reason, a story. But Nora knew better than to pry.

“I remember when my kid was just a baby,” MacCready continued. “I couldn't bear having him out of my sight for more than a few minutes.” The sniper shifted and turned to her. “Look, we'll find your son, boss, even if it means turning the entire freaking Commonwealth upside down. And when we do, I have a bullet with that jerk's name on it.”

“You don't have to call me boss. My name is Nora. Nora Taylor.”

“All right. Robert Joseph MacCready.” He extended a hand for a shake, which Nora took. His grip was firm and warm. “Former mayor of Little Lamplight in the Capital Wasteland.”

“Mayor?”

A tiny smirk lit up his face. “Up for a story?”

A/N: “Hello Darkness, my old friend” is, of course, lyrics from “The Sound of Silence” by Simon
& Garfunkel.

“In the Still of the Night” by The Five Satins. 1956.

I'd like to dedicate this chapter to tomeri-no, whose super awesome drawings and gifs keep me writing!

Thanks for reading.

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Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Ten: Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall

Target locked on. Leather-gloved finger squeezed the trigger on the laser rifle. The last machinegun turret exploded without detecting him. X6-88 lowered his weapon and surveyed the scene. The rooftop of Fort Hagen was cleared, all done without even breaking a sweat.

X6-88 was getting bored. The outside defense in this military compound provided little to no challenge. Too many dead angles, too little firepower. A contact killer like Kellogg should have known better. But then, X6-88 didn't expect much from the surface dwellers, Kellogg included. The mercenary was just a tool, an effective one for many years. And like any other tools, sooner or later they would outlive their usefulness.

It would seem the clock was ticking for the Institute's favorite dirty weapon. But this time, the person chosen for disposal assignment wasn't a courser. Not even a synth. And she was fast approaching.

Leaning against the ledge, he spotted his target three blocks down. A woman who looked out of place in this Wasteland. A civilian, cleaner than the rest of the surface dwellers. If she's dressed in a white jumpsuit, X6-88 could have mistaken her as someone from the Institute – someone who was untouched by the radiation, someone who was in perfect health.

He hadn't been briefed on her identity. It didn't matter to him, whoever this woman was. If Father deemed her important enough to be protected, that's all he needed to know. Father always had a plan.

As always, Father's plan worked. The woman had followed the clues and found this place. She was not alone, though. With her came two men, a synth, a robot, and a dog. X6-88 paid no attention to any of them; they were all expendable. His mission was to observe his target, and protect if necessary.

It was a simple assignment, with only one strict condition: He had to remain undetected. It served him just fine, for the least interaction with surface dwellers, the better. He hated everything about the Commonwealth. The sun, the rain, the smell, the filth. And the people.

He especially hated the rain. And it was starting to drizzle.

X6-88 glared at the sky as if to threaten it to stop raining. The filthy Commonwealth only got even more dirty when it's wet. He couldn't wait to relay back to the Institute for a hot shower to sanitize himself. No, two hot showers, after running through the standard decontamination chamber.

Still, if the Institute needed him to be on the surface for surveillance, he would stoically suffer the discomfort. It was a small price to pay for the greater good.
Two blocks down, the dog led his target closer and closer to her destination. There was one last thing to do before she entered the fort. Second part of the preventive measure.

X6-88 opened a hatch on the roof, leaped into the hole, and landed into a storage room. For a second, he remained crouched and perfectly still, as he listened to the footsteps outside the storage. Multiple units were on patrol within the fort. No doubt the team was ordered to shoot on sight. No matter, though. X6-88 rose to his full height and strolled out of the room without a hint of fear. He was a courser. Even an ancient inferior Gen-1 unit knew better than to shoot at the Institute's elite agent.

He took five steps before a unit nearby sensed him.

“Motions detected,” said the unit.

*Unacceptable,* X6-88 scowled. If he wanted, that unit would be a pile of useless metal by now. Someone at the Robotics was obviously sleeping on the job. He made a mental note to file a report later.

“Scanning. Subject identified. Courser. Unit X6-88.”


“Code accepted. Await for new instructions.”

“Where is Kellogg?”

“In the basement.”

“Are there any units with him?”

“None. All units are currently on patrol.”

“All units, retreat.”

“Understood.”

And now, he waited.

Deacon felt like he had a giant red target painted on his back.

He hated the daylight, and he hated being out in the open. Now, he was doing both. His hands itched to reach for the Stealth Boy attached on his belt. All he needed to do was to flip a switch and press a button, then he'd be a ghost.

But stealth was no longer an option when he was traveling with a group, especially when one of his companions had a propulsion engine that hummed nonstop.

His four-legged companion stopped at the crossroad and sniffed the cracked pavement. The dog picked up a scent and bolted straight down the road. They followed without question, as they had been for since they'd left Diamond City.
Most people would only focus on the road in front of them, they would usually ignore things above their eye level. But not Deacon.

It was a force of habit, a reason why he had survived this long. His eyes never stopped moving, taking in every detail of his surroundings. After all, the bird perched on the lamppost could be a Watcher, the open window in the building across the street could be have a sniper rifle aiming right at his head.

And because of his habit, the first thing Deacon noticed was smoke coming from the rooftop of the building in front. When there's smoke, there's fire. And fire was usually started by people, which could only mean that they were not alone...

Raiders? Gunners? No, the outside of building wasn't decorated by either blood or an ugly painting of a white skull. Neither group had marked their territory.

Before Deacon could reach a conclusion, a series of loud barks interrupted his thoughts. Dogmeat dashed to said building, stopped in front of the boarded up entrance, then stood on his hind legs, and clawed at the wood boards that had sealed the doors.

So, it was neither the Gunners nor the raiders, but the boogeyman himself.

“That nose of his would put you out of business, Nick,” said Deacon to Valentine, who was not at all offended.

“You sure he's inside, boy?” asked the detective.

Dogmeat barked once, baring his fangs with a growl. For once, the dog looked appropriately like a vicious killing machine.

“Unless you know how to walk through a piece of solid wood,” said MacCready, nodding at the barricaded entrance, “we need to find another way to get inside.”

“Fort Hagen...” Nora muttered, looking at the sign outside the building. “I came here to pick up Nate a few times before. There's an entrance in the garage.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” said MacCready. “Let's go get your boy back.”

“All right, buddy,” Deacon asked the dog, “which way?”

There was a door at the opposite end, and a stairway on the left. Dogmeat sniffed and headed to the closed door.

“Wait up,” said Deacon. “Let me take a look first.”

He checked for traps, then slowly opened the door. What lied behind was a dark, long hallway, with lights at the end of the tunnel. And... was that a destroyed machinegun turret?

He then spotted a tiny device hidden behind a conveniently placed cart.

“The laser wire trap's been disarmed. We're not alone,” Deacon told the rest of the group as they headed down the hallway. “See that smoking turret at the far end? It was blown up recently.”
“Maybe someone else is going after Kellogg,” said MacCready, his sniper rifle never left his hands. The kid might be young, but he's seasoned, Deacon noticed.

“I wouldn't be surprised,” said Valentine. “The old merc has more enemies that all of our fingers combined.”

“But if someone has stormed the fort, where's the dead body?” Deacon frowned, perplexed. “That tricky son of a bitch has a team of chrome domes working for him. There should be blood or... screws and bolts.”

“Chrome domes?” asked MacCready.


“Ah. Those human-looking robots creep the heck outta me.” The young merc quickly turned to the synth detective. “No offense.”

“None taken,” said Valentine.

Dogmeat picked up the scent along the path and stopped at the top of the stairwell that led further into the basement.

“Stay behind me, buddy,” Deacon told the dog. “You might trip over some wires.”

Deacon pressed against the wall as he moved soundlessly down the long flight of stairs. He didn't have to be Dogmeat to pick up the burning smell in the air, and the smell became stronger the further down he went. Upon reaching the landing, Deacon peeked around the corner and saw where the smoke was coming from. Another broken turret, recently destroyed.

Behind the broken turret was a security gate. A rather complicated trap on the gate had been disarmed by the previous intruder. Skills like that was not exactly easily to come by in the Wasteland. Whoever did this was a professional.

Under normal circumstances, Deacon would gladly stand back and let them kill themselves. But he also knew one thing: Dead man can't talk.

They'd better hurry.

“To think young Shaun has been taken to a filthy place like this,” said Codsworth. “Oh, that poor child...”

“You're not helping there, Codsworth,” said MacCready.

“Ahh! My apologies, Miss Nora,” said the Mr. Handy.

“...It's okay, Cods,” Nora finally broke her silence for the sake of her loyal robot.

The basement was cold. Nora shivered, not just because of the chill, but because of the thought that her baby was here, in this cold, hard place with his kidnapper. With the man who had murdered his father.

Sydney led the way further down into the basement. The man had never taken his sunglasses off for even a second, by now, Nora was used to it. The endless flight of stairs brought them to a
fireproof door at the end. Sydney once again checked the gap before he pushed the door open. Behind it was a long hallway with a series of machines lining the wall to her right, and a panel of windows looking into a pitch dark room to her left.

Had Nate ever been down here before?

“Now, if it isn't my old friend, the frozen TV dinner,” said a gruff voice through the speakers. The same voice form her nightmare. “Last time we met, you were cozying up to the peas and apple cobbler.”

“It's him!” said Nora to Valentine. “I recognize the voice! The man who killed my husband and took Shaun!”

Kellogg suddenly laughed. “So that's why my synths are all gone. The old man wants me dead. And he wants you to kill me. Is this what he considers poetic justice?”

The old man?

“Look. You're pissed off,” Kellogg continued through the speaker. “I get it. I do. But whatever you hope to accomplish in here, it is not going to go your way. Before we try to kill each other, let's talk.”

Inside the dark room to the left, lights flickered and came on, one by one. Through the wired window, Nora saw rolls upon rolls of computers and consoles forming a grid within. This had to be the command center of the fort. A heavy metal door to the command center suddenly swung open by itself, giving her a silent invitation in.

“This is a perfect place for an ambush,” MacCready warned.

“Try not to be trigger-happy,” said Nick. “Shaun might be in there.”

The detective stepped through the door first, Nora followed closely behind. Everything was still and quiet, until she heard a squeaky noise of a rusty door open at the far end of the command center.

“You've got guts and determination,” a voice echoed from afar as a figure emerged from the adjacent room, “and that's admirable.”

Nora saw him. The same bald man who had kidnapped her son and killed her husband. The same scarred face that had haunted her since she'd regained consciousness. “You!”

Next to her, the detective snarled, “Kellogg...”

“You came a long way,” said Kellogg as he casually strolled through the maze of computers. “But you are in over your head in ways you can't possibly comprehend. If you're hoping for a happy reunion? Ain't gonna happen, lady.”

“Where's my son?” Nora demanded. “Where is Shaun?”

“Your boy's not here. He's with the people pulling the strings.”

“What? Goddamn it! Where is my son?!”

The old merc merely shrugged. “What's the cliché? 'So close, but yet so far away?' That's Shaun. But don't worry. He's safe, and happy. He's doing great. A bit older than you may have expected,
but... ah well. At least he's in a loving home.”

Home?

Kellogg looked right at her with a smirk. “The Institute.”

“Take me to him!” Nora raised her pistol to the kidnapper's face. “Wherever this 'Institute' is. Take me to him! Now!”

“Take you to him?” Kellogg ignored the gun and chuckled. “Like I could, even if I wanted to.”

“Don't make me repeat myself.” Nora stepped forth with each word until she reached the kidnapper and jabbed her gun onto his chest. “Take. Me. To. My son! Right. NOW!”

As much as she wanted to pull the trigger, Nora couldn't. Not when the bastard was the one holding all the information. And Kellogg seemed to be perfectly aware of that.

“That's the spirit!” The mercenary laughed. “You know, you surprise me, I have to admit, I find myself actually kind of... liking you. I admire your dedication to motherhood. Even if it is ultimately useless.” Kellogg let out a quiet sigh and once again looked straight into her eyes. “Let him go. Your son is exactly where he belongs.”

His words made her hair stand on end. “...What the hell do you mean?”

“Your son... He's lived his entire life in the Institute. If you're expecting him to come up and live in this shithole with you, you're in for a disappointment.”

“You're lying!” No. No... It can't be. But if Shaun's that ten year old boy in Diamond City...

“Or maybe I'm telling you the truth, and the truth isn't want you're ready to hear. But, enough talk.” The merc looked at the gun barrel on his chest, no doubt noticing her shaky hands. “We both know how this has to end. So... you ready?”

Out of nowhere came a hard blow on the side of her head, knocking Nora on the ground. Everything turned dark. For a moment, she couldn't move, she couldn't see, all she could hear was gunshots.

Get up! Damn it, get up!

Nora then felt a hand on her, pulling her to the side. As she regained her sight, she saw a pair of familiar sunglasses.

“Listen carefully,” said Sydney very quickly over the sounds of gunfire. “I'm gonna pop the Stealth Boy on you, you have thirty seconds. Sneak behind Kellogg and shoot him with this.” He pressed a weird looking gun in her hands. “We can't kill him just yet.”

Then, Nora heard MacCready yell, “What the-- Where'd he go?”

“Disappear, eh?” said Codsworth. “Come on out and fight like a man!”

“Find him, boy,” said Nick to the dog. “Don't let our perp get away!”

Nora struggled back on her feet, but Sydney put a hand on her shoulder to press her down behind a desk, barely in time to avoid a grenade explosion nearby.

Her ears rang from the loud noise.
Hurdling closer behind cover, Sydney continued with his instructions rapidly, “The bastard's using Stealth Boy. Dogmeat will sniff him out. Follow the dog. His Stealth Boy will run dry before yours. When he shows his face, aim for his neck.”

He reached for the device attached on her belt and activated it. A second later, Sydney suddenly disappeared in front of her eyes.

“Now, go!” Sydney urged, although she couldn't see him. “We'll cover you!”

Laying low to avoid flying bullets, Nora navigated around the maze that was formed by the computer desks.

Twenty five seconds.

She heard Dogmeat barking, growling. She saw the dog jumping in the air, attacking an invisible enemy.

“Found him!” said Valentine, shooting at the air above the dog.

Fifteen seconds.

Dogmeat whined and backed down as a bullet grazed his front leg.

“Oh no you don’t!” Codsworth charged with his flamethrower firing. “Don't you hurt our poor pup, you monster!”

The minor injury didn't stop the dog for long. Dogmeat once again leaped and bit onto an invisible arm. A second later, Kellogg materialized.

“There he is!” MacCready fired and shot the old merc's shoulder. He immediately lined up for a killshot, but was forced to take cover as Kellogg returned fire. “Shit--”

“We need him alive!” yelled Sydney.

Five seconds.

Still invisible, Nora was next to the man who kidnapped her son, close enough to blow his head off with her pistol. But she couldn't. She needed answered.

Raising the gun Sydney had given her moments prior, Nora aimed and fired. The old merc jolted and reached for his own neck, and turned to glare at the air next to him just as Nora's Stealth Boy expired.

“...You...” Kellogg muttered and pulled the syringe off his neck. Then, all of a sudden, his knees buckled and the old merc dropped onto the ground.

“Hold your fire!” warned Sydney, who was no longer invisible. “We got him!”

The man in sunglasses quickly picked up the mercenary's dropped weapon, then smashed the butt of the gun onto the side of Kellogg’s head. “That's for hitting the lady.”

“What the heck happened?” asked MacCready.

“Tranquilizer,” said Sydney as he promptly pulled out a pair handcuffs and snapped them onto the Kellogg's wrists. “A dosage strong enough to put a brahmin to sleep. But it seems our boogeyman here has built up quite a resistant.”
Drugged, the mercenary's half-opened eyes glanced around and landed on Nora. “...Should have put a bullet in you while you were on ice...”

MacCready jabbed the barrel of his sniper rifle hard into the old merc's ribs. “Shut up!”

“No. Do talk,” said Sydney. His voice suddenly turned icy cold. “Where is the Institute?”

Although disarmed, tied up, and weakened by the drug, Kellogg still managed to laugh. “Don't you get it? You don't find the Institute. The Institute finds you. ...You open the closet, it's just a closet. You can never find the monster that hides inside. Not until it jumps out at you.”

“I hate to sound so cliché, but...” Sydney reached for something in his pack and pulled out a syringe. “We could do it the easy way. Or the hard way.”

The old merc snorted. “Ain't nothing I haven't seen.”

“This?” Sydney waved the syringe and shrugged. “Homebrew. Heard it'd kill the nanobots in your blood.” Almost too casually, he injected the content into Kellogg's neck as he leaned close and muttered, “That's for your handiwork at UP.”

The mercenary grunted to suppress a scream.

“Look, pal,” said Sydney. “I've looked every inch of the Commonwealth. And if there's an entrance to the Institute, I'd have already found it. So why don't you draw us a map and get it over with?”

“...Of course you couldn't find an entrance,” said Kellogg. “Because there is none.”

That didn't make any sense. “Then how the hell did Shaun get there?” asked Nora.

“Even if I were to tell you, there's no way you could get in.”

“No more games!” Nora pulled out her pistol and pressed the barrel against the kidnapper's head. “Tell me!”

“Guess they don't pay me to keep their secrets anymore,” Kellogg muttered to himself with a casual shrug as if he didn't care about the weapons point at him. Then he looked straight into her eyes and said, “Teleportation.”

“Son of a bitch!” “What the f--” Nora heard her companions gasped, but words stuck at her throat.

Teleportation. The word she'd only read from novels or heard from movies, and now it was the key to get her son back.

The old merc chuckled. “Heh, lady, I'm just a puppet like you. My stage is a little bigger, that's all.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Shaking his head in resignation, Kellogg continued, “Seems obvious now that we're bait for you. This whole set up in Diamond City was part of some elaborate plan of the old man's. Timing couldn't have been an accident. That's not how the old man works.”

That was the second time he mentioned the old man. “Who is this old man?” asked Nora.

Somehow, Kellogg only stared at her for a few seconds, then broke into sudden fits of laughter.
“He's the man you're looking for,” Kellogg told her once he'd caught his breath. “The director of
the Institute. He is using you to tie up another loose ends. So, the question is: Are you gonna do his
dirty work? Are you ready to pull the trigger?”

The pistol suddenly felt heavy in her hands, in her conscience. If she pulled the trigger, it would be
a first-degree, premeditated murder, not in self-defense.

No, it would be for Nate. For Shaun. For tearing her family apart.

Her gun rose once again.

“Go ahead,” urged Kellogg, almost as if he was challenging her.

If she pulled the trigger now, she would be just like this monster who had murdered Nate
pointblank...

Sydney put a hand on hers to push her gun down.

“Oh, no. You're not gonna die so easily, pal,” he told the merc. “We have a lot to talk about. Let's
start with teleportation.”

Kellogg eyed the man in sunglasses. “...You like classical music?”

Just then, a strange beam of light cut through the air, right in between Nora and Sydney, and hit
Kellogg squarely on his chest. Startled, Nora jumped away. The old merc screamed, but there was
no sound. His body glowed blinding bright for a split of a second before it suddenly disintegrated.

In the blink of an eye, Kellogg was gone. All that was left of him was a pile of burning ashes.

“Courser!” said Nick, pointing at the hallway outside the command center.

When Nora looked, all she could see was a shadow quickly retreating. MacCready leaped forth to
pursue, Dogmeat followed at his heels.

Seconds later, Dogmeat's incessant barks echoed throughout the basement.

“What the-- He disappeared,” yelled MacCready from around the corner. “It's a dead end!”

“...Teleportation,” Nick reasoned. “So Kellogg wasn't lying after all.”

“Goddammit!” said Sydney. “We were so close...”

Nora could only stared at the pile of ashes that had been the man who had murdered her husband.
The only person who held the key was dead. All hopes were gone.

The room around her started to spin.

“Hey...” Nora felt a comforting hand on her shoulder. It was Nick's. The detective told her gently,
“I know the night just got darker. But it won't last forever.”

Her son was still out there. She needed to pull herself together, she needed to use her brain. Think,
Nora. Think! For Shaun. For Shaun... And then, she remembered. The document Kellogg had left
behind. “There's still another person out there.”

“Brian Virgil,” said Sydney almost simultaneously.
“Who the heck is he now?” asked MacCready.

The man in sunglasses looked at the man in tattered duster. “Does the 250 include a trip to the Glowing Sea?”

A/N: Not what you might expect, because it doesn't make sense for someone to cut open a dead man's skull with no reasons, cut off a piece of his brain/implant, and carry it around without it starting to rot. Things will be different from the game canon, and you'll see more soon enough.

I've been writing “storm the dungeon with a team all gun blazing” battle scenes on and off for three years. I'll take a break from that type of actions in this story. Commander Shepard the Galaxy Savior gets her glorious battles and explosions, Nora the Lawyer and Deacon the Liar will use stealth and wits. [Glory Dislikes That]

The weird looking gun was the modified syringer Deacon got from Tinker Tom a few chapters ago.

Title: “Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall” by Ella Fitzgerald and The Ink Spot, 1944.
Once upon a time, this was a naval yard. Home to massive military vessels. Two centuries and a war had come and gone, now there was only one ship left standing. Deacon leaned against the rusty rail of the lone surviving ship that had been turned into the largest settlement in the Capital Wasteland.

Wrong move.

He’d forgotten how high up the deck was. The water below made him feel dizzy. Deacon couldn't push himself away from the rail fast enough.

“You're late,” a woman in a tattered dress chided as she approached.

“Next time send a Vertibird to pick me up, Vic,” said Deacon with a tiny smirk, “and I'll be here the next day.”

The woman named Victoria Watts replied with her customary glare.

Unfazed, Deacon rotated his shoulders then stretched. His muscles arched from the long and grueling trip. “Haven't been here since the last delivery. How's our friend doing?”

“Which one?”

“Tall, dark hair. The one I personally delivered.”

“He left.”

Starting a new life elsewhere? Good for him. Deacon had to smile. His job was risky, and the pay was little, if at all, but moments like this made it all worthwhile.

His companion, though, didn't seem to share his joyful mood. “Listen,” said Victoria, frowning, “we have a... situation.”

“And here I thought you wanted me to come all the way down for a party... What's up?”

Forever cautious, the woman with graying hair looked around the empty deck before she continued, “A while ago a courser came to us looking for help.”

“Ah yes, I've heard. A tale of the defected courser. Even the legendary Herbert 'Daring' Dashwood was somehow involved.”

Victoria nodded. “But now, the Institute is coming after him.”

Deacon’s laid back demeanor dropped in an instant. “All the way to D.C? How many coursers did they send?”
“One. But he's just a bodyguard. It's the old man we have to look out for. He called himself Dr. Zimmer, from the Retention Bureau or something.”

Son of a bitch. “Where are they?”

“Here in Rivet City. Zimmer's been trying to recruit Dr. Li down in the lab to help. Good thing Li’s got her head too far up in her ass to care about anything but her pet project.”

“Did our friend opt for the full makeover package?”


“Except for the doctor who did the surgery,” Deacon deduced. “And if our friends from the Institute found out about that, then Pinkerton is in serious trouble.”

“Along with every single 'customer' that has walked out of his door.”

“We need to send the old man back home.” Deacon frowned, his mind was spinning fast to come up with a plan.

“The old man is adamant about it, he's not gonna leave without his 'creation.' He tracked the courser's signal all the way to Rivet City. Then it stopped.”

“Pinkerton's handiwork.”

Victoria nodded. “We have to get rid of him.”

“You have a plan?”

“Yes. The only missing piece in our plan is someone with your specific skill,” said Victoria with a pointed look. “Someone who's able to convince a deathclaw that he's its mother if he wanted to.”

“That, I haven't tried,” said Deacon. “But... I'm listening.”

“It's only a matter of time before he's desperate enough to hire a local merc to do his dirty work. And that's where you come in.”

“So, I get to play a merc this time? Should have swapped for a more menacing face for this assignment.”

“Your reputation will precede you, I'll make sure of that. My people will spread rumors about your recent exploits. When Zimmer asks you to look for his man, accept the job. Lay low, then come back a few days later and tell him the job’s done.”

“And you think he'll totally buy it because I look so sincere?”

She pulled out something from her pocket. “With this, he will.”

To most, it was a small component of some sort. Useless, probably worth a few caps at most. But Deacon knew exactly what it was. Years ago, he'd seen one... He'd seen one when the monsters had smashed his wife's head and dug a similar implant out from her brain...

“Don't ask me where I got it,” said Victoria. “I need you to sell this story. Can you do it?”

The past was the past. He couldn't save Barbara then, but he could still save this courser. Even a
killing machine from the Institute deserved a second chance in life.

What about you? You think you deserve a second chance?

Shoving his memories away, Deacon quieted the voice and took the component. “Lead the way.”

“Then I killed him,” said Unit X6-88.

Father nodded slowly. “I see...”

The result of his experiment had returned, the outcome was predictable: Kellogg was dead. Although the person who had pulled the trigger wasn't the one he'd expected.

“You did it to protect the Institute,” said the old man to the courser, “I understand.”

If X6-88 felt relieved, he didn't show. The courser stood tall and proud with not a trace of emotions on his face or in his voice. Coursers, the Institute's best agents. Father never once doubted their loyalty, even after that incident a decade ago.

“Where is she now?” Father asked.

“Back in Diamond City,” the courser replied. “She is planning to find Dr. Virgil.”

“Brian Virgil?” said Dr. Allie Filmore. “No one has seen him since he escaped to the Glowing Sea. It's safe to assume he's dead.”

“His status is irrelevant,” said Father. “The question is... if our subject is heading to the Glowing Sea, will she survive?”

“She won't,” X6-88 answered bluntly.

Father agreed with his assessment. Radiations, monsters, anything within the Glowing Sea could easily kill her if she ever stepped foot near ground zero.

The movement was slight, but Father noticed a shift in the courser's posture and the clench of his jaws. The courser seemed to hold back on his next comment.

“Go on, X6-88,” Father prompted. “You're my eyes and ears. I need your input.”

“Our subject is determined to find you, sir,” said X6-88. “Determined enough to step into the Glowing Sea.”

Someone who cared about him enough to risk her life to find him? That was a foreign idea. It somehow simultaneously warmed him and terrified him. But now was not the time to make any emotional assessment. New elements had entered the equation, he had to make adjustments to his experiment.

“That will be all, X6-88,” said Father. “Thank you.”

“What now, Father?” asked Dr. Filmore when the courser had left.

*What now, indeed...* The old man leaned back onto the chair, thinking. “What is the status on S9-23?”
“Dr. Li is running another diagnostics.” Dr. Filmore paused. “Sir... I think she’s getting a little too attached to the project.”

Was this a mistake? The old man shoved that unwanted thought away. The time bomb buried within his body was ticking, he couldn't afford to question himself.

“Prepare for phase two.”

“Teleportation?” Desdemona stared at Deacon, green eyes widened in shock. “No wonder! Now it makes sense...”

“And here comes the bad news,” Deacon told his boss. “Kellogg's dead.”

“How's that a bad news?”

“It's bad when he died just when he's about to spill the beans.”

“...Don't tell me you went overboard--”

“Of course not!” Deacon huffed. “Would I make such an amateur mistake? A courser showed up out of nowhere and killed him. Then, poof, the man in black's gone, disappeared.”

Scowling, Desdemona took a long drag of her cigarette. “And a courser just happened to be there?”

“How convenient, I know,” said Deacon. “Now that I think about it, it's a setup. A freakishly elaborated setup. The bandages, the cigars. We were led by our noses – a dog's nose. And Kellogg mentioned his boss wanted him dead, killed by our vault dweller, who happened to be released from her slumber by the Institute. Coincidence? I don't think so.”

For a long moment, the leader of their merry little band only frowned as she finished her cigarette. But Deacon knew the wheels inside her head were spinning at full speed. Allowing her all the time she needed to digest all the information, Deacon stretched and heard the faint cracks in his joints. His lower back was killing him, and he doubted one full night sleep would cure his eternal woe. Not that he could ever get a proper eight-hour shuteye. If he's lucky, he'd get two hours. His nightmares made sure of that.

Still, right now, two hours was better than none.

Desdemona finally spoke, “Why would the Institute get rid of the man who had been doing their dirty work?”

Deacon shrugged. “Who knows why they did what they did? Maybe we can ask their boss when we find him.”

“You have a plan?”

“Sure. But first, I need some hazmat suits. Undamaged ones.”

“We used to have a few in the Switchboard.” Desdemona narrowed her eyes at him. “What for?”

“I'm planning a theme party,” said Deacon. He switched to a slightly more serious tone when he received a death glare from his boss. “You're not gonna like what I'm about to tell you.”
“...Go on.”

“There's one more person who knows how to get into the Institute.”

“Who?”

“A scientist named Brian Virgil. He left the evil empire. And here's the catch: His last known location? The Glowing Sea.”

Her eyebrow arched up high. Then, for a moment, his boss stared him as if to see if he was lying. In the end, her reply came in one single word, “No.”

Deacon fully expected it. “Told you you wouldn't like it.”

“This intel could be a trap. There has never been a scientist who defects and survives.”

“There's always a first,” Deacon pointed out. “Remember there was a courser who grew a conscience and bailed? Why not a scientist this time?”

“Even if there's a Brian Virgil, he's dead by now. If the coursers haven't killed him already, the radiation would.”

“Maybe he wears a hazmat suit 24/7 and eats Rad-X for breakfast,” Deacon countered, knowing how ridiculous it sounded. “There's only one way to find out if he's alive.”

“It's too dangerous. I cannot afford to risk my best agent for an intel that cannot even be confirmed.”

Deacon knew that tone. Fighting fire with fire could only cause a giant explosion that would blow up in everyone's face. It's time to switch tactic.

“Never underestimate the will of a desperate mother, Dez” said Deacon. “Our vault dweller is out for blood. The Institute is her destination. Whether she finds her way in through Virgil or some other eggheads, she will find her way. If we give her a hand, we might score our invites to the most exclusive club in the Commonwealth.”

“...You're not giving up, are you?”

“I've been chasing shadows for decades. This is first time we're so close to finding the Institute. I'm not gonna give up our golden ticket.”

The Railroad alpha didn't reply. Deacon took it as a good sign.

“We have little friends as is,” he switched gears and continued to nudge. “We could use an extra help.”

“Too risky.” Desdemona shook her head. “You and I both know the ugly truth: The Railroad is on our last legs, Deacon. We can't afford to make one slip. This woman is a complete unknown. No friends, no family, no history. The furthest we can trace back is the vault. We don't know where she stands.”

“This woman could be our greatest ally.”

“Or our worst enemy.”

And just like that, she had walked right into his trap. “Why don't you meet her and see for
When Desdemona didn't outright reject that idea, Deacon knew he got her. Now all it needed was a final push. There were still too many unknowns, but Deacon could see a plan started to map out inside his head.

“Who knows?” he continued casually with a shrug. “Maybe we could even reenact the famous Boston Tea Party.”

Confused by his sudden change of topic, his boss frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Once upon a time, in a faraway land called Boston, there was a group of brave locals protesting the increasing oppression of their overlords. One night, one of the rebellion leaders led a group of men in disguise, and boarded their enemy's ships in the Boston harbor, and tossed chests of tea overboard. Why? To protest another tax on the locals. But that's not important. The important point to the story is the end result: A glorious revolution.”

“What's with the sudden history lesson?”

“History has a tendency of repeating itself,” said Deacon with a sly smile. “Remember a decade or so ago? A vault dweller wandered around the Capitol wasteland, and the entire D.C ended up getting clean water. And now we have our very own Lone Wanderer. I wonder what kind of magic she's gonna bring to our shithole.”

“As long as it's not more destruction...” His boss sighed and lit up another cigarette. “Bring our Wanderer to the church above tomorrow.”

“You'll like her. I promise.”

His boss snorted. “Of course you'd say that. She's your secret project.”

Deacon grinned. He didn't know how much he liked the sound of that until now. “Every secret project has a code-name. Mine should have one, too. For your record-keeping.”

Desdemona's patented death glare had no effect on Deacon, they both knew it too well. The leader of the Railroad resigned to her fate and let out a puff of cloudy breath. “Fine. What do you wanna call it?”

Deacon took a moment to think, then he announced, “Code-name... Wanderer. Project Wanderer.”

S9-23. One of his last projects. A prototype that had raised eyebrows and earned whispers from his colleagues. It didn't bother Father, though. Almost all groundbreaking innovations were controversial; they were ahead of their time. And so was this one.

At the corner of the pristine lab stood a child about the age of ten. His dark hair had been washed and combed, his white jumpsuit was spotless. With his head hanging down and his eyes closed, the boy looked as if he had been fallen asleep while standing.

Father stopped in front of the child and crouched down to look upon the face of his most ambitious project. The youthful, innocent face was familiar, yet... it wasn't.
Had he been this young once?

A wrinkled hand reached out to touch the soft cheek of the boy.

How long had it been? Fifty years?

“Sir?” a woman's curt voice called from behind. “I didn't know you're here.”

The woman's tone spelled the unspoken words: Why the hell are you here?

Father stood to his full height. His knees complained at the motion. “Doctor Li.”

The woman was about his age, with a tongue as sharp as her mind. And she was never afraid to use either. Doctor Madison Li – a rare case where surface dweller had actively sought out the Institute for protection. She'd offered her services in return. And her works had been invaluable.

“Is he ready?” asked Father.

“No.” The doctor was blunt, but Father expected nothing less from her. “His trip to Diamond City has delayed our work. We’re behind schedule. And, suffice to say, Kellogg is not a suitable guardian.”

“Was.”

The woman arched an eyebrow at him. A second later, she nodded and resumed her report. The news had little to no meaning to her.

“No radiation damage,” said Dr. Li. “No sign of food poisoning – which is a miracle. His programming is unstable. We have yet to test his emotional responses to negative stimuli. We are preparing to run tests on fear and anger.”

“Run those tests as soon as you can,” said the old man. “It's time.”

A/N: Finally, the title of the story is mentioned. Did Deacon take Lone Wanderer's quest? He sure did. If I were Zimmer, I wouldn't trust a 18-yr old kid to find my prized possession.


Thanks for reading!

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
“...To love and cherish from this day forward.” The priest’s booming voice rang throughout the church. “For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” the bride vowed.

“These rings represent the vows and promises you’ve willingly exchanged,” said the priest. “They reflect the commitment those words inspire and all your hopes and dreams for the future.”

Everyone’s eyes were on the priest as he continued with his speech. Except for the couple in front of the altar.

“Hang in there, Soldier,” Nora whispered. “It’s almost over.”

“You know I hate spotlights,” Nate mumbled.

“Don’t worry, hon,” she told him with a tiny smirk played on her painted lips. “They’re looking at me, not you.”

A handsome grin spread on his clean-shaven face. “Yeah, me too.”

From the corner of her eye, Nora saw the ring bearer approached. It was time for the final step. She gave him a heads up with a subtle nod at the ring bearer’s direction. Yet, all Nate did was staring at her, transfixed.

“The ring,” she reminded her absent-minded groom, verbally this time.

“Oh right...” He took the smaller ring of the two from the decorated tray, and slipped it on her freshly manicured finger.

A plain, polished gold band that had four hidden words engraved within. Love, honor, and cherish.

“And now, you’re mine,” said Nate, flashing a sly grin.

Hiding a smile and snorting just loud enough for her groom to hear, Nora took his strong hand in hers and returned the favor.

“And you, sir, have voluntarily entered a legally binding contract,” said the blushing bride in her serious business tone, as she put a matching ring on the dashing groom. “The contract has no expiration date, and will only be terminated when one party is deceased.”

Nate’s sudden laughter brightened the otherwise serious ceremony. “That’s why I love you,
Nora idly spun the ring on her finger. Faint scratches now marred the once spotless polished surface. The ring had never left her since the day Nate had put it on her in front of the altar. Only now, she had two. One on her finger, and a larger matching ring dangled like a pendant on a thin, long leather lace around her neck.

Nate's wedding ring.

“I knew it!” said Piper Wright. “I knew the Institute was behind this!”

The office of Publick Occurrences – and the Wrights' residence – was more crowded than usual. The owner didn't seem to mind a bit, as she'd been busy scribbling down every word in the past hour or so.

“Time like this I really hate to be right...” Piper finally put down her pen and notepad. “I'm sorry, Blue. I really am. Missing ten years of your son's life... I can't even begin to imagine.”

“I remember seeing Shaun a few times when he was here with Kellogg,” said Nick Valentine. “A healthy kid. You know anything about him, Piper?”

“No, but... Wait a minute. Hey, Nat,” Piper called to the other room, “You know anything about Shaun? You know, the boy who stayed with that scary bald guy?”

The younger Miss Wright stepped out from behind the partition that marked her private territory. “You mean that weird kid?”

“Natalie!” Piper yelled.

“What?” The girl just shrugged. “Boys are weird.”

“They are, aren't they?” said Nora gently. Shaun was now about the girl's age, no longer a baby. She had missed more than nine years of his life. “Shaun is my son, Nat. If there's anything you can tell me about him...”

“He didn't go to school with the rest of us,” Nat told her. “That scary man was watching him all the time. My friend Erin talked to him once. She said he's crazy smart, even smarter than Gavin. Oh, and I think Phil hanged out with him a few times.”

“Of course he's smart. Just like his mother,” said Codsworth while he was busy at the stove, preparing yet another meal for everyone. Having a chance to serve again made the Mr. Handy a very happy robot. “I wonder if our young Shaun turns to be a dashing young gentleman. Oh, what am I saying? Of course he is.”

“Do you remember what he looks like?” Nora asked the girl.
“A boy.”

“Great,” said Piper, “that's really helpful, Nat.”

Nat made a face at his sister before she settled her gaze on Nora. Her little brows furrowed as she tilted her head to the side, thinking. “He sorta looks like you... But not really.”

“Perhaps Shaun takes after his father,” said Codsworth, now stirring the pot with one of his multiple arms. “Mum, you do have a picture of sir, I believe.”

Nora retrieved a photograph from her bag – the only picture that had managed to survive the bomb. And thanks to Codsworth, it'd been well-preserved through two centuries. Her wedding picture.

The girl's big brown eyes lit up. “Oh, pretty!”

Piper stuck her head next to her sister's to peek at the photo. “Wow, so that's what wedding looked like back then. Lookin' good, Blue. Too bad, Nat, we don't get to wear dresses like these.”

The girl was quick to put her grumpy front back on and snorted. “Who wants to wear stupid dresses?” She pointed at the groom in the picture. “That kid looks like him.”

So Shaun grew up looking like his dad. And Nate had been a carbon copy of his father. Nora smiled to herself. But the smile soon faded when a thought that had been plaguing her resurfaced. “Shaun wouldn't even recognize me.”

“He may not remember you,” said Nick, “but you can create new memories together. Right now, we need to focus on finding Dr. Virgil. I'm a synth, I can walk through the Glowing Sea. But you, kid, you'll die from radiation poisoning within minutes.”

“Sydney is looking for hazmat suits,” said Nora.

“That's not enough,” said Nick. “We need all the Rad-X and RadAways we can get our hands on. And that's gonna take some time and money.” The kind detective sat down next to her and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I know you can't wait to get your kid back, but if he's alive and well for a decade, he'll be safe for another month or two.”

“Nick is right,” said Piper. “Even if we grab every Rad-X from the caravan that stops by, it won't be enough. We're searching for a needle in a highly-irradiated haystack.”

A knock on the door interrupted the discussion.

“Nat, get the door,” ordered Piper from the comfort of her own chair.

“Why me?” the girl grumbled, but she answered the door nonetheless. “Oh hey, Mister D--” Her cheerful tone abruptly halted and switched to a grumpy one. “Er... What'd ya want? We ain't do nothin'!”

“We didn't do anything,' Nat,” Piper corrected her sister as she approached the door, “how many times do I have to tell you that?” She then eyed the guard and said, “You heard my sister. Tell the mayor to back off. Or is it a crime to be in our own house now?”

“Relax, Miss Wright,” said the guard smoothly, “Not here for you.”

If it wasn't for his voice and his signature sunglasses, Nora wouldn't recognize the Diamond City security guard at first glance.
The man sidestepped the reporter and entered. “What a party.”

“Sydney? You're a guard?” Nora gave him an once over. The uniform looked as real as the ones on the guards outside. Without a hat or a wig, Sydney Carton's head was bald and seemed to be recently shaved.

“I could be.” The man then lowered his tone and spoke with a gruff voice, “Man, I can't wait til my shift's over. Hey, you. No loitering!” He ended his act with a soft chuckle. “Good, right?”

“Wait, I've seen you around before,” said Piper.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” said the pretend guard.

“I'm sure you have, Piper,” said Nick with a smirk.

Sydney ignored the sharp-eyed reporter's inquisitive glance. Instead, he dedicated his full attention to the dog that was pacing around his legs in tight circle.

Crouching down, he gave Dogmeat a nice pat behind his pointy ears. “Hey pal. You been good?”

The dog barked happily and made an attempt to lick the man's face. But Sydney was faster. He sprung to his full height and easily evaded the display of affection from the man's best friend.

“Sorry buddy, not a fan of sloppy kisses.” He then caught a whiff of the dinner cooking on the stove and said, “Smells good, Cods.”

“You're just in time for dinner, Mr. Carton,” said Codsworth.

“Save us some for late night snack,” he told the Mr. Handy, then looked at Nora with an inviting smile and said, “Come on, let's go for a walk. Just you and me.”

Nora blinked in surprise. “Now?”

“Sure, why not?” Sydney shrugged. “There's no better time for a walk than when the sun is down. Away from prying eyes.”

“What're you up to?” asked Nick with a tone that sounded strangely like a disapproved father.

“Our friend here needs some fresh air, Mr. Valentine,” the bald man replied. “A change of scenery might just be what the doctor prescribes. Don't worry, I'll bring her back.” He then turned back to Nora. “Meet you outside the gate by the statue in ten.”

Twenty five years ago, a five year-old girl had stood in this spot by the statue outside the stadium, smiling happily for the camera to commemorate her very first trip to the Fenway Park. No, that was two hundred and thirty five years ago.

Two centuries later, everything had changed. The park had become a settlement. And the girl was now a mother of an infant boy. No, her baby was now ten.

Her world had been turned upside down and then some.
There's one silver lining: She was not alone. She had Codsworth, Nick, Piper, Dogmeat, and...

“If I had a camera,” said a voice, approaching, “I'd have taken a picture of you. Right here. And it'd be on the cover of a magazine.”

“Which magazine?” Nora arched an eyebrow at the man who had stopped next to her. “Picket Fences?”

Now with a full head of dark hair, wearing a white shirt and jeans, the man looked different than the bald guard she had seen a short while ago. The only thing that remained constant was the pair of sunglasses.

“I was thinking,” Sydney replied while he slipped on his leather jacket to fend off both the evening chill and stray bullets. “Astoundingly Awesome Tales: Rise of the Frozen Queen! Or something.”

This man, whoever he was, somehow could always get a smile out of her. “Frozen, all right. You've no idea how cold the cryo pod was.”

“Come on, we should get going. The guard is about to pass by in less than two minutes, let's hit the road before we get too much attention.”

“You know their patrol pattern?”

“They're like clockwork,” he told her as they walked down the street of Diamond City outer perimeter. “It's hard not to notice.”

“Where are we going?”

He turned to her with a tiny sly grin. “I'm taking you to sell to the highest bidder.”

No, he wasn't, that much Nora knew. “And how much do I worth?” she asked, playing along.

The grin widened. “A walking, talking pre-war relic in pristine condition? Priceless. Like I told you, we don't make them like they used to.” He glanced at her and nodded at the bruise on her temple. “How's your head?”

She resisted an urge to touch the broken skin. “It's better now.”

“Your first pistol-whipping, huh? Any signs of dizziness, vomiting, etc, etc? And I don't mean because of the stench.”

“No concussion. Thanks for asking... And helping.”

“Speaking of help, I've located some hazmat suits. But, I need your help to retrieve them.”

“We should get MacCready and Nick.”

“Not this time. This is one exclusive party, and you're my special guest.”

Nora looked at him in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

His gaze remained on the path in front. “...I know you have a lot of questions. And you're about to get some answers.”

Nora studied his profile. She caught a glimpse of his eye where the glasses frame couldn't quite cover. Deep-set, thoughtful, and... sad.
But as soon as he turned to face her, his eyes were once again hidden behind the dark lenses, like two black mirrors that shielded him against the world.

“What exactly are we going?” she asked again, slowing her pace to a stop.

“Someone wants to meet you.”

“Who?”

“My boss.”

“Almost there,” said Sydney as they walked down a long, brick path. “Heard this used to be a tourist spot of some sort back in the days.”

A statue of a horseman was set in the middle of the path, depicting Paul Revere and his famous midnight ride. Further down was the oldest standing church in Boston: Old North Church. A critical strategic location for the battle that had sparked the American Revolution War more than three centuries ago.

But to Nora, the church meant something else.

Night shifted to day in her mind's eye. Two centuries worth of wear and tear was gone, the trees were tall and green. The door to the church burst open, and out came a joyous crowd who all parted to make way for a happy newly-wedded couple. The bride's dark hair was up in a loose bun, her heavy, long white dress almost made her trip as she skipped down the steps. The groom, looking dashing in his tuxedo, laughed, then scoped his wife up in his arms and carried her away.

“Hey,” a voice called.

In an instant, the day turned into night, laughter turned into silence. The church remained, but Nate was gone.

“You all right?” asked Sydney.

“I... yes. Let's go.”

The heavy wooden door of the church squeaked when Sydney pushed it open. The floorboard creaked underneath Nora's boots.

The atrium was dark, lit by one single lamplight, but Nora could still see the damage. The balconies on both sides were partially collapsed. The pipe organ had fallen onto the altar and completely destroyed the spot where she'd once sworn her marriage vow.

The place seemed empty. Her footsteps echoed through the quiet church as she approached the light.

“That's far enough,” a woman's commanding voice broke the silence.

From the far end of the atrium, two women stepped closer to the lamplight. The shorter woman had red hair and a lit cigarette, and a taller silver-haired one carried the biggest gun Nora had ever seen.
It was the red-headed woman who spoke first, “So you are the Wanderer.”

Nora frowned in confusion. “The Wanderer?”

“Well, you did wander a lot,” said Sydney who moved next to the two strangers. “That's what they call you. We have a thing for code names here.”

“Is it true,” the red-headed woman continued to ask, “you're from pre-war? Or is this one of Deacon's lies?”

“Deacon?” asked Nora.

The man who previously called himself Sydney Carton waved at her with a tiny smile. “Hi.”

Deacon... So that's his name. Although judging from what he'd just said, it's likely a code name, Nora deduced. No matter, though. A name's just a name.

“It's true,” Nora told the woman who appeared to be the leader of the pack. “My family and I had escaped into the vault minutes before the bomb dropped. Of course, we didn't know it was a cryogenic facility.”

The woman scanned Nora from head to toes, her sharp eyes narrowed. “...Amazing.”

“You're not here for my story, are you?” said Nora, eyeing the giant gun in tall woman's hands. If they wanted to kill her, Sydney-- No, Deacon had had plenty of chances.

Deacon seemed to notice her discomfort. “Ease up, G,” he told the tall woman next to him. “She's with me.”

“Before we go on,” said the red-headed woman, “let me ask you one question: Have you heard of the Railroad?”

“If I knew there would be a test, I'd have brushed up on my history lesson.” Nora heard a faint chuckle from Deacon. At least one of them had a sense of humor. She then answered properly, “The Railroad was an underground resistant group. They used secret routes to move escaped slaves to safety.”

“Right on,” said Deacon, nodding. “That was back then. It's a shame how many of us have forgotten history.”

“Now that I've answered your history pop quiz, it's your turn to answer my questions. Let's cut to the chase. Who are you? And what do you want from me?”

The red-headed woman replied, “In a world full of suspicion, treachery, and hunters, we are the synths' only friends. We're the Railroad. And I am the leader, Desdemona.”

Nora mentally connected the dots and began to see a picture. This group followed their namesake historic movement, only now the slaves were not humans. “You help runaway synths?”

A proud grin spread on Deacon's face as if his student had given the correct answer. “Bingo.”

“Dig deep enough into any tragedy in the Commonwealth,” said Desdemona, “and nine times out of ten the Institute's involved. Kidnappings, unexplained virus outbreaks, wiped out settlements... They've done that and worse. But always from the shadows. The only real evidence most people have that they even exist are their crowning achievement: The synths. Synthetic machines designed
to look, feel, and sound human.”

“The only synth I’ve met is Nick Valentine,” said Nora.

“Nick? He's a Gen 2.5,” said Deacon. “Meet the latest Gen 3.” He waved a hand at the tall woman with silver hair and a giant gun.


Taken aback, Nora couldn't help but stare at the other woman. Everything about Glory looked as real as any human. Her hair, her eyes, her skin. Nora could even spot faded scars on her face.

“...You are a synth?”

“That's what the 'Made in the Institute' stamp on my ass says,” said Glory. “They built me to do their dirty works. I was their thinking, feeling hammer.”

“The Institute treats synths as property,” said Desdemona. “As tools.”

Nora frowned. “That sounds like slavery.”

“Exactly,” said Desdemona. “We seek to free the synths from their bondage. Give them a chance at a real life.”

“So that they get to make their own decisions,” Deacon added. “And have the same crappy chance to live the 'American Dream' that all of us get.”

“I have a question for you,” said Desdemona, “The only question that matters: Would you risk your life for your fellow man? Even if that man is a synth?”

Somehow, all Nora could think of was the kind detective who had helped her since day one. “Nick... He's more human than many people out there. It doesn't matter to me if he's a synth or human, he's my friend. He's risked his life to help me, and I'll do the same for him.”

Desdemona nodded with a smile that softened her stone-hard expression. “Well said.”

“Told you you'd like her, Dez,” said Deacon.

“Deacon told me about your son,” said Desdemona, now with a bit of warmth in her tone. “That's terrible. What the Institute has done to your family, and others, is what drives us. We'll help you get inside the Institute.”

“And there's my green light. Don't wait up, boss,” said Deacon, who then put a gentle hand on Nora's back to guide her out of the church. “The night's still young. Let's continue our walk, shall we?”

The door to the church closed behind her with a solid thud. Two centuries ago, wearing a heavy gown and high-heels, Nora had nearly tripped on these stairs. Now, in boots and pants, her footing was stable.

Should she ever fall again, Nate would not be there to catch her.
“Hope you didn't mind the cloak-and-dagger,” said Deacon. “The precaution is necessary. When you tango with the Institute, you got to be careful when someone new gets to the dance floor. In our business, if we underestimate our enemy's capabilities, it's game over.”

“You did what you had to,” said Nora. “Besides, you helped me find Kellogg.”

“And I'll help you find Shaun,” he told her, for once, his tone was sincere. “Look, I'm just going to come out and say this: The Railroad needs you. We just survived a hell of a crisis. So we may be just a teeny, weeny bit desperate for new members.”

“Why me? I can barely shoot straight.”

“Really? I couldn't tell.” He flashed a tiny teasing smile at her. “Seriously, though, if we need meat shields and muscles, we could train some hick from the burbs. Anyone can pick up a gun and shoot. But this...” He tapped on the side of his head. “This is much harder to train. And you, my friend, is one of the smartest people I've met. You saw right through me, didn't you? From what I've seen, you could be a dangerous enemy. Or – and I'm betting – a valuable ally.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“In our little outfit, it's my job to know things.”

She looked straight at his sunglasses as if she was staring into his eyes. “So tell me, what do you know about me?”

“Someone's birthday's coming up, isn't it?”

Eyes widened, Nora could only gawk at him. “How did you...?”

“Did my homework. Nora Bennett Taylor. Born in November 10, 2047, in a city called Bethesda, Maryland – it's now crawling with raiders and ghouls, by the way. Grew up in suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts. Father was a cop--”

“That's enough. Point taken.” Nora studied the man in sunglasses anew. “...You're a spy.”

“If you insist on calling me that. A rose by any other name...” He shrugged. “My job is intel. Right now, I'm the only one at HQ doing that job. I could really use that brain of yours.”

“You know I'm looking for my son.”

“Yes, we'll find Shaun. Promise,” said Deacon. “But you're not gonna waltz into the Institute and walk out with your son. You need backup, and I'm not talking about a ragtag team of an old synth, a dog, and a Mr. Handy.”

Nora knew he was right.

“Here's my one and only sales pitch,” Deacon continued. “You're going against the Institute, and the Railroad is the only group that's insane enough to tango with them. You need hazmat suits, we have a few. If you're ever in a pinch, the Railroad buddies got your back. And when we find the key to unlock the Institute's front door, we'll bring in the heavies and storm their castle. See? We're a match made in heaven. Or hell, if you're from the Institute.”

He had conveniently left out the other side of the equation, Nora noticed. “And what do you get from me?” she asked.
For a moment, Deacon didn't answer. He was studying her; she could feel it, even though his eyes were concealed behind the sunglasses. When he spoke again, his voice low and quiet, “A golden ticket to the Institute. I've been looking for their HQ for years. Hell, decades.”

Such dedication had to be driven by something. “Did you lose someone, too?”

“...Maybe,” he answered quietly. But, in the blink of an eye, his tone reverted back to his normal one. “Maybe not. Does it matter? We'll find your son and free all the synths once and for all. Then we'll live happily ever after – or as 'happy' as can be in this shithole. So... what do you say?”

The points he'd presented were solid, and the resourcefulness he'd shown was enough to prove the Railroad's competence. Most of all, though, somehow her instincts told her to trust this man.

Nora held out her hand. “Partners.”

Grinning, Deacon took her hand for a firm and warm shake. “Partners. Go team us.”

Under the clear starry sky and a pale crescent moon, two leather jacket-clad figures walked side-by-side down the brick-paved path, away from the oldest standing church in the Commonwealth. Their steps matched each other's perfectly.

“Sure you don't want to yell at me?” asked Deacon after a brief, comfortable silence. “Not even a little?”

“Why would I want to yell at you?” asked Nora.

“For starters, I lied to you. People usually don't react well to that.”

“I knew you were lying. Sydney Carton. From A Tale of Two Cities.”

“Damn! Should have gone with Julian Montague.”

“Juliet Capulet and Romeo Montague,” Nora deciphered without missing a beat. “Seriously?”

“Huck Finn,” he tried again.

“Huckleberry Finn. Mark Twain. Come on, there's a book named after him. If you want to be obvious, you might as well call yourself 'Tom Sawyer.'”

Deacon laughed. “You know, I used that name more than once. Nobody suspected a thing. You'd be surprised how few people have heard of Dickens or Shakespeare or Twain.”

“But you have,” Nora pointed out, genuinely impressed. “And you know enough to pick your aliases after their characters.”

“And you. Did all the pre-war folks know this much about books?”

“Not everyone. I studied literature.”

“At school?”
“College.”

“Son of a... I knew I was born in the wrong century! Tell me more about the pre-war world, partner.”

A/N: You've just witnessed the birth of the Death Bunnies. The ending line of Casablanca could be used to sum up this chapter. “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”


As always, thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
It was a typical Sunday morning at this neighborhood Slocum's Joe. At one of the booths sat a father and a daughter. The father was middle-aged man with eyes as sharp as a hawk. Even without his police badge and his gun, his stern face screamed authority.

His daughter was around eight, her dark hair was up in a pony tail. Her eyes were shut tight despite the delicious chocolate glazed donut that was in front of her.

"Ready?" the father asked.

"Ready," the girl replied.

She couldn't touch her food, not until she'd passed her test, as it was the rule of their weekly ritual. This was a game Nora Bennett played with her father. No, it's not a game for fun, but a training exercise to sharpen her memory and her observation skill. The detail is in the devil, as her father had always said. If she's good enough, perhaps someday she'd be a cop just like her dad.

"The man with a hat sitting by the window," Henry Bennett started, "What's the color of his suit?"

With her eyes closed, Nora concentrated and recalled the scene inside her head. "Brown. Blue tie."

Her father fired the next question, "The woman sitting at the counter. What's the color of her dress?"

"Yellow."

"How many donuts is she having?"

"No donut. There's only a cup of coffee."

Nora heard her father chuckled. "Not bad, kiddo. Ready for a tough one?"

Nora nodded, her eyes remained shut. She'd never once peeked in weekly exercise. If she won, it'd be fair and square.

Then came the next question, "The new girl at the cashier, what's her name?"

That gave Nora a pause. Her brows knitted tight as she tried to recall if she'd heard the cashier's name being mentioned in the background. Then, she remembered one tiny detail. "Christy. That's the name on her name tag."

"Very good." Her father sounded pleased. "Last two questions. There's a car parked outside..."
Nora knew he would ask that. “Turquoise.” She then added as a bonus, “Chryslus.”

“And what is the color of the car behind the Chryslus?”

“Come on, Dad. There is no car behind it.” Big round eyes snapped open. “There's a fire hydrant.”

Henry Bennett grinned proudly at his little girl. “Six out of six. Not bad, sweetie. Not bad at all.”

A warm surge of pride propped the eight-year-old up straight and tall. “Can I eat now?”

“Go ahead, you've earned,” said Henry, taking a sip of his hot, black coffee with a smile that softened his stoic face. “You can have two if you want. But don't tell your mother.”

Deacon had never been a fan of Diamond City. Yet, today, this overcrowded settlement bothered him a little less. His mood was good. Perhaps it had to do with the delicious breakfast he'd just had, courtesy of his new partner's faithful butler.

“Are you certain you do not need my company, Mr. Cart-- Pardon, Mr. Deacon?” asked Codsworth as they headed to the only exit of Diamond City.

The robot had insisted on seeing his mistress out like a proper butler. Ah, the old-world charm.

“Sorry Cods,” said Deacon, “it's a party for two.”

“Surely you could use a Mr. Handy,” Codsworth tried again. “Someone to provide you with some purified water. Or a buzz saw and a flame thrower. Or some jokes, perhaps.”

“Don't worry, Cods,” said Nora. “We'll be fine.”

“If you say so,” Codsworth conceded. “Do be careful, mum.”

Wisely, his partner in crime had kept Deacon's tie with the Railroad a secret from all, even Codsworth and Valentine. While the synth detective had known for a long time, the Mr. Handy was very much in the dark. Just the way Deacon wanted it.

“Head back to Piper's,” Nora told her robot butler. “She'll keep you busy with all the questions she has about pre-war.”

“Oh, tell her about the real baseball game,” Deacon suggested. “That'll confuse her.”

“Excellent suggestion, sir,” said Codsworth. “Perhaps I should also pay Mr. Valentine a visit. Someone needs to tidy up that... place he calls his office.”

“Unless you want to be disassembled, don't touch his files,” said Deacon.

“Please take care of Miss Nora, Mr. Deacon,” said Codsworth, all three of his 'eyes' turned to Deacon, pleading. “She is... all I have left.”

“Aw, Codsworth...” Nora put a gentle hand on the robot's metallic body.
“She's my partner, pal. I got her back,” said Deacon. “We'll be back by midnight snack time. Or breakfast. Or lunch.”

“Where are we heading?” Nora didn't ask until they were out of Diamond City's perimeter. A smart decision on her part, knowing how careful they had to be within the settlement. Deacon appreciated that.

“Lexington,” said Deacon. “I'll tell you more later. Strategic ignorance has saved our organization more times than I can count.”

A few blocks down, Deacon took a detour to an abandon apartment. “Pit stop.”

Oddly, his partner lingered outside the doorway for a second. “There's a weird sign on the wall.”

“Is there?” said Deacon, smiling to himself as he went straight into the kitchen.

“Looks similar to the one on the mailbox two blocks down. That one has a square in the middle. This one has a... fat arrow point up.”

Deacon laughed. “That's supposed to be a house,” he told her, ducking behind the kitchen counter. Deep within the seemingly empty cabinet, Deacon pulled out a set of outfit from the hidden compartment. “Those are railsigns. Symbols we use to send messages to each other.”

“Sounds just like the spy novels I used to read.”

“If you like that, we got signs and countersigns, dead drops, and even a secret handshake.”

Nora arched an eyebrow at him. “Handshake?”

Deacon grinned at her. “All right, maybe the handshake never caught on.”

Right then and there, he began to unbutton his shirt.

“What are you doing?” his partner asked, eyes widened a little.

“Giving you a free show,” said Deacon, stripping off the shirt. He then took a brown cap from his pack and tossed it to her. “Love your hair. But I need you put it up and wear the hat.”

“Why?”

“To stay one step ahead of You-Know-Who.” He nodded towards outside as he started putting on a new outfit. “See those little raven bastards? They could be Watchers. Reporting everything back to the mothership. The Institute wasn't content with just creating synth people. Oh no, they have synth birds, too.”

“Surveillance drones,” Nora concluded.

Deacon nodded. “Smile for the pretty birdies.”

He put on a leather vest over his shirt, then on top of it all wore a patched jacket. Both ballistic
weaved, of course. His wig was gone, on his head was a wide-brimmed hat. A moment ago, a dark-haired man with plaid shirt had walked through the front door. A little later, a bald man with a hat and a coat would exit through the back.

_Take that, you Watcher bastards._

On the other side of the small apartment, his partner put her hair up in a loose bun, then donned the newsboy cap, just as she was told.

“Is that why you change your look?” asked Nora.

“This? It's nothing. You're lucky I didn't do one of my face swaps, too.”

“Face swaps?”

“Don't get too attached to this handsome mug.” He pointed at his own face and flashed his most charming smile. “I put myself under the knife every year or two. It keeps my enemies guessing. And I have a lot of enemies.”

Nora winced. “That's got to hurt.”

“Hurt less than the Institute's torture chambers,” he told her, approaching until he was a step in front of her. “It's time for you to learn the first rule of the Railroad. If you see a courser, pop a Stealth Boy and run. Even if you're in the middle of a job. Run as fast as you can. Those bastards are no joke.”

“Like the one who killed Kellogg.”

“Exactly. They are the Institute's secret weapons. Cold-blooded killers in fancy black leather coats. You're lucky if you get one clean death like Kellogg. Nine times out of ten, they'll haul you back to their base and grill you for information. Maybe even literally. Anything to make you spill. That's how they found our base several times. They... turned some of our agents, made them talk.”

Deacon could see the horror and disgust on her face. But, underneath all those, right in her eyes, he spotted determination. The will and the strength of a mother whose kid was trapped behind enemy's line. Deacon almost felt bad for using her attributes to his own advantage.

No, it's mutual benefit. His mission was to location the Institute. Her quest was to save her son. In pre-war terms, they'd be – what's the word? – carpooling.

“The Institute,” Nora asked, “what else have they done?”

“Starting with ancient history,” said Deacon, “they tried to take over the Commonwealth. Came a hair away from succeeding with their synth army. So there's that. But in the 'what have you done for me lately' category – kidnappings, wiped out a settlement or two, and nasty bioengineering experiments. Diseases, FEV, the usual.”

“FEV?”

“Forced Evolutionary Virus. Those giant, green, ugly mutated sons of bitches? That's the Institute's handiwork. The super mutants used to be humans, until they got their vitamin FEV.”

“My god...”

“That's one way of putting it. The Railroad's the only group crazy enough to fight that.” He gave
her an easy smile to soothe the hard-to-swallow dose of reality. “What can I say? We're an arguably insane bunch, and you're stuck with us.”

“Now I see why you're so paranoid.”

“Paranoid or smart? In our line of business, you can never be too careful. Speaking of...” Deacon took the sunglasses that was hanging on her shirt, and gently put them on her face. “It's a crime to hide that face of yours. But, you might turn the wrong heads.”

Then, from her bag, Deacon retrieved her scarf and loosely wrapped it around her neck until the delicate jawline was covered. All that was visible were her nose and her mouth.

Deacon took a step back to study his handiwork. “With a bit of dirt and sunburn, you'd blend right in. Let's hit the road.”

Having a travel buddy made time fly at blinding speed, especially when said buddy could probably write a dissertation on classic literature. Deacon glanced up at the sky. The sun was already up high, and thankfully there didn't seem to be any birds around – synthetic or real ones.

“I'm used to flying solo,” said Deacon to Nora as they walked down the cracked road that had been built for cars only. “But I gotta admit, working with you makes me think I've been missing out. Having someone watching your back... is refreshing. Especially since you never know when the Institute is watching.”

“You've never had a partner?”

“Not for a long time. Besides, partnering up in the Railroad can leave you vulnerable. One more person who can finger you to the Institute.”

Deacon eyed the abandon car ahead suspiciously. One hand went the grip of his pistol, ready to pull it out and shoot any ghoul that could be hidden underneath the vehicle.

When he's certain they were safe, he continued, “Not gonna sugar-coat it. In our line of work, it's rare to live to retirement. Many have heard rumors about the Railroad, and some would help maybe once a month, but they won't sign up. Can't blame them for not wanting to put themselves or their loved ones to danger.”

He could feel her studying his profile. “What about you?”

And right there, Deacon saw a perfect opening for the deviously planned story he'd been cooking up.

“It doesn't matter much to me,” he told her with a shrug, then nonchalantly dropped the bomb, “I'm a synth.”

As expected, Nora stopped dead in her tracks. “Wait, you're a synth?”

Deacon had all the ammo loaded and ready to fire. The hardest part was to keep a straight face.

As much as he hated being a stationary target in an open space, Deacon stopped and turned to his unsuspecting target, and continued with his show. “At least that's what they tell me. So I really
don’t have anything to lose. For Glory and me, and the others, it’s easier to dedicate ourselves to the cause.”

Taking off her sunglasses, his curious partner leaned close to study his face. Deacon let her look all she wanted while trying his hardest not to laugh.

“...That's incredible,” Nora muttered to herself.

Under the midday sun, her eyes appeared to be strikingly blue with just a tint of green. The color of the ocean back in the days before the war – at least the ocean in Deacon’s imagination.

Then a tiny frown appeared on her face before she asked, “Synths can get facial surgery?”,

Beneath his flawless poker face, Deacon had to mentally applaud her inquisitive instincts. “Sure. Face swaps, mind wipes, or the full package. That's the price we pay to keep the Institute from finding us.”

“...I... had no idea.”

“I don’t like talking about it. I was one of the first synths they did the whole cranium reboot on. So it was a bit of a botch job.” It was working; Deacon could read it on her face as clear as the sky above. “People wonder why I don't talk about my past. You see, most synths have fun fake memories. A happy home, a family. Me? I got nothing. And that...” He let out a deliberate yet subtle sigh. “...Well, it does something to you.”

“God, I'm sorry.”

Gotcha. For a moment, Deacon felt bad for continuing his shenanigan. But, this wasn't just fun and games, he convinced himself, it's for her own good.

“Hey, when life gives you a lemon,” said Deacon, throwing in a sad little smile. “Well, anyway, I figured you deserved to know. Don't tell anyone.”

“You have my words.”

“I can trust you, right?” he prompted, getting ready for the next phase of his ingenious scheme. A certain sealed envelope was in his bag, waiting to make its debut.

Nora paused for a brief moment, her head tilting slightly to the side. Deacon had observed her long enough to recognize this visual cue: Those wheels inside her head were spinning.

Then, out of nowhere, she said, “Give me ten dollar--I mean, a bottle cap.”

That was definitely not in his script. But Deacon embraced spontaneity more than anything else.

“What? One cap is all takes to buy your silence?” Amused, he handed one over.

“I'm giving you a discount,” Nora countered, pocketing the bottle cap. Then she looked him square in the eye and announced, “Mr. Deacon, you've hired me as your attorney. From now on, I'm contractually bound to keep your secrets. Attorney-client privilege.”

Deacon couldn't hold back his laughter any longer. “Where've you been all my life?”

Without missing a beat, his partner in crime replied, “Trapped in a vault. Frozen.”

Something told him he'd met his match, and Deacon didn't mind at all. This partnership
arrangement turned out to be better than he'd ever expected. This was going to be fun.

Less than an hour of walk away was their destination: Switchboard. The newly formed dynamic duo took a much-needed break at a Slocum's Joe in the neighborhood.

Deacon put his rifle on one of the booth and stretched. The randomly chosen table was in fact a strategic choice. It provided a clear view to the streets outside, and a quick exit to the backdoor. Even when things were seemingly quiet and peaceful, Deacon refused to let his guard down.

“I'd buy you some donuts,” said Deacon to Nora jokingly as he flopped down into the vinyl cushioned seat. “But looks like we're too late. They're all sold out.”

“We're two centuries too late,” quipped Nora as she scanned the long-abandoned donut shop. “I used to love their chocolate donuts when I was a kid.”

“What'd they taste like?”

“Sweet,” she told him with a smile that matched the pastries in her memories. “And very soft on the inside.”

“Great. Now I'm craving for some donuts, and all we have is Fancy Lads.”

It was a golden opportunity to set forth the next phase of his plan. So far, his dear partner in crime had not suspected a thing. Well, he'd not given her any reasons to; his story was air-tight, solid. Hell, even some folks back at HQ seriously wondered if he was a synth.

Sitting across from him, his unsuspecting target took off her hat and sunglasses, unwittingly provided Deacon a clear view of her face for him to gauge her reactions. All the stars were aligned. Deacon made his play.

“So I've been thinking,” he began. “Since we've this attorney-client-privilege thing, I want you to take this.” He put a sealed envelope on the table and pushed it toward her. “It's my recall code.”

“Recall code?”

With his eyes safely hidden behind his shades, Deacon unabashedly studied every inch of her. A tick of an eyebrow, a shift in her eyes, or a barely visible twitch of the corners of her mouth. Every little detail could be a telltale sign of her thoughts.

“That's the safety net the brain docs put in,” Deacon explained with some well-thought-out mumbo jumbo. “An ejector seat to bring back your old synth self.”

Almost immediately, the confusion in her eyes was replaced by apprehension. “...You mean, like a reset?”

So far so good.

“I don't know for certain,” he told her just as planned, “but I imagine it's a big old wad of trauma and cupcakes. Except with no cupcakes. Don't use the code unless you absolutely have to. It'll wipe my memories. I'm not sure how much of me will ever be left.”

For a moment, she only stared at the harmless envelope as if it was the nuclear bomb that had wiped out Boston two centuries ago.
Then, he spotted a rise on her chest as she took a deep breath. “No.” She pushed the envelope back to him. “I can't take this.”

*Interesting.*

“You're my partner, I need you to be my backup,” said Deacon, give her a verbal nudge. “When shit hits the fan, push comes to shove, if you ever need to know something about the Institute, read it to me.”

“But you won't be you.”

Somehow, it took the professional liar some effort to continue with his lies.

“Hey, I'm just one synth.” He unconsciously avoided her caring gaze. “If digging through my brain would bring down the Institute, sign me up.”

There was a pause. Then, almost instantly her demeanor shifted. The tenderness in her eyes was gone, all he could see was determination made of steel.

“No,” Nora refused, with her back straight and her chin up. “The answer is no. I'm your partner *and* your lawyer. It's my job to protect your interests.”

Again, she was going off his script. His plan for her to take the code and read it behind his back had all but gone out of the window. But Deacon would be lying if he claimed he wasn't touched by her heart-warming concern.

“For someone as careful as you, I can't believe you've made an amateur mistake,” Nora claimed, shaking her head with disapproval.

The table had turned. It's Deacon's turn to be confused. “...And what's that?”

“Never put the key next to the lock,” said his dear partner. “You shouldn't even bring this with you. What if the Institute gets their hands on it?”

Keeping his flawless poker face was one of the hardest things Deacon had done lately.

“You're right. It's dangerous,” said Deacon with a quiet sigh to cover a potential laughter. Thinking quick on his feet, he revised his plan on the spot. “That's why I want you to have the key to my lock. Read it, then we'll burn it. You'll be the only person in the world who knows my recall code.”

“And if I die?”

“Then my secret will go right to the grave with you.” He knew just the right button to push. “Keeping secrets was what you used to do, right? Well, at least it's part of your job...”

“You sure you trust me?” Nora asked after a thoughtful pause.

“Yes.” To his own surprise, that didn't feel like a lie.

Tentatively, she took the envelope and opened it with such great care as if she was disarming a bomb. Within was a small note with one line written on it. Deacon held his breath, waiting for a reaction he'd been anticipating since he'd prepared the note last night.

For a fraction of a second, her brows knitted ever-so slightly in confusion. Then, almost immediately, her eyes lit right up as she snapped her head up and glared at him. Through those expressive eyes of hers, Deacon could hear two unspoken words loud and clear: You bastard.
“What is it?” Deacon prompted, trying his best to hold onto his poker face. It's getting harder and harder by the second. “What did it say? Wait! Don't tell me!”

With her eyes narrowed a tab and her voice as flat as the warm Nuka-Cola, Nora recited, “You can't trust everyone.”

“Aaah!” Clutching his chest, Deacon doubled over dramatically in his seat and groaned, “Aaahh... haa!” He broke into a fit of laughter before he straightened himself up. “Did I have you going?” he asked knowingly. When all he received was a stony gaze, Deacon quickly added, “Don't take it personal. I lie to everyone.”

Letting out a tired sigh, his prank victim shook her head in exasperation. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since last night.” He grinned at her. “It's good, right?”

“Award-winning performance.” Nora snorted.

“Okay, hear me out. There's a lesson somewhere,” said Deacon, wiping the grin off his face. “If you want to tango with the Institute, you'd better learn the steps. That code I gave you is a hard truth. You can't trust everyone. Even if someone sounds sincere, they could be a synth replacement working for the Institute. The bitch of the problem is recognizing the 90% of the time someone's on the up and up, and the 10% of the time you're being played.”

“You can't trust everyone,” she read the code on the note one more time before she folded it back neatly. “Can I trust you?”

“That's for you to judge.”

“Who are you, really?” Nora asked again. The same question she'd asked before.

“Maybe I'm just another human that has people back home he wants to protect. Then again...” Deacon flashed a sly smile. “Maybe not. Maybe I'm the best synth that's ever synthed.”

For a few, quiet seconds, she studied him intently. While Deacon was certain she couldn't possibly see through the dark lenses of his sunglasses, it almost felt as if she could read his thoughts.

The liar hidden behind his trademarked shades was half-afraid, half-intrigued.

Then, with the sort of old-school grace that only existed in the pre-war world, his partner put the note back into the envelope and pocketed it.

“You're good in my book,” Nora concluded. “Whatever or whoever you are. Synth or human. Sydney Carton or Deacon.”

“What about Huck Finn?”

“Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. Whatever name you can come up with. Or whatever face you're wearing. You are you. You've helped me, and I won't forget that.”

Deacon felt a strange warm surge began to seep to the heart he'd forgotten he had. He dismissed it as quickly as it'd come.

“My relationship with the truth rubs people the wrong way,” Deacon confessed, although not quite knowing why. “I lie... That's what I do. My job requires it, and I'm very good at it. So good that
sometimes I don't even know why I lie anymore.” Somehow, the weight on his shoulders lightened bit by bit with every word.

Patiently, she listened.

And that encouraged him further. “I want…”

*I want your trust, even though I sure as hell don't deserve it.*

But the truth got stuck in his throat. Deacon swallowed a sigh and met her gaze. “If you believe anything, believe this…”

*I've been watching your back ever since you stepped out of the vault.*

“I'm in your corner,” said the liar, for once telling the truth. “Always have been.”

*And I always will be.*

A/N: Nora's dad is named after Henry Spencer from “Psych”, who played a similar game with his son Shawn.

According to Google map, a walking trip from Fenway Park to Lexington takes about 4 hours. The game gave us a scale-down version of Boston. In this story, I'll switch it back to the real-life scale.

If you're reading, I assume you like Deacon (enough to read through all these chapters). So here's something extra. I posted a short story about Deacon/Nora on my ongoing short-story-dumpster called “Campfire Tale from the Commonwealth.” Chapter two is about Deacon and why he likes to read. So there's that.

A random thought: If Nora has S.P.E.C.I.A.L stats, her perception and intelligence are the highest. (P boosted to the max later, thanks to her dad's weird training.) Decent charisma. Very low in strength and endurance. And she has shitty luck.


Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
Screams.

He heard screams. But it wasn't coming from his nightmare.

Deacon jolted awake from his nap.

The screams continued into reality.

“They're here!” someone yelled from the hallway outside his room. “They're here!”

His blood went cold, for he knew what that meant: The Institute had found them.

Fuck!

Deacon leaped down from his bed, one hand grabbed his sunglasses and shoved it on his face, another went for his pistol and tucked it into the waistband of his jeans in one swift motion. He then snatched his rifle and a Stealth Boy, and bolted out of his private sanctuary. All done in five seconds flat.

He'd done this before, more times than anyone should. Deacon had already known what to expect and what to do before he even opened the door. As expected, the once peaceful headquarters of the Railroad was in complete disarray.

They'd only moved to the Switchboard two years ago. And someone among them had turned by the Institute.

“Deacon!” A skinny young man rushed to him. Tommy Whisperer. “They're here! Came out of nowhere. The turrets upstairs are holding them back. But it won't take long before they come down!”

First order of business: Assume the enemies know everything.

“Find Carrington and have him change the code to the vault!” ordered Deacon.

Next: Find the alpha.

“The turrets!” Desdemona's voice rang amidst the chaos. “Somebody activates the damn turrets! Where the hell is Glory?”

Deacon followed the voice and found the leader.

“What the fuck what the fuck?” Tinker Tom screamed.
The chems were making him jumpy. But it was more than that, Deacon knew. It was PTSD. Poor kid had seen his family murdered by synths only a few years ago.

“I told you!” said Tom, hysterical. “I FUCKING TOLD YOU!”

“TOM! Focus!” Desdemona snapped. “Deacon--”

“Tommy and Carrington have the vault,” Deacon told her before she even asked.

“Good,” the alpha breathed a sigh then quickly back to barking orders, “Drummer, bring a message to High Rise. On the double!”

“On it, boss,” the young man ran out, almost collided with a tall woman on her way in.

Glory rushed to them with her oversized weapon. “They'll breach the door in a minute. Two, tops. We've to move!”

“Get PAM and others,” Dez told Tinker Tom. “Take whatever you can, then get out through the tunnel. They're coming in from the front.”

While Desdemona was busying dishing out orders, Deacon were already onto the third order of business: Destroy the evidence.

He had gathered two boxes full of files – files with the code names and last known locations of the runaways. If the Institute ever got their hands on these...

“Gimme a hand, G,” said Deacon to Glory. “We have to burn these.”

“I'll take care of it,” said Tommy Whisper, who returned with Carrington.

“Password's changed,” the doc told them. “Set it to voice recognition. If I die...”

“We'll make sure you don't,” said Glory. “Get your candy ass outta here! All of you! We'll cover you!”

Deacon wanted to argue.

“Go!” Tommy Whisperer urged. Standing tall next to Glory, the kid looked almost as big as the resident angel of death. “We got this, Deeks! Dez can't run the show without ya. Watch her back!”

“They get to the basement!” warned Maven from down the hall.

Desdemona issued her last order within Switchboard, “MOVE!”

“The Railroad's old base was underneath a Slocum's Joe,” Deacon told his partner in crime. Switchboard was a few blocks down, but Deacon took a detour towards an open field by the road. “We had a pretty sweet setup until the Institute found us. It was a disaster with a capital D.”

“What happened?” asked Nora.

“Our HQ was strong, defensible. Hell, we thought it was secure. Inside a minute, the Institute
troopers breached the doors and turned it into a shooting gallery. The survivors didn't have time to grab anything. We left some important equipment behind, including hazmat suits.”

“...I'm sorry.”

*Yeah, me too...* Deacon swallowed a sigh. “Hate to say this. It's not the first time we got raided. And it won't be the last, unless we take down the source of our problem.”

“How did they find you?”

“Probably the same way they'd found the past locations. Either they turned one of ours, or we have one of theirs in our fold.”

“A spy?”

Deacon nodded. “One time, we had this woman at Mercer. Smart, strong, everything we could ask for in an agent. She was perfect. Too perfect. I had my eyes on her – not the way you think. Turns out my instincts were right, she's a synth infiltrator. Caught her before PAM did, but it's too late. The coursers were already on their way. So we blew up the HQ and moved. That was... what? Six years ago.”

“That's when you moved to Slocum's Joe?”

“Not yet. There's another HQ in between. That one went down on fire two years ago.”

Deacon took a subtle long breath as he concluded the story. As casual as his tone might make the story sound, recounting painful history, however briefly it was, had taken a toll on him. He remembered every single raid, all seven of them. Yet, never had he talked about it outside closed-door meetings.

Somehow, sharing his past with someone felt strangely... liberating.

He turned to Nora and continued, “So here's lesson number... whatever number we are at: First rule in this business is never go against your gut. Your instinct is a powerful tool. Hone it, use it.”

For a moment, Nora didn't speak. Deacon was grateful for a quiet moment to collect his thoughts.

“Losing people like this...” she said quietly after a pause, “Must be tough.”

*You've no idea.*

Then, to his surprise, she asked, “Are you okay?”

No. “Sure.” The reply came out of his mouth automatically. The muscles on his face moved on their own and spread a tiny smile.

He was good at lying, so good that sometimes he scared himself. The mask that had protected him for decades, first out of fear, then out of necessity, out of survival, had now become his prison.

His partner's concerned face told him she was not at all convinced by his lies. But she didn't press on.

Instead, she asked, “Are we heading the wrong way? Slocum's Joe should be over there.”

An effective way to change the subject. Deacon appreciated her tact.
“My little birds told me the old HQ's crawling with chrome-domes. The front door's fortified to hell and back with mines all over the place, and probably other fun and exciting prizes.”

“Chrome-domes,” Nora recalled that particular phrase. “Older synths, right?”

“Gen 1s and 2s,” Deacon explained. “The synths didn't start off as nigh perfect copies of human beings. The Institute had to work up to that level of hubris. Gen 1s and 2s were stepping stones along the way. The Railroad's not fully united on how we feel about them. Everyone wants to liberate the Gen 3s – the human looking synths. Some of the synths in the Railroad, like Glory, think we should help earlier models, too. But Gen 1s are basically the same as, well, a Protectron. So the line gets muddy. Do we defend AI rights? Terminals? Hell, turrets?”

“That's a tough line to draw.”

“I know, right? Anytime it gets brought up: Boom! Fireworks. All the old arguments flare up. The upshot is Glory and some others won't run missions like this. But enough of Railroad drama for the day. Back to our scheduled program. We don't have enough mojo to do a frontal assault. So, we go in through the escape tunnel.”

“The donut shop has an escape tunnel?”

“What? Doesn't everyone have an escape tunnel?” He chuckled. “Seriously, though, thank god for that tunnel. If it weren't for that, there wouldn't be any Railroad left. The back entrance is safer, but no cake walk. You ready?”

“If it's the only way to get to Shaun, I am.”

“Perfecto. Together with you, I like our odds.”

Never had she thought she'd traveled off-road by the highway. On foot, no less. But then again, lately Nora had too many first-times. First time waking up two-centuries too late, first time killing someone, first time encountering a ghoul.


And now it'd appear today would be her first time traveling down a sewage pipe.

They cut across an open field and headed straight into giant rusty pipe. At the end of the short pipe was a gate. With some effort, Deacon pushed the heavy gate open and led the way down the long metal tunnel.

The tunnel was dark, lit up sparsely spaced red lights. Nora had to take off her sunglasses to see properly. Her partner, though, stubbornly kept his on.

“Can you really see in the dark?” Nora asked a question that had been on her mind since she'd met him that pre-dawn morning.

“I have night vision,” said Deacon as they continued their way. “Right now, everything is green and spooky.” That earned him a pointed look from her, which he effortlessly deflected with an easy
“Human bodies are surprisingly adaptive. I can see just fine.”

At the tunnel was a solid brick wall of a building. There was nothing else but a gate and a console mounted on the wall.

“First step is to override the security lockdown,” said Deacon. “Well, the terminal's on at least. I'm going to feed it some passwords.” He mumbled to himself as he typed, “No... No... Aha, missed one, you cocky bastards.”

The gate popped open.

“Stick to the shadows,” Deacon told her, then took point and led the way in.

The air within was stuffy, laced with a strong rancid and foul smell. Nora adjusted her scarf to cover up her nose as she followed, taking extra care to keep her footsteps as quiet as her partner's.

“Someone left a railsign here.” Deacon pointed at a chalk-drawn mark along the wall. “This one means danger.”

A few step away from the sign, Nora found the source of the pungent smell: A decayed dead body. The sight of a decomposed body didn't bother her as much as the smell. She'd seen pictures of corpses throughout her career, but standing next to one in person was a different story. However gruesome crime scene pictures could be, they would never smell.

Deacon, however, didn't seem to be bothered by the smell a bit. He paused beside the body and muttered to himself, “Yeah, we know, Roger, you poor dead bastard. We know...”

“...I'm sorry about your friend.”

“I'll tell you stories about Roger later.” He glanced at her and nodded at her covered nose. “Smart move.”

Further down, there were bodies of early-model synths on the ground, and a woman by a destroyed turret.

“That's Maven,” said Deacon with a quiet sigh. “Still owe you that beer, Mav.”

Suddenly, there was a noise.

Before she knew it, she was pushed against the wall and felt a warm hand pressed firmly onto her torso, trapping her safely within the shadow.

Faint footsteps echoed from the area ahead, louder and louder by the second. Then came a mechanical voice. “Sensors indicating concealed organic lifeforms.”

Concealed by the darkness, both remained perfectly still. From the corner of her eye, Nora spotted the silhouette of a pistol already in Deacon's free hand.

Ten long seconds later, the previous voice announced to itself, “The sensitivity of my sensors clearly needs adjustment.”

Her cautious partner didn't release his iron grip on her until the footsteps had long faded. He motioned her to stay put, then moved quietly ahead and peeked around the corner.

“Five,” he told her in a whisper when he returned. “What do you think we should do?”
Even now, he was testing her, Nora knew. “We have the element of surprise,” she replied in a hushed voice, “let's use that to our advantage.”

“I like the way you think. There's an area below with only one exit. Five bastards are patrolling, and there's no other way to sneak past them, so...” He pulled out a cylinder-shaped grenade from his bag. “It's time for Tinker Tom's special. Ready for some fireworks?”

He gestured her to follow. Noiselessly, they reached the edge of the ledge. Deacon pulled the pin and tossed the grenade the area below, then quickly switched to his rifle and fired.

Staying in the shadows, Nora aimed her pistol at a synth who was crawling towards the stairs. The explosion had crippled both legs, leaving wires and metal bone structures exposed. She quickly fired, damaging its back. Had it been a human, it'd have been dead. Yet the robot refused to give up. Its head twisted at an odd angle and looked up. Its yellow eyes found her, sending a chill down her spine. Nora drew a sharp breath and pulled the trigger again. And again.

“...System error...” It finally stopped and collapsed onto the ground.

“Tell your friends, you dead bastards,” Deacon muttered to the pile of broken robots as he reloaded his rifle. “We'll be here all week.”

Robotic army. Soldiers with no fears, no pain, no concept of self-preservation. Perfect killing machines. It was a downright scary concept, yet Nora had to admit whoever had come up with this idea was a genius. No more human lives would be lost on the battlefields. No more grieving families, no more heartbroken spouses. No more children missing their fathers or mothers, or both.

If only the synth creators had used their ingenuity on a good cause.

“Now that we've announced our arrival with a bang,” said Deacon, “we should get moving before more come to join the party.”

The maze of underground tunnels brought them to an iron grid that sealed their path. To their right, a hole the size of a doorway had been cut open, providing a convenient exit into a small room with brick walls.

Deacon stepped through the opening. “Here we are.”

Opposite of the makeshift doorway was a heavy metal gate. Near the gate were bodies of a woman and three synths.

“That's Kelly K,” Deacon told Nora, “Her mirelurk steaks were the some of the best. Second only to mine.”

“You cook?”

“Did I tell you I used to be the head chef in New Vegas? My mirelurk steak with salsa is legendary. You should try it sometime.”

It was a probably a lie. Nora had noticed a pattern by now. When Deacon was lying, his words were fast and smooth, his tone was a pitch higher and melodious; he wanted your attention. But
when he was serious, his words came much slower, his tone quieter, almost as if he didn't want to be heard.

Unfortunately, because of her former occupation, Nora had seen more liars than straight shooters. Yet, she had never encountered a liar who openly claimed to be one. An honest compulsive liar. The man was as much of a paradox as he was a mystery. And that man was now her partner – someone who had kept her safe, someone whom she trusted with her life.

“The password is... 'Password'. No?” Deacon muttered as he typed on the console. “Oh, I remember now... Okay. There we go.”

The lock on the metal gate clicked, then door swung open.

“Welcome to Switchboard,” said Deacon, leading the way inside.

On the other side of the gate was a high-ceilinged lobby with an official seal painted on the floor in the middle.

Defense Intelligence Agency.

“The DIA?” said Nora, surprised. “I thought we're in the underneath a Slocum's Joe.”

“We are,” said Deacon. “It's a secret DIA research lab. A place that never officially existed.”

“I can't believe they put a hidden lab under a donut shop.”

“Why not? Underground is the ideal place for all sorts of secret activities. Away from the prying eyes of the nosy civilians. Or, in our case, the Institute.”

The lobby had several desks, now scattered across the floor, some even had been flipped upside down. Bullet holes and scotched marks on the desks and the file cabinets told the tale of a battle that had once held within these walls.

“Never thought I'd be back here again,” said Deacon as they stepped though the rubble. He nodded at a body slumped against one of the desks. “That's Songbird. Don't let the name fool you. She's no Magnolia, but it never stopped her from holding her weekly concerts.”

The deaths, the destruction. As nonchalant as Deacon tried to make it sound, Nora could tell it hurt him. His eyes might be concealed, but his mouth revealed his thoughts. Whether it was a smile that flashed too quickly, or a unconscious frown that thinned his lips, every detail revealed little things he tried to conceal.

Nora kept this observation to herself, though. Everyone had their own reasons to lie. Whatever Deacon's reasons were, they're his, and only his.

“Movements detected,” said a mechanical voice from one of the rooms on the other side of the lobby.

Deacon quickly pulled her into a storage room nearby. He pushed her behind him, then peeked around the doorway into the now-empty lobby.

“Hmm. Overactive sensors. Nothing more,” said the synth patrol from the lobby.

Nora heard slow, heavy footsteps fading as the patrol retreated back to his previous station. Her partner was quiet, but Nora was certain the wheels inside his head were spinning fast, devising a
plan. And she was right. Mere seconds later, Deacon turned to her and put a finger on his lips, then motioned her to follow.

Careful not to step on any debris that would announce their presence, Nora followed Deacon through his former home, ducking behind desks and cabinets to avoid being detected.

Noiselessly, they headed up the stairs into an executive office that overlooked the lobby below. Deacon signaled her to close the door while he sneaked to the desk and unlocked the computer.

“Password... There we go. You're so predictable, Dez.” He then glanced over at Nora and said, “Heads up. Don't step out of this room or you'll be Swiss cheese.”

“What are you doing?”

“Housecleaning.”

Right on cue, the sound of rapid gunshots echoed throughout the quiet facility.

“Bet you didn't know the pre-war ceiling turrets are still working, you cocky Institute bastards,” said Deacon, standing up to his full height, no longer hiding. “Let the machines do the heavy lifting,” he told Nora. “Ammo's not cheap, you know.”

Although her partner was looking rather bored as he casually leaned against the desk and waited, Nora knew he was listening, paying attention to every detail outside their safe haven.

The battles only lasted for a short minute. When all was quiet, Deacon pushed himself away from the desk and looked around the room.

“We had lots of late night meetings in this room,” said Deacon. “Me, Dez, and Carrington.”

“Carrington?”

“Our resident doctor. Aka Doctor Asshole,” Deacon replied as he went through the desk drawers. “He's good at what he does, but bedside manner? Not in his dictionary. You'll meet him soon enough.” From a particular draw, Deacon pulled out a copy of a magazine of some sort. “Aha! Found you.”

“What's that?”

“Some light reading.” He handed it to her.

The slightly stained cover was plain, with nothing but the title: U.S. Covert Operations Manual: Whistling in the Dark. Right below the official seal was some small prints. Headquarters, Department of the Army. Authorized Eyes One.

“One of my favorites,” Deacon told her. “Almost as good as 'Urban Camouflage.' Keep this one. I'll let you borrow the rest when we get back to HQ.”

Nora carefully flipped through the semi-torn pages. “Can't believe I'm reading a secret government manual.”

“Inside a secret government base, using secret government technology. Life is unpredictable. Ain't that fun?”

She noticed he had yet to deactivated the security systems. For someone as careful as Deacon, it couldn't be an oversight. Was he expecting more hidden synths?
“Now that the pests are all gone,” said her partner, “we should continue your private tour to the ultra secret hideout.”

“The turrets,” she had to remind him.

“Right. Forgot.” But the way a tiny sly smile spread on his face told Nora he was very much lying.

It could only mean one thing: He was testing her. Again.

“There we go...” He shut down the security systems. “Turrets down. This way.”

They exited through the double door opposite of the desk. Beyond was an ordinary, empty hallway. Except for a few faint red beams at knee-level, crisscrossing in the air like a glowing spider web.

“Laser traps? Really?” Deacon called for Nora's attention and pointed at a tiny device attached onto the wall, “See this wire here? All you need to do is to pull it. And...” He gave the wire a quick tug. “There goes the trap. Easy, right?”

“What about the other wire?”

“That? Don't ever pull that unless you want a third-degree burn. Why don't you have a go?”

Nora carefully moved to the next trap. Crouching down, she held the correct wire tentatively for a second before she gave it a sharp tug.

The red beam blinked then disappeared.

A smile found its way onto her face as she released the breath she'd been unconsciously holding.

“Good, fingers are still attached.” Standing right behind her, her sunglasses-wearing mentor had a proud grin that matched hers. “One down. Two to go.”

The winding hallway ended in an intersection.

Deacon pointed to room on the left. “The goodies are inside the vault over here. But first, let's take a detour.”

He made a right and continued the path down the hall, then entered one of the rooms near the end of the hallway.

“Come on in,” he beckoned. “Welcome to my private sanctuary. Or whatever's left of it. Only a handful of people have stepped through this doorway. Aren't you special?”

Within the decent-sized room was a bed, a desk, and a wall lined with storage lockers. The furniture was all askew; drawers were left opened, mattress was on the floor by the bed frame. The room had been thoroughly searched by the Institute.

Deacon opened the chest at the foot of the bed. “Knew they wouldn't bother with these.”

From one of the lockers, he pulled out a duffel bag, then started to empty the content of the chest into the bag. All Nora could see was one set of outfit after another.
“Are those... your disguises?” she had to ask.

“My private collection,” he told her, shoving a lab coat and a necktie into the bag, followed by an utility overall and a pair of goggles. “But a perfect disguise is more than just some clothes and a wig. It's the attitude that counts. You'd be surprised how far I've gotten with the right attitude and a clipboard.” He then suddenly looked up and nodded at the locker closest to the desk. “Hey, do me a favor? Inside that locker are things that worth their weight in gold. Check and see if those Institute bastards have stolen anything.”

Nora didn't know what to expect. Weapons? Armors? A locker full of Stealth Boys? When she opened the narrow metal door, she was met with nothing but an empty locker, until she lowered her gaze further and further. What she saw brought a smile to her face. On the bottom of the locker was nothing but books.

A fallen pile of old books scattered on the floor, waiting for their owner to return.

And he had.

“Thank god they're still here,” said Deacon with a genuine sigh of relief.

Nora picked up the books one by one.

Twain. Shakespeare. Dickens. Wilde. Among the well-worn books, a particular one caught her interest.

Her eyes lit up at the title. “'In Search of Lost Time'?"

“You've no idea how long it took me to find that copy.”

“I've always wanted to read this one.”

“You haven't read it?” Deacon looked at her, surprised. “You have to! Take it. Give it back to me when you're done. You won't regret it. Promise.”

The book, more than two centuries old, had seen better days. Yet, the pages were still intact despite all the destruction.

“I'm glad some books survived the bomb.”

“Yeah, me too. Have you seen the library yet? It's a shame, all those books...”

The master of stealth, disguise, and lies. A man with a love affair with books in a world where classic literature had all but extincted. To say her partner had piqued Nora's curiosity would be an understatement.

“Why did you join the Railroad?” asked Nora as she watched him finish packing.


“What? You? You founded the Railroad?”

“Sure. Me and Johnny D and Watts. Hell, that was... what? 60? 70 years ago? After a while you lose count.”

And right there, Nora spotted a flaw in his statement. But she was curious how far he could spin...
his tale. So, instead of calling him out right away, she let him have his fun.

Deacon didn't disappoint. “Everyone thinks that Desdemona's the big boss. She calls the ops, gives the ra-ra speeches. But... it's just an act.” He flashed a sly smile. “She does what I tell her to because the Railroad's my show. It works best that way. Gives me room to maneuver.”

His words were too smooth, his grin too charming. The liar was completely in his element.

Keeping a straight face with well-practiced ease, Nora merely listened.

“I tell everyone I get the occasional face change to stay anonymous,” Deacon continued. “Truth is, it takes a lot of work to keep this mug handsome.”

Nora waited until he was finished, then said, “...You really think I'm going to fall for this?”

To his credit, Deacon put on an incredibly convincing innocent act. “Fall for what?”

“Give me your hand.”

“What?” This time, his confusion was real.

Nora took it in hers regardless. His fingers were long, and, from what she'd seen, exceptionally nimble. Her mother would have loved him.

“Our hands show our age.” She flipped to the back of his hand and noticed a faint scar. “No way you're at least 80.”

It was then he laughed. “You got me. You've no idea how many people would fall for that.”

“You ever played piano?” Nora asked, thinking of her mom, the piano in their old living room, and the hours she'd spent on the bench practicing.

“Me? Why'd you ask? Oh no, you've found out about my secret past, haven't you? Okay, I admit, I once had a gig in New Vegas. I was the star performer at the Tops. Two shows a night, five nights a week.”

Without missing a beat, she countered, “And was that before or after you became the head chef in New Vegas?”

“So this is how it feels like to be grilled by a lawyer, huh?” he said, chuckling. “Can I plead the Fifth?”

Nora could no longer hold back a laugh.

“You should smile more often,” Deacon commented out of nowhere, catching her completely off guard. It wasn't just his words, but his tone. It was... gentle. But before Nora could even think of a proper reply, he continued, “Seriously though, why did you ask?”

“With hands like yours, you'd make a good pianist.”

“You play?”

Nora shrugged. “My mom was a piano teacher. So... yeah. She'd have recruited you as her student on spot.”

“Hey, if we ever find a working piano, you've to teach me.”
She gave him a knowing look and a tiny sly smile. “Sure... But I thought you were a star performer at the Tops.”

“All right, you got me. Again,” he conceded, grinning. “You know, I'm starting to feel sorry for those poor bastards who had to face you in court.”

“Sorry. Old habits.”

“Don't be. I'm just glad the Human Lie Detector is in our corner. Come on, one last stop and our job’s done. Can't wait to get back to Codsworth's home cooking.”

They stopped in front of an enormous safe. “Most of the valuables are in there,” Deacon told her. “Files, equipment...”

The vault door was sealed by bolts thicker than her arm. “The Institute hasn't broken in yet.”

“Oh they've tried, I'm sure. Whoever gave them our location probably also told them about the vault. Only three of us knew the code, but to be safe, we changed it just before we left. There's no way the Institute would get the new password.”

“Smart.”

Deacon activated the console by the door and inserted a holotape.

A pre-recorded voice said, “Carrington. Stanley. Salus aegroti suprema lex.”

“Latin?” mumbled Deacon. “Carrington you genius bastard.”

A second later, one by one, the steel bolts on the door began to retract automatically. Then, slowly the thick metal door swung open by itself.

“Open says me.” Deacon headed into the vault. But, almost immediately, his steps slowed to a stop.

Curious, Nora looked over his shoulder and saw a body on the floor by a metal barrel.

“...Tommy Whispers,” said Deacon. “Asphyxiation. He died trying to burn every file we have, until he ran out of air.” He crouched down to his friend's body for a moment. “You did good, buddy. Rest easy.”

How many had to die before the Institute stopped?

Deacon picked up a dropped pistol on the floor before he stood back.

On one of the shelves, Nora noticed two sets of suits with weird-looking helmets. “...Are those hazmat suits?”

“Hm? Yeah. Take those. And this...” said Deacon as he started to retrieve some small items on the shelves, including some Stealth Boys and a small box-like device. Everything went straight into his duffel bag. “That's about it.”

“What about the rest?” asked Nora, looking at the remaining boxes.
“I'll send a team in to pick up the rest.” He stepped out of the vault and used the console once again. “Let's lock this baby up. And reset the security systems. And... there we go. The turrets will shoot on sight once we turn on the alarm. Let's go back the way we came.” Deacon looked around one last time. “Goodbye, Switchboard. You were one awesome pad.”

The heavy gate closed with a bang.

Deacon activated the security systems. All turrets within the facility were remotely powered on. Password was reset. Deacon made a mental note to pass the info to Tinker Tom for his boys to retrieve the rest of the equipment.

“You know, you should start thinking of a code name for yourself,” said Deacon as they headed for the sewage exit.

“Why?” Nora asked.

“We all have one. Secrecy keeps us alive. Right now, the folks back at HQ are calling you The Wanderer, after the Lone Wanderer who showed up in D.C a decade ago.”

“Who's that?”

“Someone who crawled out of Vault 101 and wandered around the Capital Wasteland. And thanks to the Lone Wanderer, the entire D.C has clean water.” He glanced over at her with a tiny grin. “We're hoping you'd change our world like the Lone Wanderer did in Washington. No pressure.”

Nora snorted. “Then you're placing your bet on the wrong person. If it's my husband who survived, maybe. Me?” She shook her head.

“Hm. I'm not sure,” said Deacon. “A wise man told me, 'Battles are won with fists. Wars, with wits.' And you, my dear frozen banana, is full of wits.”

That earned him a frown from his pretty partner. “Frozen banana?”

“What, you don't like that? How about something prettier? Like, Ice Queen? Lady Icicle? Oh! The Mistress of Frost.”

Deacon fully expected a pointed look or a witty retort, but he didn't expect to hear a quiet laugh escaped from her lips. He didn't bother to hide the surge of pride. He'd finally made her laugh. Twice. And he liked the sound of that.

“You know, when we have time, we should stop by the library,” Deacon suggested. “Once we get rid of the giant green librarians, we could have the entire place to ourselves. Nothing beats a good treasure-hunting.”

Smiling, his partner agreed, “Sounds like a plan.”

The sun had started to set when they walked out of the tunnel.

As soon as the gate closed behind them, Deacon's sharp ears picked up something.

“Wait.” Deacon stopped her, pushing her behind him. The hair on his body stood. His gut
screamed a warning.

They were not alone.

Right outside the tunnel, in the open field with nothing but overgrown dry weeds, a group of synth troopers scattered. They turned to the sound of the gate and slowly approached the opening of the tunnel.

“Shit!” Deacon quickly whipped around and pushed Nora against the door, keeping both of them as far away from the light as possible. “We're trapped.”

To her credit, although he could see panic in her eyes, Nora managed to remain keep a cool head. “Should we get out from the front?”

“There's a mother of all mine fields waiting.”

“We can't fight them here. We'd be fish in a barrel.”

“Not here. But out there, we have a much better chance.” He could feel nervous breaths on his neck. Despite her composure, she was scared. And rightly so. Deacon quickly whispered in her ear, “Pop our Stealth Boys and run like hell to a cover. Then we take them out one by one. They'll never see us coming.”

Nora nodded.

“Thirty seconds.” Deacon reached over to the Stealth Boy on her belt. “Run, don't stop.” He stepped back from her and pressed the switch. “Go!”

In the blink of an eye, his partner in crime disappeared. Deacon activated his own Stealth Boy and dashed out of the tunnel.

Five synths by his quick count. He would take down those sons of bitches as soon as he had more room to maneuver, more places to dodge.

Deacon ran straight to trees to the left, mentally keeping track of the time left on the clock. Fifteen seconds. Plenty of time to take down three, or perhaps four if lucky. That would save two for Nora, at most.

*Down, you assholes.*

Deacon quickly aimed and fired, aimed and fired. His Stealth Boy and the silencer on his rifle hid him well. The remaining synths were alarmed, but none could find him. He then spotted one of them dropped on the ground, no doubt courtesy of his pretty partner.

Five seconds.

Deacon fired at the closest of the remaining two. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Nora materializing behind a tree at the other side of the open field. One chrome-dome left and they would be home free.

A grin of victory spread on his face as Deacon aimed at the last synth standing.

Then, he saw it. A dark shadowed appeared out of nowhere behind Nora.

*Shit! Courser!* “Watch out!” Deacon screamed, not caring he'd practically given away his location.
His Stealth Boy ran dry at the same moment. Deacon barely dodged an incoming laser beam and rolled back behind the tree trunk, cursing. He heard footsteps approaching on his left. Using the tall grass as cover, Deacon leaned to the right and fired. The synth dropped. Deacon sprung up and dashed across the field, pausing only very briefly to smash the butt of his rifle into the trooper's head.

“Nora!” Deacon yelled at the top of his lungs, hoping against hope that she'd activated another Stealth Boy in the nick of time. “NORA!”

But there was nothing but silence. Along the sparse tree line, there was no woman nor courser in sight.

No.

His blood froze in his veins.

No, no, no...

Frantically, Deacon searched and searched, looking for a scared figure making her escape, or an injured woman hidden behind a tree, or... Or even a body.

Still, there was nothing. Nothing but a brown cap on the ground.

Nora was gone.

Fuck!

A/N: Well, what Deacon said. This is long. But I didn't want to break it in two chapters, it'll stop the momentum. So I deleted two-page worth of details, broke a very long sequence into parts. And here we are.

I have been waiting to write this for a long, long time. For better or worse, here it is. The beginning of a wild ride.

One thing I've found out about writing character's conversations is that, when the characters have chemistry together, they won't stop talking. Deacon and Nora are like that. I had to cut some of their banters in this chapter and the previous one. Hopefully I'd be able to use the deleted conversations in the future, if/when they see each other again.

For the record, this is the first time Deacon called Nora by her name.

The wise man mentioned by Deacon is none other than Nick Valentine. Also, since many of you are not from the U.S, plead the Fifth = decline to answer questions.

Back in Ch 4, when Nora first entered Diamond City, the guard who snickered at her Fifth Amendment comment was indeed Deacon. If he seems to know about tax laws and baseball rules, it's not a stretch to assume he's heard about the Constitution back in the days.

Title: “Out of Nowhere” – 1931 Bing Crosby.

As usual, thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
Someday I'll Meet You Again

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Fifteen: Someday I'll Meet You Again

Everything he had. Gone. Stripped away by the nightmare he had been running away from.

His vision was blurred by blood and sweat and tears. His nose was broken. One eye started to swell from the beatings he had received. He deserved it. But she didn't.

She didn't.

She was the only good thing in his life. And now she was gone.

His arm moved on its own accord. Swung. Smashed. Swung. Smashed. The skull of the man on the ground had been smashed to pulp by the baseball bat, yet the young man didn't stop.

They had murdered his wife right in front of his eyes. They'd smashed her head and ripped an implant out of her brain like a fucking trophy.

An implant he didn't even know she'd had.

The young man felt a jolt on his back. Something hit him, but he couldn't feel the pain. He couldn't feel anything. Survival instincts kicked in; his well-honed reflex took over. Dodging another swing from an incoming tire iron, the slender young man quickly picked up a discard pistol by the dead body and jabbed it onto the torso of his attacker.


The tire iron dropped onto the ground with a crystal cling. A bloody body followed suit.

Warm, metallic-tasting liquid rushed from his lungs, choking his breath. The young man split out a mouthful of blood, then picked up the tire iron and began to smash the skull of the dying man. Smashed it the way they'd cracked his wife's head. Swung and smashed. Swung and smashed.

They had taken everything away from him. Every. Fucking. Thing.

A thunderous bang interrupted his payback.

Shotgun shrapnel shell hit his arm, the tire iron dropped from his loosened grip. The attacker reloaded quickly, but he was too slow for the man they'd come to torture. The young man dashed to his wife's murder and swung his broken fist right onto the bridge of the gunman's nose. He scooped up the falling shotgun before it hit the floor, then jammed the butt of the gun into the gunman's crotch, hard.

With his face turned red and purple in pain, the gunman doubled over and fell down his knees. A swift kick on the head toppled the gunman over. The young man then picked up the abandoned
baseball bat and smacked the gunman's head. Again. And again.

They should have killed him, not her. Not her.

His sharp ears picked up the sound of retreating footsteps behind the thin sheet metal wall. The young man dropped the baseball bat and picked up the shotgun. Unlike his enemy's, his footsteps on the creaking floorboards made no sound.

He knew this tiny shack all too well. This was his house. His fucking house. His prey had nowhere left to run, not even a window to jump out of. The asshole was probably stepping on mattress on the floor, peeing and shitting on it. His wife would have been pissed. His lovely wife... who was now dead. Because of them.

Because of all of them.

Because of him.

The young man leaped into the room in one long stride and jabbed the barrel of the shotgun at the throat of the last attacker. Just as he'd expected, the bigger man had urinated on the bed he'd once shared with the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

“...Why...” the young man uttered, his voice coarse and raw. When the bigger man had no answer, he suddenly yelled, “WHY?! ANSWER ME!!”

“...S-sh-she... she's a...”

“She's MY WIFE!!” He flipped the shotgun in his hand and smashed the butt of it right at the bigger man's forehead. “SHE'S MY WIFE!” Smashed. “AND YOU KILLED HER!” Smashed. “YOU FUCKING KILLED HER!!” Smashed. Smashed. Smashed.

The young man didn't stop until the last bit of strength had left him. Then, all was quiet. He couldn't hear anything but his own ragged breaths as a haunting realization set in: It was all over. His life, his wife, his everything, all over in less than an hour.

His knees buckled. The young man collapsed onto the floor, and slowly he crawled out of his room and made it to his wife. Lying in a pool of her own blood was a woman who had brought a ray of sunshine to his fucking miserable life. He'd never deserved her; and she certainly had never deserved this.

It was his fault.

Her once lovely face was covered in red. Her features were distorted, forever twisted in pain and horror. But all the young man saw was a woman as beautiful as the day he'd first met her. Gingerly, he picked her up and cradle her in his arms one last time, desperately trying to warm her body with his.

His wife was dead. It was all his fault.

On top of a hill by a lone dead tree, a slender figure stood. His hands were coated with dirt and blood – fresh blood and dried one, some was his, some not. Long fingers trembled from exhaustion,
from adrenaline, and from a broken heart.

Sweat dripped from his forehead down, stinging his steel-blue eyes, one of them swallow shut. The young man didn't even blink. He merely stood and stared at the fresh mound of dirt by his boots. His wife, his lovely, beautiful wife was now buried, safe from the bastards who'd killed her, safe from him.

It's his fault.

The man blinked, tears mixed with sweat fell from his high cheekbones, dropping onto the dirt mound, onto her grave. He picked up a wood plank started to carve a name on it with his knife.

B

She'd come to him one day. Out of nowhere like an angel descended from the sky.

A

Him. A sinner. He'd never deserved her. But she'd chosen him. Like an angel, she'd believed every word he'd said, every lie he'd told.

R

He was ashamed of himself, ashamed of his past. He was afraid that she'd hate him, afraid that she'd leave him for the person he truly was. And so he'd lied.

B

His life had been nothing but a lie. His name, his past, everything he'd told her were all lies. Lies weaved tightly with more lies, wrapping him safe in a cocoon.

A

The only truth was that he loved her. He loved her.

R

And she was dead because of his past, because of his lies, and because he loved her.

A

An angel who was too good for this world, after all, was not from this world. She was a sythn. She was his wife.

Because of his mistakes, because of his sins, his wife had paid the ultimate price.

It's all his goddamn fault.

_______________________________________________________________________

The young man put a flower by the wooden cross he'd made. The fresh picked hubflower joined the wilting ones on the ground.

It'd become his daily ritual, guarding his late wife's resting place, barely slept, barely ate.
Bruises and cuts on his face had begun to heal. His eyes, though, remained hollow. He had gone bad, he had turned good; he had murdered, he had escaped; he had loved, and now he had lost. All before his twenty-third birthday.

He should not be here. He should not be standing. He should be the one lying underneath the dirt – buried, rotten, dead.

But life wasn’t done with him; it’d given him yet another chance. In his back pocket was a letter, an invitation to join an organization, a chance to begin the path of his atonement. A very, very long path. And he’d not stop until his very last breath.

In front of his wife’s grave, the man who had been calling himself John swore.

It’s all his fault.

And he would fix it or die trying.

It's his fault.

He should not have brought her to Switchboard, he should never have gotten her involved. The assholes in the Institute now had their hands on her, doing god-knows-what to her to grill information – information that she didn't even have. Deacon shuddered to think what went on in the dark dungeon, what they'd do to break her...

Someone so perfect from a bygone era, gone, taken by the monsters from the Institute.

It's all his goddamn fault.

“Damn it,” Desdemona muttered under her breath upon hearing the news.

That's it? Behind the sunglasses, Deacon glared at his boss, disbelieved. My partner was taken by the courser and that's all you said?

Yet, that was all she said. She didn't yell at him, didn't react any more than a thoughtful frown and chain-smoking.

It was Carrington who spoke up, “Please don't tell me she knows about our HQ.”

“She doesn't,” Deacon snapped. “She doesn't know a fucking thing about us, and she's taken!”

“Well, at least the damage is minimum,” said the doctor.

“What did you just say?” the spy hissed.

Although he seemed mildly surprised by Deacon's outburst, Carrington merely shrugged. “If what you said is true, and she doesn't know anything about us, we're safe.”

The white-coat wearing, cold-hearted bastard had a point, Deacon knew. But, for once, the heart he’d forgotten he had now drowned the rational voice of his mind. “We're safe but she's not!”

“How long have you known her?” Carrington asked in his perpetual condescending tone. “Weeks? Days?”
“The hell does that matter?”

“Of course it does,” the doctor countered. “For all we know, she could be a sleeper agent from the Institute. The latest infiltrator. She wouldn't be the first.”

Deacon almost threw a punch at the other man's face. “You don't even know her, you asshole!”

The doctor calmly asked, “Do you?”

“That's enough,” their boss interrupted. She took a sharp drag of her never-ending cigarette before she continued, “Carrington's not wrong. We don't know who she really is. All we know is that the Institute released her from the vault.”

She's not a spy! His heart yelled, but his mind kept his mouth shut. He had zero evidence to convince them otherwise.

“Let it go, Deacon,” said Desdemona. “This side project of yours...”

“Come on, Dez,” said Deacon, trying from another angle. “You're not giving up on finding the Institute now, are you?”

The Railroad alpha frowned at him. “Don't tell me you want to find that Brian Virgil within the Glowing Sea.”

“We don't need PAM to calculate your chance of success. It's slim to none,” said Carrington, folding his arms. “And if, by some dumb luck, you happen to stumble upon this Virgil, he's either a corpse or a ghoul.”

As much as he hated the bastard, Deacon knew Carrington was right again.

“We need everyone at HQ,” said Desdemona, “Including you, Deacon. Especially you. Don't go MIA on us. Not now.”

The air in the catacomb had become unusually suffocating.

I'm wasting my breath... Deacon headed straight to the door.

“Where are you going?” his boss called after him.

Giving them a casual wave without turning to face them, Deacon did what he did best. “Check in with my tourists, boss,” said the liar without batting an eye. “Don't wait up.”

“What?!” Nick Valentine sprung up from his chair. “...Why the hell did you take her there?”

“Surely it's just a jest, Mr. Valentine,” said Codsworth with a chuckle. “I admit you got me there, Mr. Deacon. A fine performance, indeed. Now, where is Miss Nora? She must be famished.”

Deacon had never hated himself as much as he did in a long, long time. “I'm sorry, Cods. I really am...”

The Mr. Handy ignored him and floated towards the door. “It's really funny, ma'am. You can come out now. What would you like for dinner? I've learned a new recipe from Miss Perkins, perhaps you would like to try.”
“Codsworth,” Deacon called, more firmly this time. “Listen to me, she's gone. Kidnapped!”

All three of the globe-like eyes turned to Deacon. Each shutter closed then opened, closed then opened.

“...She's gone,” Deacon muttered those two painful words again. “I'm sorry.”

For a moment, Deacon swore the engine noise stopped.

“...Oh.” The robot backed up inch by inch as the reality hit. “...Oh...”

“It's my fault, Cods,” said Deacon, wishing one of the metal arms would smack him. “My fault.”

“...She'll come back,” Codsworth mumbled to himself as he floated aimlessly until he hit the far corner of Valentine's office. “I know she will.” His arms carelessly knocked down several piles of folders and files, but the neat-freak didn't even notice. “I waited for her for two hundred and ten years. I can wait for another two hundred and ten years. I can. I can... Oh, dear god!”

If a robot could cry, the faithful butler would be a sobbing mess.

I'm sorry, buddy, I am...


And so, Deacon did. A rare chance for confession for the compulsive liar. He told Valentine about the synth troopers outside Vault 111, about the ambush outside Switchboard, about the goddamn courser who had appeared out of nowhere.

The detective listened quietly, taking occasional notes, but made no judgment against Deacon's previous lies or his unforgivable mistakes.

For the longest time, neither men spoke.

“...The courser knew you were in Switchboard,” Valentine concluded. “Probably the synths sent a dying message back to the Institute. So they waited outside. But why did they take Nora? And why did they take her there?”

“The same questions I've been asking myself...” said Deacon. “If they wanted to kidnap her, they could have easily done it when she was still in the vault.”

The detective nodded. “Why went through all the trouble? To release her, then to hunt her down? Sounds like some sort of sick game.”

“And if they sent her to infiltrate us, they should have waited longer. She doesn't even know where our HQ is.”

“So infiltration is out of the picture. That still leaves us with a whole lot of questions, and nowhere close to finding some answers.” The detective lit a cigarette and took a thoughtful drag. “One thing we know for certain is that she is not a synth.”

Deacon hated to ask. “You're sure?”

Valentine nodded. “Nick knew her father. The things we talked about, the past, no way anyone else would know. Not even the Institute. She's the genuine article. Good ol' Henry Bennett's kid.”
Deacon let out an unconscious sigh of relief.

“The Institute took her son ten years ago, and now they took her...” Valentine leaned back on his chair with a frown. “Why?”

“We need to focus on the 'how,'” said Deacon, “as in 'how to get her back.'”

The detective's yellow eyes landed knowingly on his. “Brian Virgil.”

Deacon nodded, hoping and praying that Nick Valentine, of all people, would take the challenge.

“If this Brian Virgil had ever stepped foot in the Commonwealth,” said the synth detective eventually, “he'd leave a trace. I'll ask around.”

Deacon finally let go of the breath he'd been holding. “And I'll see what I can dig up. I'll bring her back, Nick.”

“We're talking about finding the Institute, Deacon,” said the level-headed man.

“I will bring her back,” the liar vowed, meaning every single word he said, “if it's the last thing I ever do.”

It was past midnight. All was quiet in Diamond City. In a tiny alley between two shacks, engulfed by the shadows, a lone man sat on the ground with a dog.

Lying beside Deacon, Dogmeat rested his head onto the man's legs. Ever the clever beast, the dog seemed to understand his best friend was missing. His pointy ears drooped slightly, his tail had stopped wagging. Once in a while, those big sad eyes would glance at the sunglasses-wearing man, before he settled back onto the man's laps with a tiny, faint whine.

Adrenaline had finally worn off. Exhaustion had caught up to him. Deacon's muscles arched from running, his back threatened to break if he didn't lie down soon. Yet, the physical discomfort was nothing compared to hollow chill he felt inside.

The Institute had snatched his partner right under his nose, and there was not a single damn thing he could do about it. The feelings of helplessness, anger, despair, and, most of all, guilt, all blended together in a bitter cocktail and was forced it down to his throat.

Letting out a long, noiseless breath, Deacon looked up to the sky, staring blankly at the gap between two metal roofs. It was a clear sky, the stars shone brightly, but he couldn't see any. All he could see his partner's face, with eyes the color of the ocean and a smile that could lit up the entire room.

And she was gone, because of him.

He tightened the grip on a brown cap in his hand – the hat she'd been wearing only a few hours ago. The only thing she'd left behind.

It was his fault.

It was all his fucking fault.
Deacon stripped off his sunglasses and buried his face into the thick fur of his four-legged friend's neck.

“We'll find her, buddy,” Deacon whispered to the dog, or perhaps to himself. “...We'll find her. Promise.”

For hours, the man and the dog sat, finding comfort in each other's silent company. When dawn came, the alley was once again empty.

The man and the dog had vanished without a trace.

---

Antiseptic.

Nora picked up a faint scent of antiseptic as her consciousness returned. She stirred and struggled to open her sleepy eyes. The first thing that greeted her blurry vision was a white ceiling. A clean, spotless, pure white ceiling.

She blinked, her eyelids felt unusually heavy. It was as if she hadn't slept for days, and finally woke up from a long overdue nap. The bed underneath her was firm yet comfortable, the pillow under her head was supportive. Everything was quiet, except for the faintest noise of air circulation through the vents.

Exhaustion lured her back to another nap. Nora submitted to her body's request and took a deep breath and relaxed.

The air was cool and crisp and odorless, without even a hint of the acrid stench that constantly laced the Commonwealth air.

The Commonwealth...

This was not the Commonwealth.

Startled, Nora snapped open her eyes and bolted up. Yet, her muscles barely responded. Willing her body to move, Nora managed to prop herself up on her elbows. The room was clean and sterile. Two machines with monitors were set beside her bed, several handheld equipment of some sort were neatly placed on a polished tray upon a wheeled cart.

This place screamed hospital. But this wasn't like any hospital she'd ever been to. It was spotless... too spotless.

The door to the room opened with a barely audible hiss. “Oh thank god you're awake!” said the man who walked in.

Nora almost fainted on spot. Her heart burst, her eyes widened, her jaw slacked. She could only stare at the man as her vision started to blur.

“What's wrong?” asked the black-haired man. “You feeling okay? I'll go get the doc.”

Swallowing hard to push away the lump in her throat, Nora could only manage to utter one word, “...Nate...?”
“Yes?”

Her husband, Nathaniel Taylor, was once again standing in front of her. Alive.

This was a dream. This had to be a dream.

“You okay, hon?” Nate sat down on the chair by the bed and took her hand in his. His hand was warm, as always. “Stop looking at me like that,” he joked with an easy smile, “It's freaky.”

“...You're alive...”

“Let's see.” He pressed her palm onto his chest, where she felt a steady pulse. “So, am I alive, doc?”

Her vision blurred again until she could no longer see his face. Then something tickled her cheeks and dropped down from her chin.

“Hey, hey...” He held her cheek in his warm hand in a panic. “What is it, honey?”

“...You're alive.”

“Don't be silly, of course I am.” He pulled her to his chest and held her there.

The familiar embrace, the comforting warmth, and the slow but steady heartbeat. All were very real. Nora now understood. The Commonwealth was all a dream. The vault, Diamond City, Kellogg, everything was just a vivid dream.

*Including Deacon,* said a tiny voice inside her head. The sunglasses-wearing, book-loving, honest compulsive lair was nothing but a part of her imagination. *Of course he was,* Nora thought with more than a hint of regret.

Her husband's voice grounded her back to reality. “The doctor said you're fine. Just exhaustion.” He pressed his lips on top of her head. “You gave me quite a scare.”

If it was a dream, then... *Shaun.*

“Where's our baby?” asked Nora.

Nate gave her a loving look and a teasing smile. “You know, hon, try not to call Shaun a 'baby', at least not in front of his face. Kids his age, they hate to be called that, especially boys.”

Utterly confused, Nora could only stare at her husband. “What are you talking about? He's not even one.”

“...What?” Holding her at arm's length, Nate studied at her. His handsome face scrunched up, full of concerns. “...Honey, I think I should get the doc.”

When the door opened, Nora spotted a boy outside, trying to peek in.

“You're not supposed to be here, kiddo,” said Nate gently, ushering the boy away.

Somehow, the boy looked familiar...

The boy stole one glance at Nora before he stepped out of sight. But his voice could still be heard, “Dad--”
Then the door closed.

Eyes widened in shock, Nora stared blankly at the close door. Her heart raced, her mind spun.

*Dad?...Shaun?*

*No, it can't be.*

With a shaking hand, Nora peeled off the blanket and determined to find the boy, to find answers. It was then she realized her outfit was the one she'd been wearing in her dream. The same shirt and pants she'd bought at Diamond City. And, around her neck was leather lace makeshift necklace with a plain wedding band hanging on it.

Nora couldn't breathe. Her own heartbeat became deafeningly loud as she came to one single conclusion.

The Commonwealth wasn't a dream.

Nate was dead, murdered by Kellogg.

*But... But... he was here.*

She'd felt him, touched him. Yet Nora could no longer ignore a particular image – the image of her husband trapped inside a pod. Frozen. Dead. His ring was now around her neck, the same ring she'd taken off from his cold, hard finger.

The lingering warmth of her husband's embrace now turned into a chilling shiver down her spine.

*What? How?*

Her heart pounded faster and faster. She remembered. The ambush. The synth. A pinch in her neck. A man yelled... Her partner.

The room started to spin.

...*Deacon*...

Darkness took over.

– End of Part One –

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*A/N: I had Twilight Zone in mind when I was writing Nora's section.*

Part One of Project Wanderer has come to an end. Deacon found Nora, Deacon lost Nora. Nora lost Nate, Nora found Nate. All goes according to plan.

If this was a manga series, this would be the end of book one. If this was a tv show, this chapter would be the final episode of season one. No big deal, it's just the way I'm framing the entire story.

Part Two will continue right here. I'm not going to post it as a separate story like my Mass Effect
fic. So, stay tune and come back for the next part.

Hope you like the story so far. Thanks for reading.

Title: “Someday I’ll Meet You Again” – 1944 The Ink Spots.

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
“You're doing great, Mrs. Taylor,” said the doctor. “Now give me another push.”

Six hours. Six long, torturous hours since Nora had driven herself to the hospital. The moon had long gone, the sun was already up, yet her baby still refused to come out and see the world.

Her strength had been rapidly draining from her, her eyes stung with sweat and tears. Excruciating pain shot from her lower body, ripping her apart, quite literally so. But Nora wasn't about to give up. She couldn't give up.

“Come on, Nora,” the doctor urged again, “you can do it! Push!”

Nora took a deep breath, then with a primal yell, she pushed as hard as she possibly could.

“Good, good,” said the doctor, “I can see his head. Take a nice, long breath, and get ready for another push. We're almost there!”

I can't... I can't... Labor breaths puffed from her pale, dry lips. In her delirious state, she silently called for her husband, Nate... help...

Yet Nathan wasn't here.

“Nora, now! Push!”

And she did.

Her grip on the rail of the bed was so hard that she almost bent the metal. Her head was light. She couldn't breath.

Faintly, she heard voices, “...Doctor, the patient...”

“...Prepare for blood transfusion...”

“...Pressure dropping...”

“...Emergency C-section...”

“...Mrs...”

“...Nora...”

She felt a warm hand on her cold arm. Then there was a pinch.

“Mrs. Taylor! Mrs. Taylor!” one of the nurses called. “Stay with us!”
“One last push,” said the doctor, “Give me everything you got, Nora.”

For Shaun... For Shaun.

Perhaps it was the injection, perhaps it was pure adrenaline, Nora gripped on the bed rails and pushed with all her might. Every fiber of her being screamed in pure agony, a voice that sounded nothing like hers roared from her raw throat.

And then came an unexpected rush. A strangest sensation that shot through all her nerves.

“Got it! Got it!!”

Somehow, she knew that was it.

Nora flopped down onto the pillow. Her lips parted, gasping for rapid, shallow breaths. Her eyes were wide open, yet she saw nothing but stars. In a daze, she heard quiet yet urgent exchanges.

“Hurry! Untangle it!”

“Hold its head. Careful!”

Alarmed, Nora summoned the last bit of energy to raise her head. At the foot of the bed, she saw the doctor and a nurse gathered. One of them holding a tiny, slimy creature in her hands.

That was the very first sight of the little guy that had been living inside of her for the past ten months.

Her baby. Shaun. His skin was... purple.

Wrapped around his tiny little neck was the umbilical cord. Once the source of his nutrients, the cord now strangled the baby, threatening to end his life before it began.

No... No! No! No! Nora screamed, but she could no longer make a sound.

The cord was quickly untangled by the experienced doctor. Yet, the baby remained as lifeless as a rag doll.

“...Sha...Shaun...”

“Mrs. Taylor, please don't move,” said the nurse who had been treating her. “You've lost a lot of blood.”

Nora could only watch. Never had she felt so helpless in her life.

The doctor held the baby by his ankles, hanging him upside down, then smacked on his behind.

Nothing.

God, don't take my baby!

A few loud smacks later, still not a peep.

Don't take him. Take me instead! Please!

Another smack.

Save my baby! Save Shaun!
In an ideal experiment, all the parameters should be under complete control, except for the one that was being tested. Realistically, however, one could only control a few variables. Thus, adjustments to an experiment might be necessary.

Father knew this all too well.

Adjustments had been made to the first phase of his latest project.

Phase one: Release and observe.

It had ended earlier than he'd expected. Observation period was short, although enlightening.

Now, on to the next phase.

Phase Two: Retrieve and interact.

Retrieval had been conducted smoothly. Interaction with the subject, though, was one of the most crucial yet volatile steps in this experiment.

How should he reveal the true? How much should he say? How should he even address her?

“Unit S9-23 is not quite ready,” Dr. Madison Li reported. “We've finished the final testings of emotional stimuli, but we haven't reprogrammed his memories.”

Sitting at the head of the oblong conference table, Father shut down all his uncertainties and focused on the meeting.

“It’s all right,” he told Dr. Li. “We can use this opportunity to test S9-23 under a more... extreme situation.”

“The retrieval of our guest was a success,” said Dr. Justin Ayo. “Thanks to the surveillance mode we have installed in all our older models.”

“Pure luck,” Dr. Li commented. “If the synth didn’t scan her face before it was destroyed, your people would still be watching hundreds of surveillance videos just to find one woman.”

“Regardless,” Dr. Ayo spat like it was a curse word, “the mission was a success, thanks to the SRB.”

“Did you pick her up by yourself?” Dr. Li was fast to point out. The head of Advances Systems was well-known to have a tongue as sharp as her mind.

“Of course not.” Dr. Ayo frowned, disgusted by the idea. “Why would I head up to the irradiated dumpster? We build synths to do the dirty jobs.”

“Maybe you should get your hands dirty sometimes, Dr. Ayo,” said Dr. Li without missing a beat. “Like the rest of us.”

“If you like the surface so much,” Dr. Ayo countered just as quickly, “you’re more than welcome
to go back--”

Irritated, Father knocked on the table twice to get their attentions. Li and Ayo, both were thorns in his sides, yet both were effective at their positions.

“You are free to leave the meeting and carry your private conversation elsewhere,” said Father to no one in particular. “Now, on with the meeting. I expect all courtesies extend to our guest. She is granted full access to all departments.”

“Sir, there's security issue,” said Dr. Ayo. “Some of the experiments are highly classified--”

“Use your own discretion.” Father waved a hand impatiently. Did he have to spell out every detail? “I want our guest to feel welcome. She will have a lot of questions, no doubt. Answer them as best you can. Keep in mind that our technological development is far superior than what she's used to. Please be patient.”

“Two hundred and ten years ago, pre-war America,” said Dr. Allie Filmore. “I can't imagine living in a world like that.”

Neither could he. But, lately, he had. In the late hours, alone in his quarters, Father often wondered the 'what-if'. What if the bomb hadn't dropped? What if he'd lived a normal life two centuries ago with both his parents in the suburb of Boston? Would he become a soldier like his father? Doubtful. A lawyer like his mother? His attention to details and tenacity would help in that field. Or would he repeat his path as a researcher, a scientist, perhaps in CIT?

He would never find the answer.

The door opened. Dr. Dean Volkert joined the meeting.

“Our patient is awake,” he told the group. “Her response to... Mr. Taylor was emotional.”

“It's expected,” said Father.

“I think she’s figured out where she is,” said the doctor.

Dr. Ayo raised a skeptical brow. “Figured it all out when she's drugged? Impossible.”

“Her vital signs said otherwise,” said Dr. Volkert. “Rapid heart rate, a spike in blood pressure, a sudden increase of cortisol and adrenaline, and her erratic behavior shortly before her loss of consciousness. All pointed to the conclusion that she’s under extreme stress.”

“Fascinating,” said Father. “...And remarkable. What is her current status?”

“Currently tranquilized until vital signs have been stabilized. The patient suffers from dehydration, malnutrition, and radiation poisoning. She's been decontaminated and treated. I expect a full recovery.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t lost a limb yet,” said Dr. Li. “It’s a harsh world up there.”

“Make sure she's comfortable,” said Father to Dr. Volkert. “When she's awake, bring her to me.”

“Yes, sir,” said the doctor.

“Should we assign a courser to our guest?” asked Dr. Ayo.

“Your coursers are unsettling enough for those of us who were born and raised here,” said Dr.
Filmore. “We should make her feel welcome, not intimidated.”

“I agree with Dr. Filmore,” said Dr. Li. “And keep those coursers of yours out of my lab.”

“That will all for now,” Father quickly concluded the meeting before another argument could even start. “Thank you and dismissed.”

In his haste, he had forgotten one detail. However unwilling he might be, age had finally caught up to him.

“Dr. Filmore,” Father called out. “The living quarters for our guest...”

“It's already furnished, sir,” said Dr. Filmore. “A two-bedroom unit with a view to our central courtyard. I have also added some antiques that might make her feel more at home.”

“Thank you,” said the old man with a tired sigh.

He could feel a subtle yet persistent pain slowly crept its way back to his body. Pain and... something else. Something unfamiliar. Ever since the subject of his experiment had been brought to the medical bay, an unknown turbulence had been whirling underneath his stoic shell.

Nervousness, he reluctantly identified.

For an old man like him to get this nervous, it was beyond embarrassing.

“...Are you ready, sir?” asked Dr. Filmore.

No. “Yes,” said Father, taking in a subtle breath to calm his nerves. “As ready as one could ever be in my... unique situation.”

“If I may speak freely.”

“You don't ever have to ask, Allie,” said Father to his trusted ally.

“Your mother would be proud of what you've achieved. If Quentin ever became the director, I'd sleep with a smile on my face every night.”

The old man chuckled ever-so quietly. It was a sound he rarely made. “Then tell Mr. Filmore to catch up with his study.”

Decades ago, a sandy haired young woman had walked into his lab and introduced herself as his new assistant. Now, she was the head of Facilities, and a proud mother of a young man. Father was genuinely happy for Allie Filmore.

“I will tell him Father says so,” said Allie with a motherly smile. “If there's one person Quentin listens to, it's you, sir.”

“The boy is spirited. Just like his father when he was young.”

“My husband was the trouble-maker, and you were the overachiever.”

“Dean was the overachiever. I was the outsider.”

The outsider, the orphan, the lab rat. From an infant who had been constantly poked and prodded in the lab, to an old man who led some of the brightest minds in the world, his whole life had been dedicated to the progress of humanity, to the new evolution. Now, with one foot in the grave, he
had come to seek the approval from a stranger? That was ridiculous, irrational, and plain stupid.

No, that woman was not any stranger, but his own mother. A mother he had never met.

“I'm glad you have a chance to be with your family,” said his former assistant. “After everything you've done for the Institute, you deserve that, Dr. Taylor.”

Dr. Taylor... It’d been a long time since someone addressed him as such. Like meeting an old friend, the familiar title brought a thin smile to the old man's tired face.

“Thank you, Allie.” Dr. Shaun Taylor drew a slow, long breath and muttered to himself, “I hope it's not too late...”

When Nora opened her eyes, a bright ceiling greeted her once again. It was the same room as the one in her dream. Her nightmare continued.

“Hey honey,” a warm voice greeted gently. “How are you feeling?”

Never had she thought the voice of her husband would bring a chill down her spine. The man who was supposed to be dead was sitting by her bedside, looking at her with a loving look. Was he a ghost? A fragment of her imagination? A dream?

“You fainted,” Nate told her, brushing a few strands of hair off her forehead.

She could feel his touch, warm and gentle. He was certainly not a ghost.

“The doc said your blood sugar’s low. When was the last time you had a proper meal?”

The face, the voice, everything told her this was Nate.

No. Nate had been killed. It’s a solid fact supported by the murder she had witnessed, the cold body she'd touched, and the confession by the killer himself.

Yet, all those contradicted with the evidence in front of her eyes: The man himself. Talking, smiling, breathing.

With all the above facts gathered, Nora could only come to two conclusions: Either Nate had been revived, or this wasn't her husband.

A doppelganger.

There was one way to find out the truth. But Nora was almost too afraid to try.

“I'll tell the doc you're awake,” said the man, leaving.

Looking at his retreating form, Nora steeled herself and called out, “Nathaniel.”

The man turned and looked at her with a quizzing smile. “Yes?”

Nora froze with horror. Nate had always hated his name. This was not her husband, this was absolutely not her Nate.
Who the hell was he? What the hell was going on? The last thing she remembered was an ambush outside Switchboard. She'd heard Deacon's sudden warning, then she felt a pinch...

The only logical answer was an utterly horrific one: She was kidnapped by the Institute.

“What is it, hon?” the man prompted patiently.

Out of the corner of her eye, Nora spotted a brown leather jacket draping over the back of a chair. Thinking quickly on her feet, she replied, “...Could you bring me my jacket?”

An easy grin flashed across the man's handsome face. The exact same smile that had once melted her heart. But this was not her husband.

The man took the jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Geez, you're freezing,” he said, touching her hands. Nora forced herself not to recoil out of fear. “I'll tell them to turn up the heat and get you something warm to eat.”

As soon as the door closed, Nora quickly scanned around to search for an exit, an escape. But there was none. No side door, not even windows in this facility. There's no way to run, nowhere to hide.

She held onto the ballistic-weaved jacket as if it was her only link to reality, to sanity. Then, she felt something inside one of the pockets. An envelope, a note. Deacon's 'recall code'.

You can't trust everyone.

Swallowing hard, Nora fought against the dizziness and foggy head, and gathered her wits. First, she needed to arm herself. But her gun was taken away, so was her bag.

There was no knife or any sharp objects in sight. The handheld instruments on the tray were too bulky to be an effective weapon. Panic started to rise, Nora thought quickly what her father would do, what he'd taught her. If wielded properly, anything could be a weapon. In a pinch, her belt could be a good whip or a weapon to strangle someone. A broken glass bottle could be as sharp as a knife.

Just then, the door opened. An old man entered.

“I am Dr. Volkert, Mrs. Taylor. How are you feeling?”

The man was perhaps in his sixties. Bald and slim. His face was stoic, but his tone was warm.

“...I'm fine,” Nora replied as she got out of bed. Her face was perfectly masked. Her heart, though, was threatening to leap out of her chest. Her legs were wobbly.

The doctor picked up one of the instruments on the tray. “Please hold still. This won’t hurt a bit.” He remotely scanned her. “Do you know where you are?”

“The Institute.”

He nodded then reached for a syringe on the tray.

Nora immediately backed up.

“This is glucagon,” the doctor explained. “Glucose shot. Your blood sugar level is low. Heart palpitations, shakiness, loss of consciousness, confusion, anxiety... those are the symptoms of hypoglycemia. If you prefer, I could bring you a cup of juice.”
“Why am I here?” Nora demanded. “What do you want from me?”

The doctor retrieved two sealed cups of orange liquid from the cabinet nearby. “We mean you no harm, Mrs. Taylor,” said the doctor, handing her one of the drinks. “In fact, you're our guest.”

Guest?

“Your radiation poisoning has been treated,” the doctor told her. “If you have symptoms of headache, nausea and vomiting, fever, please come to see me at once.”

“I was poisoned?”

Dr. Volkert nodded. “Unlike the Wastelanders, your immune system is not evolved to counter the radiation you've been exposed to on the surface. Prolong exposure to radiation increases your risk of developing leukemia or cancer. A heavy dose could lead to death, typically occurs within two days to two weeks.”

*The Glowing Sea*, Nora thought. She would not survive a trip there.

“I am glad we found you when we did.” The doctor broke the seal of his juice and took a long drink, as if to silently prove to her that it was not poisoned. “Used to love this when I was young, now it’s a bit too sweet for my taste.”

Thirsty and tired, Nora reluctantly took a sip. The drink was cold and sweet, with a hint of orange flavor. Strangely, it reminded her of the juice boxes she used to have when she was a kid.

“...Why are you helping me?” Nora asked.

“Like I told, Mrs. Taylor, you are our special guest,” said Dr. Volkert. “It's an honor to finally meet you, ma'am.”

“What is going on?”

“I know you have a lot of questions, you will find some of your answers. Why don't you come with me?”

---

The facility was bright and clean. The charcoal-colored floor was polished to a shine. The walls were a lighter shade of grey. As if the building itself wasn’t monotonous enough, the people were wearing some sort of all white uniforms, with only one accent color on each person. Red, blue, yellow, or green, the single color was on their sleeves like the doctor’s, or a simple trim around the collars.

Although the styles and the accent colors varied, one thing in common was the logo on their chest. A circle with a human figure inside. Oddly, it reminded Nora of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The ideal human proportions. The ideal man.

Dr. Volkert led her up a flight of spiral stairs to the level above. Standing outside the double door was a tall man dressed in all black in a sea of white uniforms.

“Sir.” The man in black gave the doctor a stiff nod, then turned his attention to Nora. His face was completely void of emotions. “Ma'am.”
A courser. One of those dangerous killing machines that Deacon had warned her about was now standing in front of her. Nora took an involuntary step back.

The doctor didn't seem to be bothered by the courser's presence. He knocked on the door before opening it for Nora. “This way, Mrs. Taylor. The director is expecting you.”

Behind the door was a huge room with a balcony at the far end. Sitting behind the desk, a silver-haired man turned away from his computer to greet his visitors.

A sharp gasp escaped from her when Nora had a clear view of the man’s face. For a second, she thought he was Nate’s father. The man, though, had a full beard, whereas her father-in-law had always kept his face cleanly shaved.

“Thank you, Dr. Volkert,” said the old man.

The doctor respectfully nodded and headed out of the office, leaving Nora alone with her father-in-law look-alike.

For the longest time, the old man quietly and thoughtfully studied her. There was no menace in his stare, though, only a strange mix of wistfulness and curiosity.

Unlike the others, the old man wasn't wearing some strange, white uniform. Underneath his tailored white coat was a plain white shirt and a green sweater. Whoever this man was, he was in a high enough position to distinguish himself from the rest.

“Wellcome to the Institute, Mrs. Taylor,” the old man finally spoke. “I am... the director.”

Somehow, she was brought straight to the leader himself. Although certainly intimidated, Nora had only one thing in mind. “Where is my son? Where is Shaun?”

The old man didn't reply.

Taking a breath to shake away her nerves, Nora pressed on, “Why did you take my baby? What have you done to him?”

“You've come a long way for your son,” said the old man. “I've been told you're even willing to travel through a sea of radiation for him.”

“Of course I'm willing to,” Nora snapped. “He is my son! Now, where is Shaun?”

Again, the director didn't reply. He simply studied her.

If he thought silent treatment would deter her in any way, he would be dead wrong.

“You know I'm here for Shaun,” said Nora, “and you haven't killed me yet. So let's cut to the chase: What do you want from me?”

The old man seemed to be taken aback by her blunt question. “...That is the question I've been asking myself...”

“Give me back my boy, and let us leave. Or I'll make you regret bring me here.” It was nothing but an empty threat, if the old man had an ounce of brain, he would know.

Still, the director didn't call her bluff. “Your son... is here.”

“Let me see my son. Now!”
“I understand that you are emotional,” said the old man, “but I need you to realize that this... situation is far more complicated than you could have imagined.”

His statement, however vague it was, confirmed Nora’s fear.

“He is ten now, isn't he?” said Nora, her voice on the verge of breaking. “He won't recognize his own mother.”

The director stood. He was surprisingly tall, about the same height as Nate. “Come with me,” he told Nora, then headed up the stairs to the private quarters above.

Sitting on the floor by the coffee table, a black-haired boy was busy tinkering with an old radio that had been taken apart. Nora had seen the kid before -- the boy outside her room in the medical bay.

The boy, though, didn’t notice he was no longer alone until the director called his name.

“Shaun.”

The boy looked up and smiled at the old man, but his innocent smile faded and turned into a curious glance as his eyes met Nora's.

The same warm brown eyes as Nate.

“...Shaun? Is that... is that really you?” Nora rushed to the boy. The infant she had held in her arms not long ago was now a boy about ten.

Ten missing years. She held him by his shoulders, touched his cheeks. It felt like a dream.

“Who is this?” the boy asked the old man.

He didn't recognize her. Of course he didn't. Nora knew all along. Yet when it finally happened, when those three innocent words finally came out of her son's mouth, it ripped Nora apart.

It was all Nora could do not to break down in front of her son. “...I'm your mother, Shaun.”

The boy looked utterly confused. “But I thought mom was dead when I was a baby. What’s going on, Father?”

“Father?” Nora looked at the old man, demanding an answer. Did he adopt Shaun? No... She'd heard Shaun called Nate 'Dad' a moment ago.

“I am home!” The boy ran straight to the director. “Help! Father! I don't wanna go!”

Already broken, her heart was now completely shattered. Her own son, avoiding her, seeking refuge from those who had taken him away from her.

“Shaun! Honey, I know this is confusing--” she called out, only to have her son hide further behind the old man.

“Father! Help!” Shaun screamed. “Don't let her take me away!”
The old man calmly turned to the boy and said, “S9-23 Recall Code Cirrus.”

In the blink of an eye, everything stopped. The terrified expression on the boy’s face suddenly turned blank. Warm brown eyes shut, his head hanged, his shoulders dropped. It was as if he had suddenly fallen asleep on his feet.

Horrified, Nora shook her son’s shoulders. “Shaun! Shaun, wake up!” Yet the boy remained as still as a statue. “What the hell is going on? What have you done to my son?”

“He is not your son,” the director told her. “As you can see, he’s a synth. A prototype, you understand. We’re only just now beginning to explore the effects of extreme emotional stimuli.”

Manners be damned. “What kind of sick joke is this?!” Nora yelled. “Where the hell is MY SON? Where is the real Shaun?”

The reply was something she would never, ever expected. “I’m here, Mother.”

“You… what? Is this another joke?”

“I assure you, it’s not a joke.” The old man gave her a thin, awkward smile. “It’s good to finally meet you, after all this time. It’s me. I am Shaun.”

Her head started to spin. Nora collapsed on a chair nearby, confused and shocked beyond belief. “...What?”

“I am… your son.”

“...How...”

“In the vault, you had no concept of the passage of time. When you learned from rumors that your son was no longer an infant, but a ten year old boy, you believed that ten years had passed. Is it really so hard to accept that it was not ten, but sixty years?”

“But… Kellogg! The man who took my son-- I saw him!”

“Ah, Kellogg. Institute technology prolonged his life far beyond any normal human lifespan. He was more than a hundred.”

“No… This... this is...” Nora shook her head as the random pieces of puzzle began to fall into place inside her head. Had it really been sixty years? “I need proof!” she demanded, desperately holding onto the last bit of sanity by retreating back to her comfort zone. “Evidence!”

The man who claimed to be Shaun merely nodded. “Of course. I do not expect you to take my word for it.” He headed to a computer nearby and pulled up some files. “Due to my… status, my life has been documented in great details. Especially in my early years. Take a look.”

The infant in the picture was her baby, Nora recognized it immediately. The text, though, sent a chill down her spin.

Subject: Shaun Taylor. Procedure: DNA extraction. Date: December 1, 2227.

Another file. Same procedure, a week later. And another, and another.

A picture a week. Her son grew quickly up in front of her eyes. Soon, there were pictures of him as a toddler, then a child, then a man who looked very much like Nate when they’d first met.
Nora could only sit and stare at the screen, shaken to the core.

“If you need further proof,” said the director, handing her a file, “here's a DNA test report.”

The letters on white paper blurred into blobs of black. As she blinked to clear her vision, something tickled down her cheek and fell onto the report.

50% shared DNA.

This was Shaun. The old man in front of her was her son, the baby who had almost died in the delivery room.

Her knees buckled as she struggled to stand. Nora had to swallow hard to push a suffocating lump away from her throat before she could find her voice. “...It's... It's you...”

“It's me, Mother,” said Shaun calmly.

Her hands trembled uncontrollably as they reached out to touch her son’s face. Chubby rosy cheeks were now hollow and wrinkled. Wispy soft black hair had turned silver. His eyes, though, were the same warm shade of brown.

Only a few weeks ago, she had held her baby in her arms, singing to him, rocking the fussy little guy to sleep. And now he was towering over her, and twice her age.

If this was a nightmare, Nora wanted to wake up.

She wanted to wake up in the comfortable bed, with her husband snoring softly next to her, hogging the blanket as always. She wanted to wake up to the hustle and bustle in the kitchen, to the sound of Codsworth humming along to the music on the radio as he was busy preparing for breakfast. She wanted to wake up knowing Shaun was safe in his crib, cooing to himself, or perhaps crying at the top of his lungs to call for attention.

She wanted to watch her son grow up, to teach him his first word, to guide his first step. She wanted to take her son to school, to pack his lunch box each day, to read him stories every night before bed. She wanted to bring her son to his first baseball game, to explore the library, and to play in the park.

Most of all, she wanted Shaun to grow up in a loving and caring home, not a cold, sterile lab.

“What have they done to you...?” Nora breathed, feeling the phantom needles and scalpels on her skin as they had been on her infant son decades ago.

“My DNA was needed to create the latest synthetic organics.”

“...The synths?”

Shaun nodded. “The Institute endeavored to create synthetic organics,” he started to explain in a measured tone as if he was merely giving a report of the latest experiment. “The most logical starting point, of course, was human DNA. Plenty of that was available, of course, but it had all become corrupted. In this... wasteland... radiation affected everyone. Even in their attempts to shield themselves from the world above, members of the Institute had been exposed. Another source was necessary.

“But then the Institute found me, after discovering records of Vault 111. An infant, frozen in time, protected from the radiation-induced mutations that had crept into every other human cell in the
Commonwealth.

“I was exactly what they needed. And so it was my DNA that became the basis of the synthetic organics used to create every human-like synth you see today.”

Oh god...

“I am their Father,” said Shaun, proudly. “Through Science, we are family. The synths, me... and you.”

Oh my god...

“I know this is a lot to take in. But this the reality.”

Not only had the Institute robbed her a chance to be a mother, they had treated her baby like a lab rat.

Her maternal instinct ignited. Nora was beyond horrified and furious. “...How could they... How could they do this to you? To us?”

“I am doing well, Mother, as you can see. Raised by the Institute, and now its leader.”

“They took you from me! They killed your father!”

“The man who killed him is gone.”

“I know you must have questions,” said Shaun patiently. “Please, anything I can do to help you understand.”

Only one question managed to surface from the sea of chaos inside her mind. “It was you who released me out of the vault, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Why did you take so long to find me?”

“I thought my parents were dead. Or so I was told. For many years, I never questioned who my parents were; I accepted my situation and that was that. When I became director, I have access to files that were sealed. Curious, I looked up mine, and... And I found out you’re still alive.”

“Then why didn’t you bring me to you? You knew I was out there!”

“I... Well, I suppose I wanted to see what would happen. An experiment, of sorts.”

What the... “An experiment?” So disgusted, Nora uttered each word like a curse.

“I was curious... After all this time, would you attempt to find me? Now I know the answer. It's remarkable.”

The truth hit Nora like a ton of bricks. She was a lab rat in her son's experiment. “...I was your experiment?”

“Rest assure it was under control. You were safe at all times, Mother. A courser was sent to protect you.”

“That’s not the point!”
Yet, Shaun merely gave her a puzzled look as though he couldn’t quite comprehend her meaning.

If this had been his ‘experiment’, then… “Kellogg.” Nora asked, “he worked for you?”

“He was an Institute asset long before I arrived here. I wasn't until I became director that I learned of all the things he’d done... what kind of man he was. He never failed the Institute, but his cruelty became more apparent with every completed objective.”

“He killed your father, Shaun!”

“And now he's dead. I won't lie... It's not coincidence your path crossed his. It seemed a fitting way to allow you... us... to have some amount of revenge.”

She’d been played by her own son.

Nora shut her eyes to clear her thoughts. Her son had become the leader of the enemy. This nightmare had to end. It had to end. Now. Yet when she reopened her eyes, she was still in the same room, with the same man.

*What the hell have they done to you, Shaun?*

Nora studied the man in front of her. She could see so much of Nate in him -- his face, the way he moved when he talked. Yet, the warmth, the humor, the easy charm, all those that had made Nathan special were missing in Shaun.

*Nate... “That man,” said Nora. “The man who looks just like your father. Who *is* he?”*

“I took the liberty to create a husband and a son for you, Mother. It's my... gift to you. A chance for you to find the family that has been taken away from you. As you can see, the boy is not quite ready--”

“You can't replace a husband like that, Shaun!” Nora snapped. “A spouse is not a... a car!”

He seemed sincerely baffled by her outrage. “It's not yet a common practice, I admit. But Dr. Binet's current social experiment seems successful. A synth has been integrated to his family as his son's surrogate mother after Mrs. Binet’s passing. However, I will give you his recall code. If he bothers you, simply recite the code and he will be switch off.”

*Just like the kid over there.* Nora looked at the motionless boy. “This is... This is wrong!” She shook her head, exasperated. “Even if that man is a synth, he’s a person.”

“Morality shouldn't be a question here,” Shaun countered. “I understand your confusion. As human as they look, the synths are machines. They are all programmed to act and think a certain way. Would you hesitate to turn off the radio?”

“Synths are not radio!” Nora argued. “They are sentient.”

“They are copies of us, Mother,” Shaun retorted. “Perfect copies of humans. But ultimately, they are machines. Programmable, walking, talking machines.”

*But what about Nick, Glory, and all the synths the Railroad has saved?* Nora, though, knew better than to utter a word about the Railroad.

“Perhaps a trip to Robotics will clear some of your misunderstandings,” said Shaun with an air of finality. “I’ll arrange for a tour. Once you see the production of the synths, you’ll understand they
are indeed machines. But, all that can wait until you get some rest.”

Shaun led her back to his office. The boy, the synth, remained motionless in the middle of the living room.

“What about the kid?” Nora had to ask.

“He will be sent to Advanced Systems for further adjustments. Finding errors and correcting them is a never-ending process in developing a new prototype.” He headed to his computer and sent a short message. “The head of Facilities, Dr. Allie Filmore, will be here to show you to your assigned quarters. I hope you like your new home.”

Home... The only home she wanted was the one in Sanctuary Hills.

“I've been a part of something amazing here,” said Shaun. “I've helped to build a life for myself and the people of the Institute... And now, after all these years, you have an opportunity to help with that. Doesn't that intrigue you? Isn't that what you want?”

“I've never wanted to change the world, Shaun,” said Nora with a tired sigh. She was emotionally exhausted to a point where everything was numbed. “What I want is my son and a normal life.”

Shaun seemed to be taken aback, although he recovered quickly. “And here I am, Mother.”

He was, indeed. Yet this wasn't what she’d expected, not in her wildest imagination, not in her worst nightmare.

“I spent decades working to reach this point,” said Shaun, looking around his office wistfully. “It's a responsibility I take very seriously. The Institute can provide a better life than anything above. You've been in the Commonwealth. You've seen what it's like. I assure you, the Institute really is humanity's best hope for the future, no matter what those above ground think of us.”

“Above ground?”

“We are underneath the Commonwealth.”

No wonder Deacon couldn't find the Institute. Again, Nora kept her mouth shut about the Railroad. If her partner ever found out she was the mother of the director...

“They're scared of you, Shaun. Scared of the Institute.”

Her son merely snorted. “People are always frightened by what they don't understand.”

That, Nora couldn't argue. “Then educate them.”

“You've seen the people above. Tell me, Mother, do you really think it’s possible?”

Both the mother and son knew the answer.

“Ultimately the Commonwealth has nothing to fear from us,” Shaun continued. “Whatever you've seen or heard, I know I can convince you of that. Just... give me time. Take a look around, see for yourself. In time, I hope you can see that, rationally, the Institute is the only thing left in the world that's worth being part of. I simply ask that you give the Institute... me... a chance. A chance to show you what I've been telling you. We really do have humanity's best interest at heart.”

Despite her uncertainty, her confusion, and her exhaustion, Nora recognized this type of speech. It was an opening statement to his case. The case of The Institute v. The Commonwealth. And she
was invited to be the judge.

In her pocket, Deacon’s note spoke to her loud and clear.

*You can’t trust everyone.*

But could she trust her own son?

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A/N: I’ve a feeling some of you wish the baby didn’t make it in the flashback. Long chapter yet, I think. Mind-melding with Nora is exhausting in this chapter. My eyes hurt from going through the chapter again and again. So please excuse the typos and errors. If you spot any, please let me know.

So far, we’ve only seen the Railroad side of the story. In part two, we will see the Institute’s side of the tale.

If you miss a certain bald-headed sunglasses-wearing pathological liar, he will show up soon. Promise.

Some little facts: Nate hated being called Nathaniel was mentioned in chapter 5. In ch 12, it’s mentioned that Synth-Shaun looks like Nate, and Nate looked like his dad. Guess Shaun has his dad’s look and his mom’s brain.

As always, thanks for reading. And to all the new readers, welcome aboard.

Title: “When Your Hair Has Turned to Silver” -- Perry Como, 1947.

Contact info: gmail – pinoko19, tumblr – pinoko-k.
It was a typical night in the laboratory.

The scientists and researchers had all gone home; half of the lights had been switched off. But the lab wasn’t empty. A metallic skeleton mopped the floor methodically from one end of the room to another. At the back of the lab, another metallic skeleton stood at its assigned post, diligently guarding the most precious specimen in the facility.

Those were their orders: To clean, to protect, to serve. Twenty-four hours a day. Seven days a week.

The synths were not alone. Inside the tiny room behind the guard, a little boy sat on the bed with his only companion -- an old teddy bear. Although the room was furnished, it was spartan, with only a bed, a desk, and a chair. And it wasn’t a typically bedroom; it was a glass cage. A cell.

The occupant didn’t mind. Or perhaps he simply didn’t know any better. Because for all his life, this was his world. This department, this lab, this room -- this was all the boy had ever known.

The little boy watched as the janitor finished mopping the floor and proceeded to its next task. It’s a routine the synth performed every night for as long as the boy remembered.

Soon, though, it would come to an end. Tomorrow, he would have to go to school. The boy didn’t understand why. All he knew was it’s something he had to do, like being poked by needles, or being scanned by weird machines.

He had to do it because he was helping many people, creating a future, whatever that meant. He had to do it because he was a good boy. And because he didn’t want to go to bed hungry, nor did he ever want to be trapped in a dark closet again.

Changes were terrifying, even more terrifying than needles. And both were inevitable.

Clutching his stuffed companion close to his chest, the boy hid underneath his blanket and shut his eyes, once again wishing everything would go away.

But they never did.

“Hurry!” A boy with brown hair led a group of children running down the hallway. “We’re late!”
Hiding next to a plant, a skinny little boy watched as the group passed by. Big brown eyes followed the kids until they disappeared around the corner. It wasn’t until the hallway was once again empty did the boy step out of his hiding place and resumed his path.

No, the boy wasn’t sneaking around. From this day on, he was granted access outside the laboratory without supervision.

Freedom.

It’s a word the five-year-old had yet to learn. His first taste of freedom? It was terrifying.

The boy wanted nothing but to run back to the lab, back to his room, to hide underneath his bed forever. Why did he have to go to class? Why did they kick him out the lab?

Still, he had to report to the classroom. After this, he could go back to the lab, back to his room, back to his whole world.

One step after another, the boy walked down the hall and found the room he was supposed to go to.

The door quietly hissed as it opened. Behind it was a whole new world.

A lively, noisy, and chaotic world.

The boy had never seen so many kids before. More than fingers on both his hands could count.

The chatters inside the classroom stopped immediately. All eyes turned to the stranger at the doorway.

Horrified beyond words, the little boy took a shaky step back, away from the inquisitive eyes, away from the unwanted attention. He wanted to run back to the prison that was the lab, back to the cell that was his room.

“You must be Shaun,” said the only adult in the room. A woman with a kind face and a gentle smile approached. “I am Mrs. Watson, your teacher. Come on in, we are expecting you.”

The boy’s feet, though, were firmly glued to the floor. The kids all seemed to be bigger than him. They were whispering to one and other, but their eyes never left his face. The boy would rather get poked by ten needles than to suffer another second of this.

Mrs. Watson held her hand in front of her, inviting him into the fold. “It’s okay, Shaun. They are your new friends.”

Friends? That was a new word.

The teacher took his hand and led the boy into the classroom, into the next stage of his life.

“Class,” said Mrs. Watson who presented the new kid as if he’s the experiment of the day. “We have a new student today. I want all of you to be nice to him and give him an extra warm welcome.”

So overwhelmed and petrified, tears almost flowed out of his big round eyes. But the boy knew better. He had learned from an early age that crying would only bring bad things to him.

No more going to bed hungry. No more being trapped inside a dark closet...
“Why don’t you introduce yourself?” said Mrs. Watson.

The boy understood the words, yet his mind was blank. The invisible spotlight on him shone brighter than any surgical lamps in the lab. His whole body burned, especially his cheeks.

“What is your name?” the teacher prompted gently.

“...S...Shaun...” the boy answered in a whisper.

“What’s that?” yelled a skinny boy with a mop of thick dark hair. “Can’t hear you!”

“Mr. Higgs,” said Mrs. Watson to her student, “settle down.”

He had to do this. He was told to come to class. He was told to listen to the teacher.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Mrs. Watson encourage kindly. “Don’t be afraid. They are all your friends.”

There it was again. That new word.

My name’s not Sweetie… I am... The little boy said out loud, “...Shaun Taylor.”

“Very good, Shaun.” The teacher gave him a comforting squeeze on his bony shoulders. Her touch was as warm as her smile. Decades later, the boy would still remember the kindness this woman had shown him. “Why don’t you take a seat next to Mr. Volkert over there?”

Too glad to be off the spotlight, Shaun kept his gaze on the floor and hurried to the empty seat next to the brown-haired boy. It was the same kid who had led the group running down the hall a moment ago.

The boy was taller than Shaun. His piercing blue eyes looked as though they could see right through the newcomer, but his grin was warm. “Hi. I’m Dean.”

Swallowing hard, Shaun only nodded.

“I’ve seen you in the lab before,” Dean continued. “My dad works there. He said you’re the most important person in the Institute.”

The skinny boy in front turned around and joined the conversation. “You’re that weird kid from the lab?”

“Shut up, Larry,” said Dean.

“ Heard they made you in the lab like they make the robots,” the boy named Larry asked Shaun with a lopsided grin, “is that true?”

Dean snorted. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Yeah? So where’s his parents?”

Parents? That’s another new word.

“Settle down, Mr. Higgs,” the teacher warned. “Or would you like another detention?”

The skinny kid whipped around so fast he almost fell out of his chair.

The class laughed. It was a weird noise Shaun had rarely heard. The sound of laughters, of random
chatters. The sound of normal children. The little boy from the lab was fascinated.

“Hey, Shaun,” Dean whispered once the teacher had turned her back on them, “wanna play after class?”

Perhaps this new world wasn’t that scary after all.

Long, sharp needle pierced through the skin on his arm. The director watched, unflinching. How many times had he been poked by needles? Hundreds? Thousands?

“Any signs of dizziness? Headaches?” asked Dr. Volkert as he slowly injected a cocktail of chemicals in his patient’s vein.

“Headaches,” Shaun reported. Lying to physicians would be akin to providing false data to scientists.

“How’s your sleep lately?”

“I’d probably sleep better once we take care of the power shortage problem we’re constantly facing.”

“I’ve been told that your lights are on until very late at night.”

“If I can’t sleep, might as well get some work done.” Shaun had to wonder who had been spying on him.

Dr. Volkert ran a quick scan on his patient with a handheld device. “Blood pressure is high. When was the last time you had a day off?”

“And do what, exactly?”

“Anything. Anything but work.”

“Time is something I can’t afford to waste, doctor. You and I both know that.”

The doctor studied the director. Shaun knew what his old friend was about to say.

“Sir, I strongly urge you to reconsider,” said Dr. Volkert. “We have treatments that can certainly prolong your life.”

“For how long? A year? Two? And what is the price I have to pay? Will I become so sick I cannot even get out of bed? Or perhaps I won’t be able keep any food down?”

“Side effect varies. But we have successful cases.”

“For isolated tumor cells. Mine have spread.” Shaun leaned back onto the chair with a tired sigh. “I’ve said it before, Dean. I’ve lived long enough.”

For a moment, Dr. Volkert didn’t answer. They both knew the truth. All the experiments, all the tests that had been done to the infant, now manifested in a form of cancer, spreading around the boy’s now aged body.
His body was tired of fighting. And, frankly, so was the old man who had dedicated his life to the Institute.

Whatever he’d to endure, it had paid off tremendously. The perfect machines had been created, based on his DNA. The third-generation synths would forever be his legacy. His children, of sort.

“But you’ve just found your mother,” said Dr. Volkert eventually. “Don’t you want to spend more time with her?”

“Perhaps…” Shaun admitted. “I’ve always wondered, what it’d feel like to have a mother. Or a father.”

“How was your meeting with her?”

“It was… interesting. It’s hard to see a woman half your age as your own mother. But here she is.”

“Are you planning to tell her the truth?”

“That I’m dying?” Shaun reached for the multi-color pills that had been waiting for him. He took a long drink of water and used the moment to consider. “I don’t know, Dean. Should I?”

“I think you should,” said Dean Volkert. “God forbid, if anything happened to Brendan, I’d hate to be the last to know.”

“But what can she possibly do? She’s not a doctor.”

“She’s your mother.”

“I’m not a child anymore.”

“To her, you’ll always be her son, no matter how old you are. Think about it, Shaun.”

A comfortable bed, a soft pillow, and a warm blanket. When Nora opened her eyes to the bright morning light, for a short drowsy moment, she thought she was back in Sanctuary Hills.

But she wasn’t. The light was not from the sun, and it was no longer 2077. She was deep underground in a facility called the Institute. The organization that had stolen her son was now led by the boy they’d kidnapped. Her nightmare had become the most bizarre dream.

And it continued in the waking hours.

Nora abandoned the warm bed and headed for a hot shower. Clean running water, soap, shampoo, fluffy towels. Crisp, filtered air, food that was neither irradiated nor two-century old. All the amenities she could ask for, they were here in the Institute. This was an underground safe haven, away from the radiation and constant dangers on the surface.

If only the people in the Commonwealth had the same access to the modern necessities.

Hot water streamed from the showerhead, pouring from her head down to her toes. Last time Nora had had a decent shower was back home. Home sweet home, with Nate and Shaun.
Now, Shaun was twice her age, and Nate was a synth -- a synthetic replication of her late husband.

Nora felt a chill inside despite the hot water on her skin.

She turned off the faucet but stayed in the shower. Part of her was afraid to step out of the room to find her husband’s doppelganger waiting for her. She’d not seen him since she’d left the medical bay. But hiding inside the bathroom was definitely not the answer. Steeling herself to face the day, Nora reached for the fluffy white towel and got dressed.

An outfit that had been prepared for her. A white fitted tunic, a tailored knee-length white coat, and a pair of light grey pants. White and grey, the color scheme of the Institute.

Nora put aside her dirty Wasteland outfit and put on the new one. A disguise to help her blend in with the rest of the white-clad people, as Deacon would probably put it. Her thoughts wandered to the man with sunglasses, the master of disguise. Her partner.

Their partnership was short-lived, but it was… special.

Her lips curled up as she recalled the nicknames Deacon had come up for her. But her smile quickly faded when a thought hit her like a bucket of ice water.

Deacon would absolutely hate her if he found out the truth about her son. So would Nick, Piper, and just about everyone in the Commonwealth.

I’m sorry, Deacon. I am...

The new clothes fitted like a glove. A new outfit, a new beginning, a new life. But was this what she wanted?

“Here are the reports from all departments,” said Dr. Filmore. “Nothing out of the ordinary. There’s a pipe leakage in BioScience, and temporary power failure in Advanced Systems yesterday.”

“Power failure?” Those were two words Shaun dreaded to hear lately.

“An intern mishandled some equipments, blowing the circuit breaker. I’m sure Dr. Li has given the poor kid an earful.” Dr. Filmore checked with her file before she continued with her report. “Also, there are several complaints from various departments that Dr. Ayo has been interrupting their work with his investigation.”

“Again?” Shaun sighed. “I’ll talk to Ayo.”

“Some good news. Energy consumption has been down by 4% since last month.”

“That’s not enough. We need to find a permanent solution soon.”

“There is one. But it means we’ll need to rely on some pre-war tech.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’ve been digging up some old data. There’s a Beryllium Agitator in the Mass Fusion building.
We can use it to boost the reactor’s power.”

“How stable is it?”

“We’ll never know until we try. If it worked, we’d get enough power to last for a long time.”

“If it didn’t, we might blow up our reactor,” Shaun pointed out. “The future of the Institute and all our lives here are at stake. I don’t want to rely on the pre-war tech.”

“I understand, sir. It’s definitely not my first choice either.”

“We’ll bring this up in our next Directorate meeting. Meanwhile, send a team to scout the building to make sure the agitator is still there.”

“I don’t think the scavengers would know what to do with a Beryllium Agitator.”

“From what I’ve heard, they’d sell it for its weight in metal. Have a team guard the location until further notice. If push comes to shove and we need to use the pre-war tech, I want it to be there.”

“Understood.” Dr. Filmore checked the time. “Sir, I believe it’s time for you to meet Mrs. Taylor.”

“It is…”

His former assistant could sense his hesitation. “It’s a perfect opportunity to spend some time with your mother. Show her what you’ve accomplished. I’m sure she’d be very proud of you.”

Would she? Yes, she would.

“Did you take away N4-73?” asked Shaun as an afterthought.

“I did, as you instructed.”

“Was it a mistake?” Shaun pondered out loud, genuinely puzzled by his mother’s reaction. “I thought she’d be happy to have her family back.”

“You can create a perfect shell,” Allie replied, “but without the memories they’ve shared, that man simply is not her husband. No one can replace your father.”

His father. A man Shaun had only known by name. “Our goal was to ease our sub-- my mother through the transition, not to fool her. Perhaps to compensate her for what she’s lost.”

“She still has you, Dr. Taylor. That’s enough.”

Just as Nora feared, waiting outside her assigned quarters was a man, but it wasn’t her husband’s doppelganger.

When the door opened, Nora found herself staring at a tall, dark shadow looming right in front of her doorstep.

Startled, Nora gasped and jumped back.

“Good morning, ma’am,” said the shadow in a flat tone.
The shadow was, in fact, a tall, well-built man dressed in all black. Black leather coat, pants, boots, gloves, and sunglasses.

A courser.

_Run!_ Nora could almost hear Deacon’s voice inside her head. But there was nowhere else to run, for she was already trapped inside the Institute.

If the courser was sorry that he’d startled her, or perhaps amused by her reaction, he certainly didn’t show.

“I have been waiting for you,” he told her, stating it as nothing but a dry, plain fact.

Although she was definitely intimidated by the man towering over her, Nora adamantly refused to let it show.

“Waiting for me?” asked Nora as calmly as she could. “Did my son send you?”

Her not-so subtle reminder of her relationship with the director had no effect on the courser. The man remained emotionless as he replied, “No. Doctor Ayo wants to see you. Please come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the SRB.”

“SRB?”

“The Synth Retention Bureau.”

_Coursers, Retention._ Nora had an inkling of what that department was. “...So, what do you do?”

“Recovery and rehabilitation of escaped synths.”

“Rehabilitation?”

Instead of answering, the courser waved a polite arm down the hallway. “This way, ma’am.”

_If they wanted to kill you, you’d be dead by now._

Swallowing her fear, Nora followed the man in black.

Without a weapon or a proper hand-to-hand combat training to defend herself, Nora held onto one thing she could always rely on: Her mind. A clear, rational mind. Her acute observation skill was her weapon, her skepticism her armor.

And, as always, information was her ammunition.

Right now, her instincts told her to gather information. Any information.

“...What’s your name?” asked Nora.

“Unit designation X6-88,” he answered without looking at her. “We have met, ma’am.”

“We have?”

“I was assigned to protect you.”
If he’s the courser that had been following her… “Then Kellogg… It was you?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you kill him?”

It was then he turned and looked at Nora. “To protect the Institute, of course.”

“Mrs. Taylor.” A skinny man with sharp features approached. “Looks like X6-88 has found you. I’m Dr. Justin Ayo. Acting director of SRB. I believe this is yours.” He handed her a leather bag. “We… found it.”

“You found it?” It was one of the most blatant lies she’d heard, and she’d heard many.

Her bag had been thoroughly searched and scanned, no doubt. Everything was there -- sunglasses, scarf, a few stimpaks, snacks that Piper had put in, and the book from Deacon. Most important of all, the holotape from Nate. Although one particular thing was missing.

“Where’s my gun?” Nora asked.

“You don’t need that anymore, Mrs. Taylor,” said Dr. Ayo. “Our weapons are far superior than the pre-war junks. Besides, why even lift a finger when you’re protected by the best weapon ever created?” The man motioned at the courser behind her.

“That’s a person,” Nora pointed out, “not a weapon.”

For a brief second, Dr. Ayo merely blinked at her. He then suddenly laughed. “I forgot. You’re new here.”

Nora suppressed the anger budding within. “I was told you wanted to see me,” she said with an air of annoyance. “If there’s nothing else…”

“Yes. My… apologies,” said Dr. Ayo in a tone that’s anything but sincere. “If you have a moment, would you follow me to my office? I have a few ongoing investigations that could use your assistance.”

“I don’t think I can help you. Like you said, I’m new here.”

“That’s precisely why you can help,” said the head of SRB. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Railroad…”

Nora’s heart almost skipped a beat. Outwardly, though, her face was as still as a mask. “Are you referring to the underground movement that took place centuries ago?”

“More recent one. Within the past two decades.”

“I’ve heard rumors when I was in the Commonwealth.”

“Only rumors? Come on, Mrs. Taylor, I believe we found you outside their previous headquarters.”

With some well-practiced effort, Nora’s poker face remained intact. “Was that their headquarters? What happened there? I saw bodies lying around.”

“We chased them off and killed them like the annoying rats that they are.”

Ayo was baiting her to slip and reveal the truth. A common tactic used by investigators and
lawyers. Child’s play.

“That would explain the synths,” said Nora indifferently despite her thumping heart. “So they’re all dead. There shouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

“Not quite.” Ayo’s sharp eyes look straight into Nora’s. “What were you doing in their headquarters, Mrs. Taylor?”

“I was there for the hazmat suits.” Nora deliberately put on an indignant front, like an innocent victim that’d been accused of a crime she’d not committed. “In case you didn’t know, resources are scarce. Fallon’s isn’t exactly open for business. Local merchants didn’t carry the items I needed. So… I scavenged. I’m not proud, but I had to do what’s necessary to survive and find my son.”

“And the man you were with?”

Careful now, Bennett…

Steadily, Nora held the scrutinizing gaze of her interrogator. “A man I hired to help me look for my son. Your director.” Her subtle emphasis on the last four words had reached its desired effect as Ayo narrowed his eyes. “And he’s not the only mercenary under my employment. But you already knew, didn’t you? At Fort Hagen, your courser was there. Didn’t he tell you?”

When she spotted a clench of his jaw, Nora knew she had an upper hand.

“Two men, one discarded older model synth, a dog, and a robot,” X6-88 confirmed. “All stated in my report.”

Carefully masking a smirk, Nora continued, “The synth detective helped me find two mercenaries. The robot is my Mr. Handy. He used to look after Shaun when my son was a baby. And the dog? He’s a stray. Anymore questions?”

That was 90% of the truth. Hidden somewhere within the truth was a lie Nora vowed to protect. A lie about a liar. Her ‘client’, her partner, her friend...

Her story was airtight, but Nora knew a man like Ayo wouldn’t give up on a lead so easily.

Just when she was ready for round two, from the corner of her eye, Nora spotted a silver-haired man in white coat approaching. She hid a sigh of relief.

“Dr. Ayo?” The disapproval on Shaun’s face was unmistakable. “What are you doing here?”

“Returning Mrs. Taylor’s belonging, sir,” said Justin Ayo. “Thank you for your cooperation, ma’am.”

“I hope he’s not bothering you,” said Shaun after Ayo and the courser left.

“Felt like I was being interrogated.”

“Dr. Ayo could be... callous, but he’s an effective leader for the SRB. The SRB division is a necessity, you understand. We have a minor issue with lost properties.”

Nora frowned at the terms. “You mean runaway synths.”

Shaun nodded. “No doubt you’ve heard of some rumors while you were above ground. It’s true. Someone has been stealing our synths, and we’ve been looking into the leaks.”
Stealing? That’s not what she’d heard on the surface. “...Maybe the synths want to leave.”

Her son looked at her, as bluffed as though she was speaking another language. “Why would anyone, synths or humans, want to leave the Institute and suffer in the Wasteland above? Everyone knows being exiled to the surface is the worst punishment they could ever received.”

“People make choices, Shaun,” Nora explained patiently. “It might not be something you want or agree with, but they are free to choose.”

“For human, I agree. But synths? No.”

“Why not? If they can act and think…”

“They are machines, Mother. They’re programmed to mimic humans, nothing more. You will understand once you see how they’re made. Come, we have an appointment with Robotics.”

“Ain’t got nothin’ for you, man,” said Tinker Tom. “MILA’s not pickin’ up shit. It’s all quiet out there. Too quiet. It’s like the Institute’s just gone poof.”

“Oh they are out there,” said Deacon, scanning at the data on the computer screen, “And they have my partner.”

“Partner, huh? When’s the last time you had a partner?”

*Never.*

“Glory said she’s pretty hot,” Tinker Tom continued as he typed away on the keyboard.

“Very,” Deacon admitted.

She was everything that’s good about the pre-war world, and he was everything that’s fucked up about this shitty post-war hellhole.

“You know what my mama used to tell me about the hot ones?” said Tinker Tom, wagging one finger. “Watch out, boy, they’re trouble.”

“I was the one who got her into trouble.”

To that, the skinny man only grinned at Deacon. “If you’re tryin’ to make me say you’re hot, ain’t gonna happen, man. You’re not my type.”

Deacon gave him a smirk for his effort. The smile came too easily but it never reached his eyes. Not that anyone could tell, his eyes were concealed behind his sunglasses anyway.

Tom tapped on a spare MILA as he checked the map on the board. “It’d be sweet if we could put one of these babies on top of the Mass Fusion building. Think about all the data we could get. Too bad that place is crawling with Gunners though. ...Maybe if we could set one up here…” He pointed at the Boston Bugle building.

“That would work,” Deacon agreed.
“I'll get my boys to do it when they're back.”

“When are they coming back?”

Tinker Tom shrugged. “The haul you've found back at Switchboard? It's gonna take them a few runs to clear that place.”

Time was something Deacon didn’t have. “Give me the MILA.”

“You sure? I need it at the top of the building to work properly.”

Height. His nemesis. Only a few knew about it, and Tinker Tom was one of them.

“Top of the building it is,” said Deacon, grabbing the device with determination.

Just put this damn thing at the edge of the rooftop. That’s it. He could do this. He could pretend the building was only two stories high and overcome the queasiness. For his partner, he had to.

“Never seen you like this, Deeks.”

“Keep an eye out, Tom.” Deacon spotted a blue-clad young man coming back to the HQ. “Drummer. What’ve you got?”

“Old Man Stockton quests help to move some packages,” said Drummer Boy.

“Bring ‘em here.”

“But Dez said...”

“Did I tell you I used to be the fastest runner the Railroad had ever seen?” Deacon snatched the files from the kid’s hands. “I’ll handle it.”

If there’s the slightest chance he’d get some intel from the latest runaways, Deacon would personally escort them to the Capital Wasteland if he had to. Any information, no matter how insignificant, could be the key to find the Institute, to find the missing pre-war relic. His partner, his... friend.

*Hang in there.*

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A/N: A slight delay because of writer’s block. Sorry about that.

A giant thanks to tomerbi-no, for all the artworks, all the conversations. Without any of that, I’d probably still facing the wall called writer’s block. The latest picture of Nick and Nora dancing? I will put it in this story somewhere, somehow. (Unless you prefer to see Nora dancing with Deacon instead.) Thank you, thank you, thank you!

I’ve said it to some of you before, and I’ll say it again here. There’s no villain or hero in this story. Just people who are the products of their circumstances. Doesn’t mean what they do is right, though. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

As always, thanks for reading. And to those who take the time to drop me a note, thank you, glad
you like the story.

Title: “Stranger in Paradise” - Tony Bennett, 1953.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
Under the coffered ceiling of this two-century old building, people gathered. Yet, except for occasional quiet footsteps and random muffled coughs, there was not a single sound. For everyone had their nose in their book of choice. Some readers occupied a table like a sole survivor on an island, some shared with others.

Among the sea of tables, a young woman sat. Stacks of books piled up like a wall built to isolate her from the rest of the library. Within her fortress, the young woman was preparing for war, and the war was called bar exam.

Words in front of her started to blur; her bottom ached from sitting on the wooden chair for hours. Nora blinked hard to sharpen her focus. As tired as she was, sleep could wait. The exam was around the corner, it was do or die.

All too soon, though, the ceiling lights above blinked twice, signalling the end of the day at the library. Nora stretched and freed her hair from the makeshift bun that was held together by a pencil.

A sudden soft snore next to her brought a smile to her face. She was not alone.

“Nate,” Nora whispered in a hushed tone that was acceptable within this historical sanctuary.

Fallen asleep on the table with a pile of books as his pillow, the young man didn’t even stir.

“Nate,” Nora tried again, tapping his muscular arm this time. “Nathan, wake up.”

All she could get out from him was a mumble.

A sudden idea crossed her mind. Nora leaned closer and whispered, “Ten-hut!”

Nate Taylor sprung up to his feet and reflexively snapped a salute. It took him a few long seconds to realize he was not in the bootcamp, and his former drill sergeant was nowhere in sight.

“At ease, Taylor,” said Nora in the most manly voice she could muster before she broke into a quiet fit of laughter.

“Very funny.” The soldier slumped back into the chair and yawned. “I swear, that asshole Robinson will forever haunt me in my nightmares.”

“Aw…” She jokingly pinched his cheek. “How could your drill sergeant pick on a cutie like you?”

Nate was fast. Before she could blink, his face was already right in front of hers. “Cute, huh? I prefer the word ‘handsome’ though.”
Grinning, she gave him a peck on the tip of his nose. “Come on, cutie, it’s closing time.”

“Already? This is the best place to sleep…” The man yawned again and stretched his long limbs.

“When are you leaving?” Nora asked as she packed her notes and files.

“Have to be at the fort by 0800. Better be there ten minutes early. Our CO is an ass.”

“You should go back home early. You have a long day tomorrow.”

“But I won’t be able to see you for a month.”

“I’ll be here when you get back. By then, the bar exam will be over.”

“Relax. You’ll pass, I’m sure.”

“I’m 99% sure I will, but that 1%…”

There was a sudden glint in his warm brown eyes. “Wanna bet? I bet you’ll pass. If I win…”

“If you win?”

“We’ll get married.”

Nora almost laughed. “Is this a proposal, Mr. Taylor?”

Nate merely shrugged. “What do you say?”

“And if I fail the exam and you lose?” Nora asked, hiding a smile.

“You won’t,” he told her, staring into her eyes. “I have faith in you.”

Somehow, his words alone was enough to kick away that pesky 1% lingering doubt.

“Deal,” said Nora.

Absolutely beaming, Nate sealed the agreement with a kiss on her lips. A tender peck turned into a lingering kiss, and then another one. Until Nora heard someone coughing loudly in the background.

Nora pulled away, breathless. “We should go.”

“Let’s go grab a bite. I’ve to survive on food in mess hall, or worse -- military rations.”

“Hm… How about pizza?” Nora suggested. “Double pepperoni.”

“My favorite.”

“And ice cold Nuka-Cola. Straight from the bottle.”

He gave her a smile that melted her heart. “You know me too well, Miss Bennett.”

Taking her hand in his, the soldier and the future lawyer exited the library. His grip firm and warm, and always gentle.

“I can see it now,” said Mr. Taylor to the future Mrs. Taylor. “You, me, a house with white picket fence. Two kids and a dog.”
“Two?”

“Yup. A boy and a girl. You’ll teach them how to play piano, and I’ll teach them how to ride a bike.”

The future was absolutely perfect. “One step at a time, hon,” said Nora, her smile couldn’t be any sweeter. “One step at a time.”

“Father.”

“Good day to you, Father.”

“It is so good to see you again, Father.”

Shaun nodded politely to each one of them.

Father. He hated that title. But he was proud of his contribution to the perfect machines they had created. The third-generation synths. It was no doubt a pinnacle of scientific achievements. Self-thinking, self-maintained machines that could be trained and molded to whatever tasks they were assigned to. Like humans, only that they’re immune to disease and aging.

If only he had the same advantages.

The usual dose of medications had made him nauseating this morning, perhaps it was due to lack of sleep. Or perhaps it was partly due to the unusual excitement he was experiencing. Like a child showing his secret project to his mother.

Shaun felt ridiculous for even considering the latter possibility. Yet, he couldn’t deny the unsettling feeling in his stomach.

“They like you, Shaun,” said his mother after they were left alone.

Shaun carefully kept a perfectly stoic face as they continued their way to Robotics. “I worked hard to achieve this position. In my early years, my contribution to the third-generation synthetic human project was more… directly.”

“You mentioned they took your DNA,” said his mother with a slight frown. “And all those lab reports… What did they do to you, son?”

Son. He definitely like the sound of that more than ‘Father’. “I was kept in the lab until I was five.”

“What?” The knot between his mother’s brows tightened.

“I didn’t understand back then. But they did it to keep me safe. You see, as isolated as we are, part of the radiation and contamination from aboveground still seep through the earth and into our air and water. Of course, our filtration systems have been upgraded many times since. Sixty years ago, the Institute wasn’t a safe place to keep an uncontaminated subject. With the resources and technologies they had, they were only able to keep a small area completely free of radiation. And there I was, safe from harm until the project was complete and my DNA was no longer needed.”

Surprisingly, that was not the answer his mother liked to hear. “That’s inhumane!”
Was it? For the first time, Shaun considered that opinion. “They did what was necessary to protect the source of DNA”

“You’re not just a source of DNA, Shaun. You’re a human!”

Somehow, her words, her genuine concern made his chest tighten. No, it must be the medications.

“I wasn’t mistreated, Mother,” Shaun insisted, sparing his mother the details that would no doubt upset her further. “It was simply impossible to build a filtration systems large enough to handle the entire facility. They were constrained by a constant shortage of resources and power. It’s a problem we are still facing.”

He stopped in front of a tall entrance to the Robotics department, silently grateful that they’d arrived before the topic circled back to his well-being.

“This is where the synths are created. Come, Dr. Loken is waiting for us.”

After going through two decontamination chambers, Nora stepped through another doorway and into an enormous laboratory. The circular room was filled with machines and equipment she couldn’t even make heads or tails of. Right in the middle of the lab was a round pool of strange liquid or some sort.

One of the scientists nearby greeted their director as soon as they arrived. On their way further into the lab, Nora overheard the conversation of two men by one of the many consoles.

“It was probably just a glitch in the nervous system,” said the taller of the two scientists. “The fine motor control software could use an update.”

“If it were just a limb twitching, perhaps,” said the shorter, skinnier man, “but her eyes were moving as well. Involuntary twitching and rapid eye movements while sleeping can only mean one thing, Max. You just don’t want to admit to yourself what it is.”

“If you’re about to launch into one of your impassioned speeches about artificial sentience and machines with souls, don’t bother, Alan. I’ve heard enough of them by now. Hell, I could write them down from memory.”

“But we can’t just ignore the question. If a synth can dream, why can’t it have a soul?” asked the man named Alan.

That had caught Nora’s full attention.

“And if a synth has a soul,” the shorter scientist continued, “then it is a living person by every standard we can measure. Of course, it’s far more comfortable to think of them as machines, so we can do what we want with them.”

The taller scientist seemed alarmed by the arrival of their director. “Sir! I’ve been expecting you.”

Nora was certain Shaun had heard the debate, yet his face was an unmoving mask.

“This is Dr. Max Loken.” Shaun waved at the taller of the two men, then motioned at the other one. “And Dr. Alan Binet.”
“It’s great you’re finally with us, Mrs. Taylor,” said Dr. Binet, shaking her hand. “I’d just like to apologize for any… trouble… our synths may have caused for you on your way here. They, of course, couldn’t be told of your identity, and they have very specific protocols for protecting themselves and the Institute interests… Most of which I designed myself. Not to make problems for you, though.”

The image of a humanoid robot crawling on the ground after its leg had been blown off was not something Nora could forget anytime soon. Nor could she forget the man who had kept her safe from the synth troopers. Silently, she wondered what Deacon was doing. If only she could find a way to send him a message...

“Proceed, Dr. Binet,” said Dr. Loken who then turned to Shaun. “This way, sir. To observation deck.”

Nora followed them to a room with a clear view of the laboratory.

“You’ve arrived at a momentous time, Mrs. Taylor,” said Dr. Loken. “Our third generation synths are a true breakthrough, the culmination of centuries of research. It’s no exaggeration to that that they’re superior in almost every way to human beings.”

“Superior?”

“The list of improvements is exhaustive. I can talk for an hour and still not cover all of it. Imagine what you could accomplish if you could live without fear of hunger or disease. Imagine what you could create if you could use every waking moment of your life as you saw fit, with no need of sleep?”

Nora had to raise her eyebrows at that.

Dr. Loken nodded proudly. “Like I said, a momentous time.”

“But they do sleep, don’t they?” asked Nora. “I’ve overheard Dr. Binet mentioned about rapid eye movement.”

The man’s smile was quickly wiped away by a frown. “Don’t listen to him. Alan is a bit of a philosopher. We’re men of science. We deal with facts. The fact is that glitches in software happen. Synths are machines, ma’am. And machines don’t dream.”

*They don’t?*

On the floor of the lab, scientists in environmental suits entered and headed to their respective stations.

“All systems checked,” the voice of Dr. Binet announced through the speakers. “We are ready to proceed.”

Right in the center of the room above the strange pool of liquid, a huge mechanical arm descended from the ceiling. The arm splitted in two, then rotated and moved to one of the stations, where a giant ring of some sort was erected.

The strange-looking structure was almost twice the height of the scientist nearby. Next to it was sealed container. The scientist at the workstation remotely unsealed the container, within was something white.

“What’s that?” Nora stepped closer to the window to take a better look.
“Bones,” Shaun replied.

Indeed, within the container was a pile of bones, lining up neatly, like pieces of a puzzle waiting to be assembled.

The mechanical arms began to pick up the bones from a storage box, then placed each piece on the invisible surface inside the giant standing ring. The arms moved so fast yet with such precision, it strangely reminded Nora of the embroidery her grandmother used to do. The circular frame was the embroidery hoop, the bones were the treads.

Piece by piece, a skeleton began to form.

“The bones,” Nora asked, “are they real?”

“As ‘real’ as the ones we have,” said Dr. Loken. “They are made from collagen, calcium phosphate and calcium carbonate.”

When the skeleton was completed, the circular template was then transferred to the next station, where another set of mechanical arms scanned the skeleton. Then, from bottom up, the arms began to weave muscles onto the skeleton.

“Here we create organ systems,” Dr. Loken explained. “Muscular, cardiovascular, nervous, digestive, respiratory. This step takes time because of the complexity of the human body.”

Soon enough, on the template was no longer a skeleton, but a skinless man. Light pink muscles stretched onto the bones.

“My god…”

“Isn’t it fascinating?” said Dr. Loken. “The human body is the perfect machine. With science, we improve perfection.”

The template was once again transferred to the next station. Sharp long needles probed into the back of the skinless body. Nora saw red liquid inside the tubes that connected to the needles.

“Is that blood?” Nora asked.

“Yes,” Dr. Loken replied. “This is where we ‘boot up’ the synth. Once the blood is in the system, the machine will send several doses of electric current to the heart.”

“Like defibrillation?”

“Exactly.”

As the pale muscles started to turn red, several giant needles from the mechanical arms positioned themselves over the chest and sent a measured dosage of electricity. The body twitched as it was shocked. Again, and again, until the chest of the skinless man started to rise.

The mechanical arms moved the template once again. This time, it was submerged into a pool of deep orange colored liquid.

“This is the final step,” said Dr. Loken. “Where the skin, nails, hair, everything on the exterior is created.”

For the longest time, there was not a movement. It was as though the skinless man had sunk to the bottom of the pool and disappeared. Then, from the depth of the murky pool of liquid, a figure
emerged. A bald, naked man slowly rose to his full height and stepped out of the pool.

A grown man was born right in front of her eyes. Nora had to dig her nails onto her palm to make sure she wasn’t dreaming.

“Amazing,” Nora mumbled to herself.

“Isn’t it?” The head scientist nodded proudly. “It took decades to perfect the process. And now, here we are. We can create anyone we want.”

Like Nate...

The newborn man’s face was expressionless as he headed to the door guarded by a Gen 2 synth.

“What happens next?” asked Nora.

“Now that the hardware is done,” said Dr. Loken, “it’s off to software installation. It will be programmed with various abilities to perform its assigned tasks.”

‘It’, Nora noticed.

“Shaun?” Nora finally asked the question that had been bothering her, “What happened to the man who looks like your father?”

“You seemed to be bothered by him, so I have him deactivated.”

“What? You can’t turn off a person like that.”

“He’s a machine, Mother. He was made in this lab not too long ago. Dr. Binet was the head of that special project.”

“Project…” That word left a weird taste in Nora’s mouth.

“Sir, there are a few schematics I want to show you,” said Dr. Loken to Shaun when they arrived at the main floor. “Dr. Binet, would you show Mrs. Taylor around our department?”

“It would be my pleasure,” said the skinny scientist who had taken off the environmental suit. “I hope you enjoyed the show.”

“Feels like I’m in one of those science fiction novels I used to read when I was a kid.”

“It’s science, but no longer fiction,” said the man with a gentle smile. “It must be overwhelming for you.”

That’s an understatement. “Never thought my son would be older than me,” Nora admitted, “but I’m glad I’ve found him.”

“Our director is not known to speak his mind, but I’ve known him for decades. It means a great deal to Shaun now that you are here,” said Dr. Binet sincerely. “If you require anything, especially as it pertains to synths, please let me know.”

“Shaun told me you made the synth that looks like my husband.”

“Ah yes. He was built after Mr. Taylor, down to the smallest details. However, we lacked the necessary data to program the him properly.”
Half afraid, half fascinated, Nora asked, “...What do you mean?”

“His memories and personality. Things that made your husband the man he was. We did the best with what bits and pieces we have in the files. As for the rest, we filled in the blanks. For example, where he first met you, what type of food he liked. We knew he was a soldier, so we assumed he had a healthy appetite. And, according to our data, one of the most popular dishes among male two centuries ago was steak. So, we programmed the synth such that he likes steaks and beer.”

*Nate liked Nuka-Cola.*

“Is there any reason why you are not satisfied with the synth?” asked Dr. Binet in earnest. “Perhaps if we reprogram him with proper information you provide…”

“He is not my husband.”

“Ah...Yes, I see. Although it’s been sixty years in reality, to you it’s been only weeks.”

Sixty years... Nate had been dead for sixty years.

The kind man nodded in understanding. “It took me more than a year to overcome my wife’s death. Now, I’m grateful for Eve.”

“Your new wife?”

The smile on the man’s face was strangely bashful. “Yes. She’s a synth. The first synth that has successfully integrated into our social setting. It’s an experiment, but so far it’s a success.”

A synth. A spouse. An experiment. All those words were tossed around and mixed in a conversation without anyone batting an eye. Was this how the Institute operated? That almost everything was an experiment?

A chill crept up Nora’s spine.

“...So that’s why Shaun created a synth version of his father?”

“Shaun has always been quiet and kept to himself,” said Dr. Binet. “He might not show it, Mrs. Taylor, but Shaun truly cares about you and your well-being. He wants you to feel welcome and comfortable in your new home. N4-73 was a project he’s directly involved with. So was S9-23. Being a prototype, S9-23 was developed by Dr. Li at Advanced Systems. Here at Robotics, we handled Project N4-73.”

Synthetic versions of her husband and her son, her make-believe family. Their real ‘names’ were serial numbers. Nora couldn’t help but grimace at that thought.

“What happened to N4-73?” Nora asked.

“He’s been returned to our lab. Currently deactivated. Would you like to see him?”

Curiosity kills the cat. Nora was about to shake her head when she heard her own voice replying, “Yes.”

She followed the man through a hallway and entered one of the smaller labs. The room was cluttered with equipments she had never seen before. At one corner, a man stood with his head hanging down slightly. His eyes were shut, and he made no move at the footsteps of his visitors. It was as though he’d fallen asleep on his feet.
Swallowing hard, Nora approached the synth to take a good look at the man’s face. The scar on the side of his face was there, and so were the light freckles that sprinkled across his cheekbones. This man looked exactly like Nathaniel Taylor.

Except he was not her Nate.

Perhaps if she could block the traumatic memories of her husband being shot, if she ignored the inconsistency of his likes and dislikes, perhaps if she tried hard enough, she could pretend that this was Nate.

But she could never forget the murder she’d witnessed in the vault. Nathan was dead, and this was just his copy.

A perfect copy. A synth.

No amount of suspension of disbelief could cover up the cognitive dissonance.

“What is going to happen to him now?”

“For now, we’ll keep him here in the lab. If you wish to give him another chance, I’d be more than happy to activate and reprogram him to your satisfaction.”

Nora saw her hand reached out to touch the cheek of the synth, feeling the stubble on his jaw, tracing the lips she’d kissed many times.

_This isn’t Nate_, her rational mind yelled at her again and again. He was not her Nate.

This was simply too much. Nora turned around and exited the lab.

“Did it hurt him when he was… shut down?” she asked after a brief moment of silence to collect her thoughts.

Dr. Binet seemed surprised by the question. “No, I don’t believe so.”

“That’s good,” Nora breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s good to know you care about the synth’s well-being. Many of us here think they are just machines. They do feel pain, and perhaps much more.”

“I overheard your conversation with Dr. Loken. About synths having souls.”

The man’s pale blue eyes lit up. “Ah, yes.”

“Is it true? That they can dream?”

“Evidence seems to suggest that way.” Dr. Loken took a cautious glance around. “But it’s not a popular subject among some of my colleagues. Perhaps we could discuss it further later, if you are interested, that is.”

“Of course.”

“Splendid! You should stop by for dinner sometime. Eve is an excellent cook. And I’m sure my son Liam would love to meet you. He’s always curious about the world above.”
He knew every nook and cranny of the city. Every hidden spot, every short cut. He had to. The safety of the runaways were in his hands, as well as their future. Deacon’s record had been spotless; he’d never lost a package. Until Nora…

And she wasn’t even his delivery mission. She was his partner.

“Stay close,” Deacon told the runaway, “we’re almost there.”

Deacon led the synth down the garbage-filled alley between two tall buildings, and navigated the maze of the back streets with darkness as their shrouds. Behind the two men, Dogmeat brought up the rear and guarded the weaponless runaway.

“Can you really see in the dark?” A soft voice rang inside his head as he quickly yet quietly headed down the narrow path.

Nora had once asked the question many didn’t bother to ask. The curious lawyer, the human lie detector. As a compulsive liar, she should be the bane of his existence. But she wasn’t. If anything, she was a breath of fresh air. Finally, someone who could pick apart his lies, someone who could smell the truth hidden among a pile of bullshits. Someone special from a bygone era.

And this someone had been taken away from him, right under his nose.

“See that building across the street?” said Deacon to the synth. “That’s where we’re heading. Come on.”

He peeked out of the alley, and scanned up and down the street. It was all quiet, except for the distant gunfire. Probably some Gunners killing some raiders. Deacon dashed across the exposed street and quickly ducked into the building entrance.

“You’re late,” said a leather-armor clad man guarding the lobby.

“Blame Old Man Stockton,” said Deacon.

The agent took a curious look at Dogmeat. “We recruiting dogs now?”

“My friend here can smell an ambush a few blocks away.” Deacon then turned to the synth and introduced, “That’s High Rise. He’ll take care of you.”

High Rise headed to the terminal next to the elevator. With a few keystrokes, the elevator door opened. “Hurry, get in.”

Deacon didn’t dare to release a sigh of relief until the door was close.

“You’re safe here,” Deacon told the synth as the elevator brought them to the upper level of the building. “Welcome to the rest of your new life.”

“T...Thank you,” said the runaway, visibly shaking due to adrenaline and fear.

“No need to thank me. I need information.”

“Come on, Deacon,” High Rise interjected with a frown, “give the man a day or two to catch his breath.”

“I don’t have time.” Deacon ignored the pointed look from his fellow agent and asked the synth,
“The Institute recently kidnapped someone. A woman, this tall, long dark hair. Have you seen her?”

The synth shook his head. “No… I was confined to my assigned work area. I didn’t see any stranger before I left.”

The answer wasn’t a surprise, yet Deacon couldn’t help but feel disappointed.

“Do you remember how you got out?” It’s a question he’d asked every single runaway. And the answer was always negative.

Again, the synth replied with a shake of his head. “No. No, I don’t. Everything was… hazy. I remember we walked for a long time… It was dark and… And…”

The fail safe device had somehow turned on and deleted part of every escape synth’s memory. Nick Valentine and Glory had confirmed it.

The synth held his head in distress. “I’m sorry, I… I can’t remember.”

“That’s okay. Take it easy,” said High Rise, shooting a glare at Deacon behind the runaway’s back.

The leather-armor clad agent escorted the synth out of the elevator and into the waiting hands of other agents in Ticonderoga.

His job was over, yet there was no satisfaction nor relief. The knot inside his gut only tightened. This lead, perhaps first of many, was a dead end.

“Thanks, man,” said High Rise as he grabbed a Nuka-Cola in the fridge and tossed it to Deacon. “So who’s been kidnapped?”

“My partner.” The classic drink tasted extra flat today.

“Partner? I thought you liked to fly solo.”

“Like I said, a woman, this tall, long dark hair.” He paused, then added, “Very pretty.”

“Ah…”

Deacon ignored that reaction and headed back to the elevator with his four-legged friend in tow. “Keep an eye out for me.”

“You not staying? We have stew today.”

“Can’t. Got another job. If you have new packages, let me know asap. I want to talk to every single one of them.”

High Rise studied the man in sunglasses. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

A smirk appeared automatically on his face as Deacon gave his fellow agent a casual wave and pressed the button on the elevator panel. As soon as the door closed, Deacon’s smile disappeared.

Right at his heels, Dogmeat looked up at him with a tiny whine.

“We’ll find her, buddy,” Deacon told his four-legged partner quietly. “We’ll find her wherever she is…”
A/N: Sorry about the delay. I was sick for a while. But, I wasn’t completely unproductive. Wrote two random crazy stories and posted them in “Campfire Tales from the Commonwealth,” and started a new short story based on a gorgeous drawing of Nick and Nora dancing, called “Shall We Dance?”. Check them out if you like.

At this stage of the story, it’s all about planting seeds and setting a stage for the finale of part two. It might be slow comparing to the previous chapters, but please bear with me.

As always, thanks for reading.

Title: “I’m Making Believe” - Ella Fitzgerald and The Ink Spots, 1944.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
Goodnight Wherever You Are

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Nineteen: Goodnight Wherever You Are

The elevator rattled as it rose. Like an angry beast that had swallowed two pitiful creatures, it now struggled with indigestion and fully regretted its poor choice in life.

Deacon pressed his back onto the wall of the metal cage. It was a useless gesture, not that it’d save him from the inevitable doom should the century-old cables decided to cash in their retirements and snap. Smashing like a pancake inside a free-falling elevator was one of his top ten least favorite ways to die. He would so prefer to die in his sleep, or perhaps peacefully in the arms of the woman he loved.

Love. A four-letter word he was allergic to. Sure, he could toss it around with his lies and not bat an eye. But did he truly mean it? Not for a long, long time.

Last time he’d loved someone, it’d ended horribly. If Deacon was a superstitious man, he would definitely think he was cursed. Whoever came remotely close to him would end up in a horrible fate.

Like his late wife. Like his partner.

Well, not quite, Deacon forcefully reminded himself. He couldn’t save Barbara, but he could still save Nora.

If she’s still alive.

A violent shake from the elevator promptly shut the voice of doubt inside his head. The endless torturing rise to hell finally came to a jerky stop. Deacon couldn’t jump out of the rattling cage of doom fast enough. Right at his heels, his new four-legged furry partner followed.

“One hell of a ride, huh?” said Deacon. “That was fun. We should totally take the stairs later.”

Dogmeat cocked his head and scratched the back of his ear with his hind leg.

“So, this was where the actions took place.” Deacon glanced around the long abandoned office of the Boston Bugle. “The pen is mightier than the sword, they used to say. Guess it’s not mighty enough to stop the Big One.”

Majority of the floor had collapsed, leaving a giant sinkhole in the middle of the office. Deacon took a curious peek down at the level below. All was quiet. No raiders, no feral ghouls. Perhaps this would be a decent choice for a safe house if they cleaned this place up. And if they fixed that goddamned elevator.

Dogmeat raised his head and sniffed the air.
“What? You pick up something?” When his furry partner responded with a sneeze, Deacon knew it was a false alarm. “Nevermind. Come on. Watch your step, buddy.”

Deacon took the lead and carefully stepped over the debris. The ancient floorboard creaked under his weight, so much so Deacon had to wonder if the remaining of the floor would collapse if he took another step. Yet there was no turning back. He had to put the MILA out there, he had to find his partner.

“Can you believe they used to sit here and write stories all day?” Deacon continued to talk to his quiet companion. Not that he expected a reply from that dog. It was for his own sake to shake off the unsettling nerves. “Someone should pay me to do that job. The stories I could come up with…”

He reached the exit to the rooftop and pushed it open with some effort. It was a windy November night in the Commonwealth. The wind was definitely stronger now that he was standing on the top of one of the tallest buildings around.

Some men liked to be on the top of the world. Deacon? Not so much. Three-story high was a sweetspot, where you’d get a clear view of the street, perfect for sniping.

“Hey, pal, you wanna put the MILA over there?”

Quite happily, Dogmeat barked. Much shorter and with four legs firmly on the ground, the dog didn’t seem to be affected by the gusty currents.

“Don’t bite on it, though,” Deacon instructed. “This thing’s not dog-proof. Just hold it with your front paws and walk over there with your hind legs. Simple, right?”

With a whine of confusion, Dogmeat tilted his head and looked at the man. Deacon could almost see the question mark floating on top of the dog’s head.


Deacon took a step, and another, and another. Very cautiously, he approached the edge of the building.

Don’t look down. Don’t look down. Don’t loo--

The streets below had been swallowed by darkness. But the glimpses of light here and there that vaguely outline the neighborhood. Morbidly curious, Deacon dared himself to catch another quick glance into the void.

And if thou gaze long into an abyss...

The darkness below looked strangely like the sky above, that those random sparkles of light from streetlights or campfires were the stars. It was oddly serene.

How far away from the ground was he? How long would it take for his body to smash onto the pavement below? Would he faint in the air and not feel a thing when he smash to his death? Or would he feel every single piece of his bones shatter before he took his last breath?

As if to answer all his questions, the stars on the ground beckoned and started to float closer to him. ...He was falling!

Son of a bitch!
Gasping, Deacon staggered back to a safe distance from the edge. On this chilly November night, the ever cool and calm man was sweating like it was a hot July summer afternoon.

*Put this damn thing down and get it over with.*

“Come on, it’s not that hard,” Deacon heard a gentle voice in the wind. Or he thought he did.

“Why don’t you try it, Frozen Banana?” he mumbled a reply to the voice that was never there.

He remembered the look Nora had given him over this impromptu nickname, and the subsequent laugh he’d gotten out of her with a list of prettier titles. The smile on that face, it could light up the darkest tunnel in a dungeon. And that day, it certainly had.

But it was gone because of him.

The gut-wrenching guilt drowned his fear of height. One solid step after another, Deacon approached the edge of the rooftop and secured the MILA at the spot Tinker Tom had specified.

Device activated. Soon, Tom would receive data from it. Sifting through data was like dumpster diving for goodies. It required a lot of time and patience. Lately, Deacon had neither. Thank god for Tinker Tom.

Taking a few steps back, far away from the edge, Deacon took a long breath and let the cold air to cool his mind.

As shitty as the Commonwealth was, the view up here was breathtaking. Deacon took off his sunglasses and looked up to the starry sky, taking a moment to admire the scene.

A face unconsciously slipped into his mind. A face that belonged to a better world, a better era. A face that had shown up briefly here in this shithole, and somehow managed to light up this miserable place. A face that had disappeared so quickly -- blinked and you’d miss it.

Most never had the chance to meet her. He had.

The world continued to spin. Perhaps if he tried, Deacon could pretend that they’d never met. That the light she’d brought was just a dream. That he had never failed.

But he had. Twice.

Twenty years ago, he’d not known any better. This time, he had no excuse.

Looking up at the stars above one last time, Deacon put his sunglasses back on, wondering where the pre-war relic was, what she was doing.

*Good night, partner, wherever you are.*

_______________________________

It was night time. The clock told her so.

In this place, there was no moonlight, no sunshine. No cloud, no rain. No thunder, no rainbow. From the balcony of her room, Nora looked up. There was no sky, but the upper levels of the facility. Walls and structures extended high above as far as eyes could see.
Most of the lights had been dimmed down or turned off. Perhaps if she tried, Nora could pretend the darkness above was the night sky. That those random sparkles of light from some windows were the stars. That she’d never left Boston.

But she had.

It was a science fiction she was trapped in. An underground paradise, away from radiations and pollutions, away from the dangers that had become the ways of life up there on the surface. No raiders, no feral ghouls, no mutated predators. Crops were grown in the lab, perfectly safe to consume. Water was purified, even the air was crisp and filtered.

Most important of all, her son was here.

This place, however strange it might seem to her, should be her new home. Yet, Nora couldn’t shake off a gut feeling that something was off. An uncomfortable, chill-down-the-spine feeling despite the perfectly controlled room temperature.

“Your instinct is a powerful tool,” Deacon had once told her. “Hone it, use it.”

So far, she had heard the plaintiff’s testimonies – from Deacon, Desdemona, Nick Valentine, and Piper Wright. It's time to hear from the defendant, the Institute.

Could she be unbiased?

After all, her son was the leader.

But the Institute was the one who stole Shaun and killed Nate, Nora reminded herself.

The peaceful scenery of the courtyard below suddenly made her feel sick to her stomach. Nora retreated back into the room and slammed the balcony door shut, sealing herself from the rest of the facility.

Yet, there was no escaping the Institute. Whatever they’d done to her, to her family, her son was forever tied to them. The smile she had put on for Shaun now turned into a frown.

Nora sank down onto the bed and reached a book by the bedside.

In Search of Lost Time: Swann’s Way.

Her thoughts went to the owner of the book, wondering where the man in sunglasses was, what he was doing.

Deacon, strange that he was, had the charm to make her smile, just like Nate used to. A kind man who had devoted his life to a noble cause, for reasons he’d never told her. Nora doubted she’d ever find out; she doubted she’d see him again.

Thank you, partner, for everything.

Flipping the book open with great care, Nora started to read.

‘For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say “I’m going to sleep.” And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading...’
Perhaps it was the familiar scent of an old book, or perhaps the words had transported her to
a different world, another universe, Nora found comfort and peace between the aging pages.

Words on the pages soon turned into blurry lines. Nora closed her eyes. Her last thought was the
man whose book now rested safely in her hands.

“The potential recruit at Graygarden Homestead has passed all our tests,” said Dr. Madison Li. “I
believe he’d be an asset to our team.”

Shaun nodded. “Send a team to recruit him.”

“I’ll get to it,” said Dr. Li.

“I don’t want any violence, doctor,” Shaun added.

“Don’t worry, sir,” said the head of Advanced Systems, “we are not the SRB.”

“No, obviously you’re not,” Dr. Justin Ayo jabbed. “We get results. Advanced Systems, on the
other hand...”

Dr. Li scowled. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’ve heard your prototype is still not functioning properly,” Ayo was too happy to answer. “How
long have you been working on it?”

“Our problems cannot be dealt with using brute force,” Li countered. “Although I don’t expect
someone from the SRB would understand that.”

The pounding headache threatened to split Shaun’s skull in halves. “Enough,” said the director,

“Crop productions have increased 4%,” replied Dr. Clayton Holdren, the youngest of the group.
“Thanks to data collected from Warwick homestead, we predict another increase of 2% by next
cycle.”

Finally, some good news. Shaun nodded. “Keep up the good work, Dr. Holdren.”

“Perhaps we should expand our research,” Dr. Ayo suggested. “Finch farm and Abernathy farm are
two potential locations. I’d suggest Abernathy. Less occupants, in the middle of nowhere.”

“Not yet,” said Shaun. “I’m not sending another field research unless we absolutely have to. The
surface dwellers are getting suspicious. Their paranoia will only hinder our work aboveground.”

“Speaking of ground teams,” said Dr. Allie Filmore, “I have some bad news.”

Of course, there’s no shortage of bad news.

“Our scavenger team was attacked by raiders,” Filmore reported. “Two units returned, three
destroyed, and one captured.”

“Savage,” Li huffed. “Although I’m not at all surprised.”
“Which model is the captured one?” asked Shaun.

“Third-generation, sir.”

“Every one of them came out from our lab,” Dr. Max Loken protested. “We can’t let them get their dirty hands on our property!”

Shaun agreed. Without a word, he gave the head of SRB a meaningful nod.

“Retrieve and return,” asked Ayo. “Or…?”

“Send them a message,” Shaun decided.

“I’ll make sure the message is loud and clear,” said Ayo with a thin smile. “At the SRB, we have some good news. We have located a runaway.”

“Send in a courser.” His ears suddenly started to ring. Shaun took a sip of water to cover his discomfort.

“This one is a little different,” Ayo told him. “From what we’ve heard, it’s now a ‘leader’ of the so-called raiders.”

“See? This is what happens when a machine think it’s a human,’” said Loken with a huff. “They want ‘freedom’ and look what they’ve become? A menace to the society!”

“Not all of them are bad,” said Filmore. “The runaway we received last month was living as a farmer.”

“If someone did his job right,” said Li to no one in particular, “there wouldn’t be any runaways to start with.”

“If someone didn’t get in the way of my investigation,” Ayo snapped right back, “I might have found the leak already.”

“Assemble a team, Dr. Ayo,” said Shaun quickly before the exchange evolved into yet another argument. “I want this one back as soon as possible.”

“Leave it to me, sir.”

His splitting headache was getting worse by the minute. Shaun knew he had to end the meeting soon, or else…

“Getting the reactor online remains our first priority,” he quickly moved onto the next point. “Until the reactor is up and running, every department has to pitch in to conserve power.”

“We already have,” said Loken. “Robotics output has been down 30%.”

“With all due respect, Dr. Loken, we have enough workforce,” said Holdren. “Perhaps we can afford to slow down synth production a bit further.”

“I don’t see BioScience do your share,” Loken argued.

“We are conserving energy,” Holdren pointed out. “But we can’t possibly slow down our crops and pharmaceutical productions, can we? It’s my job to ensure everyone has enough to eat.”

“We need a permanent solution,” Shaun emphasized, “Dr. Filmore has found one. Go ahead,
“We’ve located an Beryllium Agitator aboveground,” said Filmore. “We can use it to boost the reactor’s power.”

“Pre-war tech?” Li frowned. “We can’t have the Institute running on the back of an ancient device.”

“Is it even working?” asked Loken. “More importantly, how stable is it?”

“Well, it’s pretty damn old,” Filmore admitted. “We wouldn’t know until we got our hands on it.”

“It will be our last option,” said Shaun. “I want all of you to think of a better solution. We’ll discuss this issue again in our next meeting. Meanwhile, please remind everyone to conserve energy. That’ll be all.”

“Sir, a word,” said Justin Ayo.

Now what? “Yes?”

“I’d like to talk to Mrs. Taylor,” said the head of SRB.

“About what?”

“I hope she could help us on our investigations.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t know anything about the runaways.”

“No, not about the leak. But the Railroad.”

Railroad? As if his headache wasn’t bad enough, now the head of SRB was accusing his mother for getting involved with those thieves?

Shaun stared coldly at his subordinate for the implication. “If you think my mother is involved with the Railroad, consider this: She’s under our surveillance the moment she stepped out of the vault.”

“Not 24/7, unfortunately,” Ayo pointed out. “There were times we lost tracks of her.”

“And whose fault was it?” Shaun snapped. If looks could kill...

Wisely, Ayo backed down. “...She’s innocent, perhaps. But we shouldn’t overlook the people who came in contact with her. The synth that called himself Valentine, the reporter at Diamond City, they might have told her something. It’s a lead we should follow. Call it an instinct, sir.”

Again, Shaun’s ears rang and the room around him started to spin. Leaning back on the chair, the weary old man shut his eyes and pretended to consider Ayo’s statement. So far, only three persons in entire Institute knew about his illness, and Director Taylor was not about to grant Justin Ayo the clearance to discover this best kept secret.

“I will ask her.” Shaun opened his eyes and kept his gaze sharp despite the pain. “If you have any more issues concerning my mother, bring them to me.”
The cafeteria was half empty. Shaun sat at his usual table at the corner, the very same table he’d preferred for years. He usually dined alone, or with a few colleagues to discuss their current projects. Never had he dined with his family -- he never had one until now.

“You feeling okay, Shaun?” his mother asked as she put down her coffee cup. “You haven’t touched your food.”

“I’m fine.”

Usually, that would signal an end to the inquiry. Yet, his mother’s eyes remained on his face, searching. Unlike his, her eyes were blue.

Blue eyes. Recessive genes. Although genetics was not his specialty, Shaun had studied it quite extensively at some point. And now, he had the opportunity to observe up-close on two directly related subjects: His mother and himself.

Shaun absently wondered what part of him he’d inherited from her.

“Your father used to give me that look when he lied,” his mother told him with a knowing look.

“It’s part of being old,” Shaun carefully sidestepped her keen observation. “You sleep less, eat less…” *Until one day, you stop eating, and sleeping, and breathing...*

His mother’s concern gaze never left him. Personal attention was not something the old man was used to. Feeling slightly uncomfortable from being under the microscope, Shaun moved to the new topic and asked the first question that came to his mind, “Father… What kind of person was he?”

The thought of her late spouse put a tender smile on his mother’s face. “He was kind and funny. Brave and selfless. Stubborn, too. Once he set his eyes on his goal, no one could stop him.”

“Funny? Not what I expected. He was a soldier, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. So was your grandfather. When you were a baby, we always wondered what type of man you’d grow up to be.”

“You expected me to be a soldier, I presume.”

“Your dad didn’t want you to go through the horrors he’d witnessed in war. He never told me what he saw, but I could tell. Whatever it was, it bothered him even after he came back home, far away from the battlefields.”

“If soldier was out of the question, perhaps a lawyer like yourself?”

“‘One lawyer in the family is more than enough,’ your dad used to say. He didn’t want his wife and his son to face off in court.” His mother breathed a light chuckle. “But really, we just wanted you to be safe and happy, son, nothing more.”

Shaun felt an odd feeling in his abdomen. It was foreign, although not entirely uncomfortable. Was this what it felt like to be on the receiving end of parental concern?

Fascinating.

“Is it true,” Shaun continued to ask, “that the robot you purchased waited for you for more than two hundred years?”
“Codsworth? Yes, it’s true. Your father and I weren’t quite sure if we should buy a Mr. Handy after you were born. What if it malfunctioned? Would it accidentally cut your with a blade, or hold you too tight with its metallic arms? But we’re glad we did.” His mother’s smile widened at the memories. “Codsworth was so good with you. He fed you, changed your diapers, sang to you when you’re fussy. You were not exactly the most easy-going baby.”

Again, there it was, this strange feeling in his abdomen. “It’s still functional all these years? Remarkable.”

“He’s less shiny than he used to be, but he’s still the same old Codsworth. He’s part of the family, Shaun. I wish he could see you now.”

“Family? It’s a robot, Mother. An inferior model at that.”

“Who says family has to be determined by blood?” The softness in her eyes turned steel. “Codsworth might be old, but he functions just as well as he did when you were a baby. He waited for us for two hundred and ten years, right at the same spot we left him. He protected me when I travelled all across Boston to look for you. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Codsworth. Robot or not, he’s the only family we have.”

“This is the third time you clean this spot, Codsworth,” said Nick Valentine.

“But the dust!” said Codsworth. “How could you stand this filth?”

“You are talking to a man who was once tossed in a dumpster,” said the detective with a self-deprecating smile.

“Ah… My apologies, Mr. Valentine. I certainly didn’t mean to--”

Valentine waved a dismissive hand. Truth be told, he was used to the robot’s presence by now. While Codsworth might be a little too chatty and too caring for his taste, the detective did enjoy the Mr. Handy’s company. Especially in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep. Codsworth’s gentle hum of some tunes from a bygone era filled the empty office, reminding Valentine that he wasn’t the only robot in this cold, hard world.

“Now, I know you’re keepin’ yourself busy, Cods, but perhaps you could go clean somewhere else? Try Piper’s.”

“Oh, I have already reorganized her collection of old papers chronologically. Miss Piper refuses to let me touch her room, even though that place is practically a dumpster! Dirty laundries on the bed, candy wrappers on the desk, empty Nuka-Cola bottles on the floor… Oh god.”

If a robot could shudder, Nick was certain Codsworth would be shaking in disguise.

“And so here you are,” said Valentine with a tiny smirk, “cleaning my office the second times this week.”

Looking up from the expense report, Ellie chimed in, “Perhaps we should let him organize your case files, Nick.”
“That’s an excellent idea, Miss Perkins,” Codsworth agreed quite eagerly. “Should I organize them alphabetically or chronologically? I prefer chronologically.”

“Touch my files,” warned Valentine half-seriously, “and I’ll disassemble you faster than you can say ‘stop.’”

“You can’t possibly work like this, Mr. Valentine,” said the Mr. Handy. “The chaos!”

“I can, and I have,” the detective countered. “I know where everything is, so don’t touch them.”

“No, he doesn’t,” said Ellie to Codsworth. “That’s why he has to hire me. Where’s your favorite tie, Nick?”

“Right here.” Valentine tugged at the tie around his neck.

“No, the other one,” his secretary insisted. “The one I gave you last Christmas. It’s in the box on top of the file cabinet next to your desk. And you’re only wearing that tie because you couldn’t find your favorite one this morning.”

The lass was smart and observant. Perhaps one day she’d make a good detective. “Guilty as charged.” Valentine chuckled lightly. “All right, Codsworth, you can organize my case files, but only the old ones. Who knows, you might dig up a cold case or two that I’ve forgotten.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Valentine…” Although he couldn’t breathe, Codsworth suddenly made a noise that sounded very much like a heavy, sad sigh. “I just… I just want to keep everything in tip-top shape, so when Miss Nora comes back…”

“Aww, Codsworth…” said Ellie.

All three of his optical sensors lowered, his mechanical arms dropped. If this wasn’t a sad robot, Valentine didn’t know what was.

“When sir and mum evacuated to the vault,” Codsworth continued, “I held onto the hope that they’d come back one day. If not them, perhaps Shaun, or Shaun’s children. They’re the kindest persons you’d ever meet, Miss Perkins. You’ve met Miss Nora. She’s lovely, isn’t she?

“At first I called her Mrs. Taylor, it was only proper. But she insisted that I called her by her name. She even looked through the owner’s manual to see if there’s a way to reprogram me to act more ‘casual’ as she’d put it. Can you believe that?” Codsworth chuckled. “‘But I’m here to serve,’ I told her. ‘No,’ she said, ‘you’re here to help us. And we’re thankful for that.’ We compromised at the end, and I’ve been calling her Miss Nora ever since.”

Valentine lit up a cigarette as he listened. Memories that didn’t belong to him began to surface.

Detective Nicholas Valentine and Nora Bennett. The first encounter, it was a hot summer in the backyard of a suburban house. Young Miss Bennet was in high school, wondering about her future. Their next chance encounter, she was a young woman in bright red coat, an intern at the district attorney’s office. Their paths had crossed a few more times through work since then. The last he had heard, Miss Bennet was about to get married. And then, Nick’d received an order for him to report to the CIT…

“What about her husband?” said Ellie.

“Ah, Mr. Nate,” said Codsworth. “A handsome fellow! And he was easy-going, too. The jokes he used to tell! I still remember most of them. Although some might not be appropriate for young
ladies such as yourself. Sir was a soldier -- a sniper, I’ve heard. He was deployed while mum was pregnant with their first child. For months, Miss Nora was all alone, working long hours at the office while carrying her unborn son. Poor thing…”

“You weren’t there?” Ellie asked.

“I didn’t join the family until young Shaun was born.” The Mr. Handy perked right up at the mention of his young master. “Oh, Shaun, he was such a cute baby. But what a pair of health lungs he had! When he cried, he would wake the neighbors in the middle of the night. So I stayed in his room while lil’ Shaun was off to dreamland. When he opened his big round eyes, I’d be right there to tend to his needs. Mum would wake up once or twice each night to check on the baby, but I always ushered her back to bed. This old robot never needs to sleep, the missus certainly does.” Codsworth concluded his stories with a heavy sigh, “...Such a loving family. If only sir had made it out of the vault as well.”

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” said Ellie to herself out loud.

It’s a question Valentine often wondered. “Misfortune doesn’t discriminate,” said the detective. “All we can do is to help those who are still alive.”

“Yes, yes indeed, Mr. Valentine,” said Codsworth. “I shall make this city a better place. For when Miss Nora comes back, she will have a decent place to call home. Maybe I should start with cleaning with the streets? Or tending the crops in the garden?”

“You know what you can do, Codsworth?” said Valentine with a sudden idea. “Go help Takahashi at the power bar.”

“Your culinary skills are far superior to Mr. Takahashi’s, I admit. But cooking simple noodles doesn’t require much skill.”

“He doesn’t need your help, I do,” said the detective to the Mr. Handy. “I need eyes and ears on the ground to find our Miss Nora. What’s a better place to hear the latest gossips than the noodle bar? The folks here are used to having robots tending the shop, you’d fit right in. What do you say?”

“I say you, sir, are a genius!”

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“I say you, sir, are a genius!”

“It is so good to have you join us, Mrs. Taylor,” said the middle-aged woman with warm smile. “Alan told us a great deal about you.”

“Please, just call me Nora.” Nora shook her hand, it was just as warm as the smile. A welcoming aroma lured Nora further into the Binets’ apartment. “Smells delicious.”

“Why thank you, Nora.” Eve beamed brightly. “The complement has certainly made my day.”

There were faint lines under Eve’s eyes, crinkles around her mouth. If Dr. Binet hadn’t told her, Nora would have never guessed this woman was a synth. A synth that was about a year old.

“I know I can never replace Alan’s wife,” Eve continued, “or be a real mother to Liam, but I can at least help with the domestic duties. I’d like to think I’m a pretty good cook.”
“She is,” said Dr. Binet to Nora.

The smile on the synth’s face was as real and sweet as any happy woman Nora had seen. “I must be the luckiest synth in the Institute,” Eve declared with the biggest grin. “Dinner will be ready in a minute. I hope you’re hungry, Nora.”

Was this what Shaun had expected when he’d created a synth version of his father and his younger self? A replacement. A happy, make-believe family for Nora. What her son failed to understand, was that the bond between two persons -- whether they’re humans or robots -- could not be transferred to a doppelganger.

“We’re quite fortunate to have the synths to aid us,” said Alan Binet. “They give us the chance to focus all on our researches and studies.”

“The other day, you mentioned about synths and dreaming.”

“Ah yes, about that. I’m so glad you’re interested--”

“Dad.” The teenage son of the Robotics scientist stepped out of his room.

“This is my son Liam,” Dr. Binet introduced. “Liam, this is Mrs. Taylor, the director’s mother.”

The young man in dark blonde hair nodded rather stiffly then whispered to his father, “Dad, you told her?”

“Mrs. Taylor’s view on the synths is not as… conservative as some of us here.”

“I’d never heard of the word synth until I arrived at Diamond City,” Nora told the younger Mr. Binet. She couldn’t help but glanced over to the woman busy preparing for dinner. The only synth in the room. “Truly remarkable…”

Dr. Binet agreed, “They are.”

“Do you think they have a soul?” Liam suddenly asked.

“Liam…” Dr. Binet chided gently.

“Why not?” Nora replied. “The person who helped me back at Diamond City was a synth. A generation-2 synth, a discarded prototype. He’s been helping people in the Commonwealth for decades, acting on his own free will, developing friendships and ties just like any human would.”

A smile found its was on Nora’s face as she recalled a synth in tattered trenchcoat and fedora hat. “He doesn’t need to eat or sleep, he probably never dreams, but he has a soul. A very kind and wise soul.”

Something on the young man’s face shifted. The subtle knot between his brows relaxed, his pale blue eyes lit up.

“A discarded prototype managed to survive on his own in the Commonwealth?” asked Liam Binet.

“More than that,” Nora told him. “He’s made a life of his own. People around him rely on him. He’s a member of the community as much as those who were born and raised in Diamond City. He’s a very good friend… I wish I could tell him I’m okay.”

“It’s possible,” said Alan Binet. “If you wish, we could certainly deliver a message. Or perhaps you could go visit him in person. I’m sure Shaun would understand.”
But how would Nick react to the fact that her son was the leader of organization he despised?

“Mrs. Taylor?” Liam asked. “Can you tell me more about the surface world?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

It was late afternoon, and this place was already smelling like alcohol and piss. It was too early to get drunk, but that never stopped people from drinking. The Third Rail was never empty.

“You wanted to see me?” said Deacon.

“No pleasantries?” A woman in red dress approached, her hips swayed with every step. “What’s the hurry, sweetheart? Come. Let’s have a drink.”

Although not a fan of physical contact, Deacon let the woman take his hand and followed her to the backroom. Once the door was closed behind them, the teasing smile curled up on her painted lips flattened.

“Any luck on your pre-war relic?” asked Magnolia, her normal drawl was dropped along with her act.

Deacon shook his head.

“Heard a rumor late last night,” she told him, her tone was now crisp and short. “Some raiders had the balls to hit a scavenger team from the Institute, and captured one of the synths.”

“Chrome dome?”

“Gen-3.”

“Why the hell would they do that? They think the Institute would pay the ransom or something?”

The woman in red shrugged. “Who knows what those sick assholes were thinking -- if they’re thinking. They’re most likely high on chems when they pulled stunts like that. But here’s your ticket.”

Deacon knew what she was about to say. “You want me to play the good samaritan?”

“That’s one way of putting it. Get him out, take him somewhere, and see if he’s grateful or not.”

“I don’t think he’ll talk.”

“Work your magic, Deacon. If not, well… there’s always a plan B. One way or another, he will talk.”
A/N: Shaun continues to hide his illness, while he keeps the place running and babysits the egotistic members of the directorate board. Nora begins to spread her influence and her outsider views to the isolated bunch of scientists, starting from her son. Deacon moves one tiny step closer to cracking the Institute’s invisible lock.

A lot of things happening at once. Part one was more straightforward. Part two benches out in different directions, but everything will tie together (at least that’s my goal).

The idea of Codsworth working with Takahashi was not mine, it’s tomberi-no’s. I just built on it, and bam! A storyline was born.

Title: “Goodnight Wherever You Are” -- Russ Morgan 1944/ Ginny Simms 1944.

As always, thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
The sun was setting. Two police officers sat on the park bench, resting their legs after making the rounds in the quiet suburban neighborhood.

“There you go, Officer Bennett,” said the older of the two, a man with sharp blue eyes. He handed a bottle of Nuka-Cola to his partner, who was waiting for the ice-cold drink to quench her thirst.

His younger partner beamed -- his much younger partner. A girl around the age of seven. “Thanks, Dad-- I mean, Officer Bennett.”

In matching blue police uniforms, the father and daughter took a long drink from their bottles in perfect synchronization.

It was Halloween. As it’d been every year since his daughter could walk, Henry Bennett took the rookie out to patrol. Or, in layman’s terms, the dad took his little girl out trick-and-treating.

While Mr. Bennett dug up his old uniform as his costume every year, young Miss Bennett changed hers. From a walking pumpkin, to last year’s mad scientist, to this year’s police officer, Nora Bennett had played many roles. Perhaps next year, she would give herself a promotion and be a detective. Yes, a detective, with a hat, a coat, and a gun.

“Did you eat some of the candies when I was gone?” her dad asked while stretching his long legs.

“No.”

She was not supposed to eat any before she got home, that was the deal. Nora casted an unconscious glance at the plastic pumpkin basket. One less piece of candy from a pile shouldn’t be too obvious. Her dad didn’t count how many she’d received, did he?

“Really?” said her father.

The candy wrapper was hidden in her pocket, Nora had made sure of that long before his return from the general store across the street.

“I’m a human lie detector, you know?” said her dad after finishing his Nuka-Cola.

And there, Nora saw an opening to distract her old man. “Can I be a human lie detector, too?”

“Sure. But you have to learn how to spot a lie.”

“How?”

“Good question…” Her father turned and faced her. “You watch and listen. When a person is
nervous, his throat muscles tightens. If he coughs or clears his throat for no apparent reason, that’s your first sign.”

Did she cough? No? Good.

“A bad liar stumbles when he talks,” her dad continued, “a good liar doesn’t. But he talks fast, and he talks a lot to pull the wool over your eyes. He wants to get your attention to sell you his story, so his pitch is a little higher, louder.”

“Like the car salesman we saw last week?”

Her father grinned, proud. “Exactly. When you find a person lying, don’t call him out just yet. He’ll use more lies to cover up his lies, and soon enough, he’ll trip himself.”

Nora nodded, remembering every word of this lesson. Someday, she would be a real detective like her father, not just a pretend one on Halloween.

“The most important thing is what I’ve been teaching you.” He tapped at the corner of his eye. “Always pay attention. The devil is in the detail, sweetie,” her father told her, smiling, as he reached to touch her cheek, then showed her the chocolate smudge on his finger tip. “Don’t forget that.”

“A little heavy, isn’t it?” said Deacon as he adjusted the armor on the dog. “Sorry, pal. Gotta wear it. It beats getting shot at.”

Dogmeat let out a tiny whine but otherwise remained still as the man put a final touch on the doggy costume.

“Not all disguises are glamorous and fun. Now you know.” Deacon stood back and admired his handiwork. With the metal dog armor and the goggles, the cute beast now looked like a proper lean, mean, killing machine. “Now, listen. The key to infiltration is not just the clothes, it’s your attitude. Let’s try a growl. Grrr...”

Right on cue, the dog sneered and growled.

“Nice one. If anyone talks to you, just growl.”

Dogmeat barked and wagged his tail.

Just how smart was the beast? Deacon wondered as he put on the helmet to finalize his own disguise. Tonight, they would sneak into the raiders camp, dressing as... well, raiders. And the only good thing about raider’s outfit was that there’s no wrong way of doing it. It’s all about improvisation and intimidation. In other words, the uglier, the better.

And the helmets -- those weird, ugly helmets, they’re a godsend to an infiltrator. Perfect coverup. Put one on and instant blend-in guaranteed.

His whole face was covered, dirt and grease smeared on the exposed skin, the man in the mirror was a bona fide raider scumbag. Now all he need was a gruff voice and an accent changed.

And so, he tested an adapted voice and said the first random thing that came to his mind, “Gimme
back my Frozen Banana, ya fuckin’ asshole…” Satisfied, he turned to his killing machine partner. “Let’s get the show on the road.”

Monsignor Plaza. Two centuries ago, most people would enter through the grand entrance of the shopping plaza. Deacon, however, wasn’t there to shop.

After scouting the premise in the dark, the Railroad agent had located three possible points of entry. Front entrance, side entrance, and the back door. The front of the building was fortified to hell and back with guards and turrets. Unless he had an invisible army behind him, the front door was out of the question.

At first glance, the side entrance appeared to be neglected. But Deacon spotted more than a dozen innocent looking disk-shaped objects scattered on the ground. Minefield -- a sweet surprise for all the potential shoppers. One step near, and they’d hear the ever-so cheerful beeps. Beep, beep, beep, and then boom! Deacon knew he was probably fast enough to disable two or three, but a dozen or more? Goodbye arms and legs.

That left him one last option, which happened to be his favorite: Sneaking through the back door.

Under the cloudy midnight sky, the man and his four-legged pal stuck to the shadows, then headed east to the other opposite end of the main entrance. There, next to a dumpster, was an inconspicuous looking door. No minefield, unguarded. That was his ticket to the show.

The door guarded by a secured lock and a intricate trap. Still, it was nothing but a minor inconvenience. Less than a minute later, the two dark silhouettes disappeared into the building through the service entrance.

“Ready, pal?” said Deacon to the dog in a whisper. “Act natural. Remember, when in doubt, growl.”

He headed up the stairs and sidestepped several chains with rattling cans. The traps were rudimentary at best, but Deacon had to give the raiders credit for trying. He knew too well how it was to survive when resources were limited, and how important it was to stay a step ahead of your enemies.

The door on the second floor was barred, the one on the third floor was not. Just as well. For an infiltrator, the best way to make an entrance was to make no entrance at all. Like the back door of the top floor, as far away from the main action as possible.

*Show time.* He pushed opened the door and walked in like he owned that place.

“The fuck?!” A man lying on the couch sprung up at Deacon’s sudden appearance. “Scared the shit outta me! Where the hell did you come from?”

Jabbing a thumb at the door he just closed, Deacon snorted. “What? Ya fuckin’ blind or sumthin’?”

To his right, Deacon heard some noise behind the dusty cafe counter. Moaning, groaning. He didn’t even need to look to know there were two raiders currently busy getting to know each other in the biblical sense. They were too busy with each other’s body parts to notice the man and the dog.
That left him only one guard to deal with.

The man from the couch staggered closer. The red eyes, the twitches, the sniffles. Everything added up to one thing: Chems withdrawn. Judging by the empty bottles on the floor, this one was drunk as well.

Piece of cake.

The raider raised an unsteady finger at the closed door. “The hell are you doin’ there, huh?”

“A lil ‘me time’, what else?” Deacon walked past him. Behind his helmet, he deliberately sniffled then rubbed the back of his neck.

“Ooh, you ain’t foolin’ me, I know what you’re up to…”

Giving the raider his middle finger, Deacon staggered away.


Bait taken. “Fuck off!” Deacon shoved him off while discreetly dropped something on the floor.

“Ah ha!” The man was quick to scoop up a tiny pill bottle. On it was a dirty label with several colorful little flowers and the word ‘Daytripper.’ “I knew it!”

“Yo, man, that’s mine!” Deacon lunged at the man, but purposely missed the mark.

“Finders keepers.” The raider quickly downed the pills like they were candies before Deacon could grab the bottle. “...Oooh, GOD!” He slumped back onto the couch with a wide smile on his dirty face.

Never underestimate placebo effect.

Little did the drunk man know that the pills inside were nothing but powerful sleeping pills, courtesy of Railroad’s very own Stanley Carrington, aka Dr. Asshole.

“Enjoy yer high, you asshole,” said Deacon as he walked down the empty hallway with the dog at his heels.

There, in the shadows, he observed as the man on the couch promptly passed out.

One down, two to go.

The remaining two had yet to notice him, thanks to the perfect formula of chems, booze, and sex.

Two syringes in his hand, Deacon noiselessly sneaked behind the counter and stabbed one of the needles into the bare butt of man on top. By the time the woman grunted in dismay at her partner’s sudden lack of movements, a needle was already in her thigh, tranquilizer in her blood.

All the guards were taken care of. The exit route was clear if he acted fast enough.

“Oh, pal,” said Deacon to Dogmeat, “use that super nose of yours. We need to find our guy. He’s probably the only one that doesn’t stink as much as the rest. Not much to go by, I know…”

Dogmeat raised his head and sniffed. Seconds later, he started to follow an invisible source.
“You are a god, you know that?” Deacon commented as he followed his four-legged partner.

“Hey you there!” a shadow called out from the other end of the long hallway.

Another one?

This one, though, didn’t seem to be drunk or high.

“Who the hell are you?” the raider asked.

“The fuck are ya talkin’ ‘bout?” Deacon took a few confident steps towards the man. “Dun recognize me with my new helmet, huh? Ya like it? Stripped it off that poor dead bastard the other day. Man, took lotsa elbow grease to get the blood and snort out.”

The raider came closer.

Shit. Very discreetly, Deacon gave the dog a nudge.

Right on cue, Dogmeat growled and stepped in front of his human partner.

“Woah, woah!” The raider couldn’t back off fast enough. “Where’d that come from?”

“Oh, Fluffy?” Deacon shrugged. “My pissin’ buddy! Found ‘im when I was takin’ a piss outside. Ain’t he cute?”

Baring his sharp teeth, Dogmeat barked and launched at the man, who let out a high-pitched scream and jumped out of the way.

Grinning under his helmet, Deacon pulled the dog back by the doggy metal armor. “Easy there, Fluffy. Guess you’re hungry, huh? Ya want some meat, duncha? Yes ya do.”

The smart beast continued his role in perfection and growled at the raider.

“Keep that thing on a leash, for fuck’s sake!” The man hurried off and headed back downstairs without another question.

“Good job, buddy,” Deacon whispered to ‘Fluffy’, who now wagged his tail and huffed happily.

The remaining of the top floor was unguarded. Judging from the sound he heard below, most of the raiders gathered on the first floor where the front and side entrances located. Among the random chatters, footsteps, and distinctable moans from some fuck buddies, Deacon picked up the engine sounds of idly turrets.

All the actions were on the ground floor. He was safe, for now.

Dogmeat hurried his pace as they were at the end of hallway. He turned to the door of an abandoned gun shop, then stopped and looked at Deacon expectedly.

“Bingo,” Deacon mumbled under his breath. “Stay here, buddy,” he told the dog, “Make some noise if someone is near.”

Inside the pitch dark shop, Deacon spotted a silhouette in the shadows. Slowly, he approached the target, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Seconds later, Deacon saw him. Leaning against the display shelf at the back of the store, a man sat on the floor, bound and gagged, and visibly exhausted.
With both his hands held up, Deacon walked closer to the kidnapped man and said, “Relax, I’m a friend. I’m here to get you out.”

The man’s eyes lit up.

“I’m going to untie you, but you have to be quiet, or we’ll both be dead. Can you do that?”

The man nodded.

“All right. We’re gonna get out of here through the back door,” Deacon instructed as he cut the ties. “The guards are all preoccupied, but we have to hurry. Stay low and follow me.”

A pungent stench greeted him the second he landed on the surface. The smell of human wastes and decomposed organic materials. The smell of the Commonwealth.

X6-88 grimaced.

A team of synth troopers materialized behind him. His current mission: Retrieve the captured synth and kill everyone inside. Simple enough.

Tracking signal from the missing synth emitted from within the building across the street. The front entrance was poorly fortified. Repurposed wood boards, thin wired fence, and even that ancient turret stood no chance against the Institute’s superior laser weapons.

X6-88 wasn’t pleased with the lack of challenge, but what more could he expect from the unsophisticated surface dwellers? They always made his job easy.

The courser turned to his team. “All units, engage protocol alpha sigma three. Exterminate all life forms. I will locate the stolen unit and return to the Institute.”

“Acknowledge.”

With one well-placed shot, X6-88 destroyed the ancient turret across the street, signaling the beginning of this operation.

The defense at the front entrance crumbled like X6-88 had expected. The Institute force changed in. The raiders scattered like rats; everyone was on their own. Indiscipline, chaotic, selfish organics versus the organized, well-trained, fearless synthetic army.

X6-88 might feel sorry for the raiders if he cared.

He didn’t, though. They were nothing more than obstacles in his way, nuisances that he had to take care of in order to complete his mission. It didn’t matter to him if his opponents were humans, super mutants, or ghouls. Whatever stood in the way, they deserved to die.

With precision that was the envy of his fellow coursers, Unit X6-88 fired his weapon and cleared a path to the stairway while the rest of the troopers remained on the ground floor to clean house. The raiders tried to fight back -- and they certainly tried -- but X6-88 dodged their bullets with ease. His superior perception and reflex stunned his opponents. The smarter ones ran to save their pathetic lives, the slower and stupid ones remained to fight.
Natural selection at work. The smarter humans lived longer -- a few minutes longer before the synth troopers killed every one of them.

Launching forth, X6-88 cracked the skull of one of the raiders with the butt of his rifle. In the blink of an eye, he grabbed another one by the neck and snapped the windpipe, then tossed the body over the edge of the balcony.

The remaining one fleed. X6-88 scoped up the discarded pistol and threw it at the back of the raider’s head with enough force to knock him onto the floor. The courser then lifted the raider up by the neck and smashed him onto the wall. Female, X6-88 realized, but it didn’t matter to him.

“Where is he?” asked the courser.

“..Ack...F--fuck you!” The raider struggled. Her feet were off the ground, kicking in futile.

Not even batting an eye, X6-88 tightened the grip on her neck. Her face turned pink, then red, then purple. The human’s eye bulged, her mouth opened, gasping for precious air.

“Where is he?” the courser asked again. Never once did he raise his voice; it was not necessary. His actions always spoke louder.

Tears started to come from the bulging red eyes, saliva from gaping mouth. X6-88 gave her three seconds before she gave in.

Three. Two.

“...T--Third...floo-- Gun...s..shop…”

“Thank you.” He applied enough pressure on her neck until he heard a crack.

Too easy. The courser released his grip and the limp body dropped onto the floor like nothing but a sack of meat. Humans, they’re so fragile.

Third floor hallway was empty, so was the gun shop the synth was supposed to be in.

Target lost.

Unfazed, X6-88 checked the sensor again. The synth was on the move. Did he escape during the commotion? No matter.

You can run, but you can’t hide.

The timing couldn’t be any better. The surprise attack back at the plaza had created a perfect diversion for Deacon to escape with the synth.

Whoever the attackers were, Deacon didn’t bother to stay behind to find out. Most likely another raider gang expanding their territory, or the Gunners flexing their muscles.

“We safe?” asked Deacon.

Dogmeat sniffed around then gave one short bark.
Deacon took that as a ‘yes.’

They were a few blocks away from the plaza, too close to the actions for comfort. Unfortunately, the kidnapped victim was too weak to travel far. And although the Ticonderoga safehouse was nearby, Deacon couldn’t risk bringing a stranger there. For now, the second floor of this abandoned house would do.

“You’re safe here,” said Deacon to the synth. That was a lie, of course. Nowhere was safe in the Commonwealth.

“You’re not from the Institute, are you?” the synth asked, taking a wary step away from the man and the dog.

“What gives me away?”

“You would have brought us back.”

“Through teleportation, right?”

“How did you--? ...Who are you?”

The helmet he was wearing screamed ‘Murder!’ -- useful when you’re pretending to be raider, a total disaster when you’re trying to establish trust with a kidnapped victim.

Deacon pulled it off and put his sunglasses back on in one smooth and quick motion. “Like I said, I’m a friend. And I’m here to help you.”

“Help?”

“You’ve been a slave your entire life, now is your chance for freedom.”

“...Freedom?” the synth chewed on the word as if he’d never heard of it before. “Wha--what do you mean?”

*I’m so glad you ask.* “A chance to live your life as you see fit,” Deacon told him. “No more slaving for the Institute. You’re free to live a full life however you want it to be, you’re your own boss.”

This promise was like giving a sip of purified water to a man in the desert. Deacon spotted that dreamy gaze in the synth’s widened eyes.

Torture -- or Plan B, as Magnolia had charmingly referred to it -- worked fast, but the information received was not always accurate. Most lied to get out of the pain and suffering.

Showing compassion and earning trust, on the other hand, was not the fastest way to make a person talk, but the intel would be solid.

Fast with false information, or slow with real one. Deacon preferred the latter, of course.

“You’re a scavenger, aren’t you?” Deacon continued. “You comb through ruins for whatever you’re told to find, then bring the goodies back home to the eggheads, and they don’t even bother to look you in the eyes, let alone giving you a pat on the back for risking your life up here.”

“How...?”

“I know someone in your position, doing the exact same job. That was years ago. And now? That person is helping synths like you.”
The synth shook his head in despair. “No. It’s useless! You can’t run away from them. They’ll find you, and then… and then… you’ll disappear.”

The grip from the Institute was strong, but Deacon believed survival instinct was stronger.

“You’re already out of the cage, pal.” He gave it another push. “You don’t have to go back in. I know people who can help. I can hook you up, and no more slaving for the Institute. But in return, I need your help.”

*Where is the Institute? Where the hell is my partner?*

Tentatively, the synth asked, “...What do you want from me?”

“We have questions. Tons of them. But this is not the time or the place to play that game. The only question you have to ask yourself is: Freedom or slavery? Which one do you choose?”

The synth was shaking, probably scared out of his wits. The prospect of freedom had to be overwhelming to someone who had been a slave for his entire life. The unknown, the uncertainty.

Deacon felt sorry for the poor man.

Just then, Deacon heard a low growl from his four-legged partner. Alarmed, though not wanting to scare the synth further, Deacon asked the dog as casually as he could, “What’s up, buddy?”

Baring his sharp teeth, Dogmeat growled. Deacon knew what his furry friend was trying to say: They were not alone.

*Goddammit!* “We’ve to mo--” A sudden heavy shove from the dog knocked Deacon down.

A hole had been burned onto the wall behind him -- a hole that was meant for his head.

From the corner of his eye, Deacon saw his attacker. A man dressed in all black with a laser rifle. A courser.

Son of a bitch!

Dogmeat saved him from the first shoot, but he was on his own for the next attack. Deacon quickly rolled back on his feet and leaped behind a desk, just in time to avoid another attack. The chair nearby took his place and sacrificed. All that was left was a pile of ashes.

“RUN!” yelled Deacon to both the dog and the kidnapped synth as he activated his ever-present Stealth Boy.

His voice gave away his location. Deacon jumped out of his cover, with only a second to spare before the deadly laser beam arrived.

Invisible for the next thirty seconds, the courser couldn’t immediately locate Deacon, but he could see the man in black. The long-existing Railroad protocol called for an immediate retreat when a courser showed up, regardless of the urgency of the mission. But not this time. This time, he was so close. So close to helping this synth. So close to finding out where the Institute was. So close to getting his partner back...

Deacon quickly pulled out his gun, but the courser already had his hand on the synth’s arm and yanked the weaponless man in front of him as a meat shield.

Cursing under his breath, Deacon dashed to the other side of the room to get a clear shot. One dead courser meant one less threat to the Railroad.
Then, out of nowhere came an unexpected blinding flash that separated the man in black and the invisible Railroad agent. When the light was gone, so were the kidnapped synth and the courser.

_Fuck!_  

"Is that so?" said Dr. Ayo.

The man X6-88 had encountered could be any slender bald man in sunglasses. Without a good look at the man’s face, X6-88 was 60% certain. However, with the dog’s presence, the level of certainty increased to 95%.

"Yes," said X6-88. "It was the same man I saw at Fort Hagen and Switchboard."

"This can’t be a coincidence now, can it?" said Dr. Ayo to himself, almost smiling. "Good job, X6, although I expect nothing less from you."

Whatever Dr. Ayo decided to do with the information, it’s all up to him. X6-88 was not programmed to care, nor was he in a position to question the director of the SRB. His mission was over. Now it’s time for further decontamination, a hot shower, and maybe even a bite of the Fancy Lads Snack Cakes.

Yes, definitely a bite of the Fancy Lads Snack Cakes.

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"Both missions were successful, sir," Dr. Ayo reported.

Shaun had not expected to see Justin Ayo this morning. Yet, here he was, delivering some good news for a change. The morning dosage of medications made the old man queasy, but Shaun refused to show any sign of discomfort in front of the head of SRB.

"The runaway from Libertalia was captured," Ayo continued with his report, "and now waiting to be reclaimed. The scavenger team kidnapped unit has be recovered. A proper message was send to each location. No survivor on either side. Except…"

Shaun frowned at the last word. "Except?"

"There’s an unexpected turn of events."

Shaun didn’t like the look on Ayo’s face at all. The skinny man looked like a particularly vicious child ready to dissect his very first specimen.

"Which is?" the director prompted, although he had a feeling he wouldn’t like the answer.

"Someone had stolen the kidnapped unit before our team arrived. Our team recovered the unit, of course, but the man who took it?" The tiny grin on Ayo’s face made Shaun’s skin crawl. "The same man who’d brought Mrs. Taylor to the Railroad’s headquarters."
“That can’t be... Shaun knew the implication. “Has it been verified?”

“X6-88 was in charged of both missions, as well as Mrs. Taylor’s security detail. He recognized that man around her.” Ayo’s grin widened as Shaun’s stomach sunk. “And sir? I’ve reviewed some security footages last night. Guess who I saw through our Watchers outside the vault?”

The old man’s headache worsened. Shaun didn’t reply; it was unnecessary. They both knew the answer.

“Whoever he is,” Ayo continued, “he’s been there all along. He knew about our operation at the vault, and he knew about the kidnapped scavenger unit. And from our interrogation, the unit admitted that the man offered to ‘help’ him. We have more than enough reasons to suspect that he is a member of the Railroad.”

Shaun couldn’t ignore the evidences any longer. “What do you want to do?”

“I would like to talk to Mrs. Taylor.” Ayo paused then added, “With your permission, of course.”

What else could the director do but to agree? “...Granted.”

The food on the tray looked far from appetizing. Everything was sealed in an individual container, delivering just the right amount of calories, minerals, and vitamins to the consumers. Like the rest of the Institute, even the food was utilitarian, sterile, and lack of a personal touch.

But it was the food that her son had grown up with.

If only Shaun had grown up with meals prepared by her or Codsworth...

“Mrs. Taylor,” Liam Binet greeted as he approached with his tray.

“Hello, Liam.” Nora invited the young man to join her. “Back from your shift at Robotics?”

“Yeah. I was too busy working on the project that I forgot to eat lunch. I’m starving!” The young man wolfed down the content on his plate. “Oh, Eve said you should join us for dinner again. It’s better than the food here in the cafeteria.”

“Eve is a good cook.”

“She is.” Liam took another bite then washed it all down with a long gulp of the vitamins and minerals enhanced juice. “At first it was weird to have a synth living with us. But now that I’m used to having another person around… I couldn’t picture a life without her.”

A question Nora had never considered suddenly came to her mind. “...Where do all the synths live?”

There was a subtle pause in Liam’s movement. It was barely there, but Nora noticed.

“I’ve heard...” Liam replied, his tone quieter, “we have sections of the Institute many of us have never seen. Large concourse, low green lights... That’s where they live. If you call that living...”

“Like a slum?”
“Slum?”

“A… a rundown area for a lower-classed citizens.”

Liam huffed, “Add constant guards from the SRB watching their every move, and that’s pretty much it.”

The young man seemed to know more than he let on. Nora filed away that information and continued to observe. “Why the guards?”

“The guards are there to keep the synths from… malfunctioning. Have a single thought of your own? It’ll be your last thought. The SRB will come and you’ll never be seen again.”

Nora frowned at that disturbing information. “They… kill the synth?”

“No, because that’d be a waste of resources, wouldn’t it?” Liam snorted in disgust. “They’ll wipe the synth’s memory and reprogramme it. The SRB calls it ‘reclamation.’”

Did Shaun approve all that? Nora felt a chill. Yet, a question arose: How did this kid know so much?

“To most around, the synths are properties, nothing more,” the fired-up young man continued. “Self-maintained, tireless working machines. Most of synths won’t even meet anyone outside their work. They wake up, do their task, go back to bed. Raise and repeat. The only people they ever talk to are the scientists who give them orders.”

“That’s slavery.”

“It is. But everyone turns a blind eye for their own convenience. I--” Liam halted, his eyes widened as he realized what he’d been doing. “Sorry, I shouldn’t say that…”

The young man stopped himself, his cheeks flushed with anger and embarrassment. His genuine passion reminded Nora of a group of people aboveground -- more specially, a red-headed woman she’d met in a dark church one night.

The Railroad, freedom fighters for the escaped synths. How did the synths escape? Who helped them? Those were the questions Nora had once asked her partner during their travel. But even Deacon didn’t have any answers. All Deacon knew was someone on the inside had smuggled those synths out.

Someone. Or perhaps a group of synth sympathizers. And Nora had a sneaking suspicion that Liam Binet knew about them.

“There’s hope, Liam,” the former lawyer probed gently with a quiet yet meaningful tone. “I’ve met a synth in the Commonwealth.”

“You mean the detective?”

“A third-generation.”

The folk dropped from Liam’s hand. He jumped at the sudden clunk. “I-I… I’m sorry. I mean… I didn’t know there are synths on the surface. Third-generation? How’s that possible…”

The kid was lying. And he was a terrible liar.

Nora didn’t say another word, allowing Mr. Binet to process.
“...How is that synth doing?” Liam couldn’t resist to find out. “I mean… I’m just curious how the surface world affect the--”

“Doing very well,” Nora replied, sparing him the pain to find a proper excuse.

The young man drained both his juice and his cup of water, then leaned back onto the chair, his pale eyes widened.

It had all but confirmed her suspicion. Liam Binet knew something about the runaways. For now, though, Nora kept her cards close to her chest.

From behind, Nora heard a voice called, “Mrs. Taylor.”

The color on Liam Binet’s face drained as he tensed up like a cat ready to attack.

Nora turned to see a man approached. The color patch on his uniform was black. The SRB.

“Dr. Ayo would like to talk to you,” said the man from the SRB. “Please come with me.”

A/N: Perhaps this chapter should be called “The Ripple Effect” or “101 Ways to Kill a Human.”

Thanks for reading. And thank you for the reviews.

Title: “You Can’t Pull the Wool Over My Eyes” - Benny Goodman and his Orchestra, 1936.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
“Mrs. Taylor,” the head of the SRB greeted Nora at the door. “Just in time for the show.”

“What show?”

Justin Ayo gestured Nora to follow him into the most guarded department in the Institute. She’d been told that only members of the SRB could step through those doors. The only exception was the director, of course. And now, Nora was granted this privilege.

Although she wasn’t sure if she wanted this privilege at all.

The SRB looked more sterile than the rest of the Institute, if that was even possible. BioScience was filled with plants. Robotics had numerous machines and parts, and it was the birthplace of the all synths. The SRB, on the other hand, all Nora could see were racks upon racks of weapons, grenades, and devices she didn’t even know what they were. This place smelled like death and destruction.

There were hardly any personnel around, only two coursers by the weapon rack, picking up their gadgets for their missions. Both dressed in long black leather coats, the coursers gave Nora a curious glance then ignored her entirely. Although their facial features were different, their expressions were identical -- chilling stares, emotionless faces, and an air of superiority.

Giving the coursers as little regard as they had given her, Nora wordlessly followed the head of the SRB further into his domain. He led her to the upper level and entered what seemed to be an indoor balcony.

Below them was a chamber, almost empty except for a machine of some sort at the far end of the room. The machine was about the size of a bed, yet it was definitely not a bed -- not with five giant needles pointing ominously upward. Strangely, those needles reminded Nora of the machine she’d seen Robotics.

“What is that?” Nora frowned.

“That,” said Ayo with a flourish wave at the device, “is the reclamation device.”

Reclamation. Mind wiping. Nora couldn’t contained a shudder.

“Allow us to demonstrate.” Ayo moved to the intercom and ordered, “Bring it in.”

Two guards dragged a man into the chamber below. The man was sedated, but not entirely unconscious.

“Who is he?” Nora asked, frowning.
“A runaway, recently captured.”

“You wipe the memories of every runaway?”

“Of course,” said Ayo as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “A synth is considered contaminated once it’s on the loose. Who knows what kind of diseases it has caught? And I don’t mean the physical ones.”

What kind of bullshit is that? “Mental diseases? Like schizophrenia and psychosis? Those can’t spread!”

“Thoughts can,” countered the skinny man almost immediately. “And thoughts can be dangerous. The safest way is to wipe them clean and start anew.”

The man below struggled, although it was all futile. The guards easily lifted him up and strapped him down onto the machine. The bracket near the top cradled his neck, the tiny seat supported his lower body weight. The needles hovered just a few inches below the man’s spine, waiting to probe their target.

Nora wanted to scream. “Let him go,” she ordered the skinny man calmly despite the shaking of her voice.

“I’m afraid it’s not possible, Mrs. Taylor. You know what this one was on the surface?” asked Ayo, although he didn’t bother to wait an answer. “A raider,” he told her with a huff. “Not just any raider, but a leader of the entire gang! Even had a name. Gabriel. Can you believe that? Those rats at Railroad wiped its memory and gave it a new identity. And look what it became? A scum. How many humans died because of it? A dozen? A hundred?”

Her grip on the rail was so tight that her knuckles turned white.

“This is what happens when the synths start to ‘think’, the head of SRB continued. “It’s dangerous. We create the synths, and ultimately, we are responsible for our properties. We can’t let them endanger other humans.”

The man named Gabriel twitched and fought back with all his might. It was nothing but a painfully pathetic display of struggles. He was weakened, drugged, but conscious. His face twisted in absolute fear, his eyes widened, red and tearful, his mouth opened, noiselessly crying for help.

“End this now, please!” said Nora.

“You are a kind-hearted woman, Mrs. Taylor.” Switching on the intercom, Ayo ordered, “Proceed.”

The man’s body jolted as all five needles launched straight into his spine. His eyes turned white, his face red, as his unsupported limbs twitched involuntarily in the air.

Nora had to look away.

Then, the machine stopped.

The man on it was unconscious. Or… dead.

The guards promptly removed him from the device and took him away.

“Now, we send it to processing center,” Ayo explained, “where they will reprogram its abilities,
reassign its task. It won’t remember a thing for its so-called life aboveground. Pity, really. All the people it killed stay dead, and the synth walks away with a new life.”

*A new life as a slave again.*

“I’ve seen enough.” Nora scowled and walked away.

“Wait. There’s more. The next one is here because of your friend.”

That froze Nora in her tracks. “What do you mean by that?”

Ayo didn’t answer. Instead, he ordered his guards below, “Bring in the next unit.” He then turned to Nora. “The two mercenaries you hired. Do you happen to remember their names?”

Nora knew which of the two men Ayo was interested in. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Again, Ayo didn’t reply directly. “This unit was part of a scavenger team. A few days ago the team was attacked by the raiders, it was captured. X6-88 brought it back. You remember X6, don’t you?”

“Then why do you have to wipe his memory?” Nora scowled at the skinny man. “Don’t tell me he’s ‘contaminated’ by the raiders.”

“Not by the raiders.” The look Ayo gave her made Nora shudder. “By your friend. The man who took you to Switchboard.”

*Deacon!* Nora had to summon all her willpower to hide her shock. She had to be very careful. One wrong move and Deacon might be captured and tortured, or killed.

No, she couldn’t let that happen.

“Your friend,” Ayo asked, “what’s his name again?”

*I’ve never told you his name.*

Asking question while pretending it’s been answered before, it’s a common tactic used by investigators to get intel from unsuspecting targets. It was then Nora realized, this was not a simple demonstration of power, but an interrogation session.

Almost immediately, her well-honed defense was up. It was as if she was back in court, her head was more clear than ever, her face was a stone-cold mask. Her client was under intense scrutiny, and it was her job to protect him.

It was game time.

*I: Play dumb to lower the opponent’s defense.*

Deliberately walking right into the obvious trap, Nora replied, “Montague.”

“Montague, right.” Ayo nodded with a sly grin like an old cat who had caught a canary. Only, in this case, the canary was actually a snake in disguise. “Mr. Montague ‘rescued’ our unit from the raiders. He then offered to ‘free’ the synth. We’d have another property stolen if X6 didn’t arrive in time.”

*II: Divert the spotlight away from her client.*
“That still doesn’t explain why this synth has to be reprogrammed,” Nora stated. “The synth is back. No one’s hurt.” This was as far as she dared to probe for some answers without blowing her cover.

“Yes, quite unfortunate. No one was hurt.”

Nora released a secret breath of relief.

**III: Do not show any weakness.**

The synth was put on the chair, strapped, then came a scream.

Nora forced herself to watch this time.

Although sick to her stomach, once the procedure was done, Nora arched an eyebrow and asked, “Is that all?”

“I have more question about Mister… Sorry what’s the name again?”

Another common interrogation technique: Having your suspects repeat information would make them trip on their lies.

Ayo was good, Nora had to give him that.

**IV: Confuse your opponent. Throw them off balance.**

“Montague,” Nora replied as she exited the observation deck. “That’s what he told me. I never asked for his photo ID.”

“Photo...what?”

“Photo identification. Driver’s license, usually.” Nora had to hide a smirk at her opponent’s frown.

**V: Lie. The best lie has a hint of truth.**

“I don’t know much about him,” she told the skinny man. “I handed over the caps, he showed me around the Commonwealth, that’s it.”

“How much?”

Nora knew he didn’t really care. Ayo was trying to trip her by asking mundane details.

“Two hundred caps.” That was the amount she’d paid MacCready. “Before you ask, no, he didn’t give me a receipt.”

Again, Ayo seemed baffled by her random comment.

“What I meant was,” Nora clarified, “I don’t have direct proof of the transaction. Anything else?”

“You travelled together. Surely he had talked to you. Did he tell you where he’s from? Or anything at all?”

**VI: Go on the offensive.**

Nora tilted her head and pretended to think. “He did mention something…”

Right then, the man’s gaze sharpened even further. “What is it?”
“His family was killed.”

“When? How?”

“I couldn’t bring myself to dig further into his past. Losing your family, it’s painful. Have you lost anyone, Dr. Ayo?”

Surprised by her sudden spotlight on him, Ayo took a second to recover. “I… No.”

“I have,” said Nora, staring straight into the man’s hawk-like eyes. “He never asked me about my loss, and I never asked him about his. My only concern was to find Shaun.” Your boss. Nora paused deliberately to let those two unspoken words sink into Ayo’s mind. “Mr. Montague has fulfilled his obligation by helping me find my son. Our contract has already ended.”

The look on Ayo’s face could be described in one word: Disappointed.

“I don’t know why you’re so interested in Mr. Montague,” Nora concluded, “but that’s all I know about him.”

“We have reasons to believe he is with the Railroad, Mrs. Taylor.”

Nora made sure her expression was reasonably surprised. “Railroad? You sure?”

“Yes. He was the one who brought you to Railroad old headquarters, wasn’t he?”

VII: Poke holes in opponent’s theories.

“He also brought me to Slocum Joe’s, doesn’t mean he owned that donut shop,” Nora deflected with ease. “Commonwealth is a dangerous place, Dr. Ayo. The people have to do everything to get by, sometimes they have to transpass to places they don’t even know what it is.”

“He knew there were hazmat suits in there.”

“He heard from some traders that there might be hazmat suits inside that abandon building. Even if there’s only a 1% chance that the suits were there, I’d still go. Anything to find my son.”

“If Mr. Montague is indeed a common mercenary, why would he bother to rescue a synth from the raiders? And why would he offer to ‘free’ the unit?”

VIII: Plant doubts.


“We… had a long talk.”

Nora released a sigh only loud enough for Ayo to barely catch it. “…It’s not my place to tell you how to do your job, Dr. Ayo.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m sure you know that informations received from forceful interrogation can be unreliable.”

The man replied with a frown.

“If you were in a trial, you’d just ruined your own case,” said Nora with a shake of her head while keeping a perfect poker face. “In the court system, the evidence you provided would be thrown out
because it was obtained through force. Why? Because we know testimony or confession we get can be false, if we resort to violence. People will tell you what you want to hear just to get away from your fist, my father used to tell me that.”

Was it unethical to accuse the synth of lying? Perhaps. But the synth was a loss cause; his memories had already been wiped. Deacon, on the other hand… She could still protect him. And she would, as long as she’s still breathing.

There was a subtle clench in the man’s jaw. It’s time to drive the dagger in and twist it.

“It’s too late now, isn’t it?” Nora continued. “You can’t question the synth anymore. He can’t remember anything.”

To his credit, Ayo refused to give up. “That man, he was spotted near the vault before your release. Why’s that?”

That was news to her, but Nora was quick to recover. “How am I supposed to know?”

She had to be careful not to defend Deacon too much, or the bloodhound in Ayo would definitely pick up a scent.

**IX: Never stop searching for weakness.**

“I’ve always wondered,” said Nora, “Was I released remotely? Or did you send someone to release the pod?”

“Remotely,” said Ayo as if he was offended. “Our synths scouted the hill to make sure there’s no immediate threat to you upon your release. That was the director’s specific order.”

And Nora spotted a crack she could exploit. “I see. You sent a team of second-generation synth troopers to scout the area and to take care of any threats.”

“We take our security measures seriously.” The man nodded, proud of his department’s work. “The area around the vault and your old house was without any threats, wasn’t it? We took extra steps to ensure your safety. And I’m proud to say we did an excellent job.”

“And I thank you for it, Dr. Ayo. But…”

Ayo frowned. “But?”

“Could it be possible that your army of synths had attracted unwanted attentions from the surface dwellers?” Nora hated that term, but she forced herself to use it. “If you sent coursers dressed in Commonwealth clothings, they might be able to blended in a little better. But second-generation synths? Even a child knows they are not humans. We shouldn’t be surprised there were people who wanted to find out what’s going on around the hill.”

Ayo narrowed his eyes as he scanned her face. “Even if that’s true, that man followed you, ma’am.”

**X: Provide reasonable explanation for your client’s actions.**

“His curiosity paid off, didn’t it?” she shrugged indifferently. “By following me, he made two hundred caps. You may not realize it, but it’s a lot of money for a surface dweller.”

Before Ayo could fire another question, Nora released a deliberate sigh barely loud enough for him
“Look, Dr. Ayo,” she started delivering her closing statement, “Shaun is the leader of the Institute, and I’ll do what I can to help him. I wish I could tell you more, but when I was in the Commonwealth, the only thing on my mind was to find my son. I didn’t pay much attention to anyone around me. Sometimes, I’d wake up in the middle of the night thinking it’s all a nightmare… But… Well, I’m just glad I’ve found my boy. Nothing else matters.”

Frowning, the head of the SRB shifted uncomfortably and coughed. “We appreciate your cooperation, Mrs. Taylor. One last thing. Can you describe Mr. Montague?”

“He’s… not too tall, not too short. Not fat, but not bony.”

“Hair color?”

“Didn’t your courser tell you? He’s bald.”

“Any facial hair? Color of his eyebrows, perhaps?”

“I didn’t pay attention. But, if I have to guess, his hair is probably brown.” A blatant lie, or as Nora would like to put it, a misdirection.

Most of the population had dark hair, good luck finding an average build brown-haired man in the Commonwealth.

“And eye color?”

“I don’t know.”

“…Thank you, Mrs. Taylor,” Ayo conceded eventually. “You’ve been most helpful.”

And so ended her long interrogation. Nora walked out of the most secretive department of the Institute with her head held high, looking every bit like a person with absolutely nothing to hide.

It wasn’t until she was on the other side of the Institute, as far away from the SRB as possible, that she finally released a heavy sigh of relief.

Nora J. Bennett, Attorney at Law, was drained.

“Dr. Ayo didn’t give you too much trouble, I hope,” said Shaun.

Her son knew. Of course he knew.

“He was kind enough to invite me to watch the reclamation process.” Nora frowned slightly at the procedure mentioned. “Is that necessary? To wipe everything that makes a person unique—”

“A synth, Mother,” her son interjected. “And yes, it’s necessary. The alternative would be to dispose of the unit. That would be a waste of resources.”

Nora felt a chill despite the comfortable indoor temperature. She wrapped her tailored white coat tighter. The synths, they were nothing but Institute’s properties. But they’re much more than that,
Nora had seen it in Glory. A strong, no-nonsense woman with a witty sarcastic sense of humor. Her encounter with the tall woman with silver hair might be brief, but it was definitely memorable.

No, Glory was definitely not a property, neither were any of the other synths.

“Dr. Ayo’s method could seem… aggressive,” said Shaun, “but it’s his job to keep property loss at a minimum. He has some concerns about the mercenary you hired. I take it that it’s been all cleared.”

“I answered all his questions.” That wasn’t a lie. Nora was reluctant to share anything more with anyone, even her son.

“I’m sure you have. Otherwise you’d still be at the SRB.” Shaun let out a tired sigh. “The Commonwealth is not the same place as it once was, Mother. Although I’ve not seen it myself, I’ve heard enough to know. Your pre-war trusting nature could be taken advantage of. And I certainly don’t want anyone to take advantage of you due to your… unique position.”

“Unique position?”

“As the mother of the Institute current director.” Shaun took a sip from his tea cup and grimaced. Was the tea too hot? No, it’s been there for a while. Too bitter? Nora could only guess.

“We have enemies,” he told her, “as you probably already know. And they will not hesitate to use you against us, whether you know it or not.”

*No, Deacon won’t do that.*

Her son continued, “The Railroad -- sure you’ve heard about them by now -- they’ve been a thorn in our side for years. They take our properties. As such, they should be dealt with.”

“They take your properties?” Nora knew exactly what he was referring to.

“Yes, they stole our synths.”

“How did they steal them when we’re here underground?”

“That’s the problem we’ve been trying to solve. The conclusion we arrived is that they have an insider.”

The room was getting colder and colder. Nora tightened the jacket around her. “Who is it?”

“We don’t know yet.” Shaun shook his head. “Now you understand why Dr. Ayo required your help in his investigation. If that mercenary you hired is indeed an agent from the Railroad, we need to find him.”

*What are you going to do to him?* Nora wisely kept her mouth shut. She already knew the answer: Torture.

“I don’t know anything other than his name.” The lie came too easily even though she was talking to her son.

“No doubt a fake name, if he’s with the Railroad. And anything else he told you were all lies to cover his real intention.”

*Were they really all lies?* No, she’d sensed some truth in Deacon’s words.
“Their headquarters was empty with corpses around,” said Nora. “I saw it, Shaun. That place was dead. The Railroad is gone.”

“I do wish that’s true. It’s not the first time we cleared their nest, you see. They have been dealt with many times, but they keep coming back. Such nuisance…” Shaun let out another tired breath.

Leave them alone, son. No, she couldn’t say that. If she did, her tie to the Railroad would be exposed. Deacon would be in immediate danger.

Her son paused. Eyes shut tight, his brows furrowed.

“You okay, Shaun?” Nora asked, alarmed.

“...Yes. Yes, I’m… fine.”

He was lying, Nora knew. “Shaun--”

He waved her concern away. “A minor headache. I’m okay.” He took a long sip of tea then revealed, “A synth has been reported missing recently. Whether the Railroad still exists, one thing is clear: The person responsible for sabotage is within us as we speak. And we will find out who. It’s only a matter of time.”

Nora needed to find that out before the SRB did. But… how? First things first, though, she had to warn Deacon. There was only one way.

“I have a request, son.”

“Of course.”

I need to get to the surface. “I’d like to visit Codsworth.”

Although surprised, her son was quick to agree. “I will arrange to have him relocate to the Institute.”

“We should ask if he wants to come here to live with us.”

For a moment, her son merely stared at her as if he couldn’t understand her statement.

Nora explained, “If he wants to continue to live in the Commonwealth, we shouldn’t force him to come.”

“He’s a robot, Mother. I know you’ve an attachment to him, but ultimately he is a piece of metal, functioned only because of the software programmings. He doesn’t choose.”

“He chose to remain at our old house for two hundred and ten years.”

“Perhaps he was programmed to remain in his primary location until he’s instructed otherwise. Look, Mother, robots -- and synths -- simply cannot function without programmings. Without softwares, they’re nothing but junks. And we, humans, are the ones who write those programs. We can make them do what we want.”

“You make them walk, make them talk, make them think, I understand. But if they can think, why can’t they choose?”

Shaun’s expression shifted, darkened. “...Because it means the programs we’ve written... has evolved on their own. If it’s true, it’s an idea that will haunt all the scientists. Because what we’ve
created, we are no longer in control. Our creations could be our destruction, and that’s a burden no scientist would wish to carry.”

“How is it different than having children?” Nora countered gently.

“Pardon?”

“We don’t know what our kids will be like when they grow up. They could be the heroes who save lives, or criminals who kill others. They could be pillars of the community, or cancers to the society. Or something in between. We don’t know, son. All we could do is do our best to teach them, to guide them. They will form their own thoughts, their own opinions, some might even contradict our own. But that’s life, Shaun. That’s the way it’s been for thousands of years. The world hasn’t ended yet; we’re still here.”

The Institute might have a firm grip on her son, but Nora was not about to give up on him. Despite the wrinkles and the silver hair, he was still her child. Part of her and part of Nate were buried somewhere deep inside that emotionally distant man.

For a long moment, Shuan didn’t reply. When he did, it was not to counter a point she had made, but to avoid it completely.

“...If you wish to go to the surface,” said Shaun, “I will send someone to protect you.”

A handler. Either Shaun didn’t completely trust her, or he was too protective. Maybe the truth lied somewhere in between.

“Would you like to come with me?”

Her son frowned. “Is there a need for my presence?”

“I’d like to show you our old house, and perhaps to see your father…”

Shaun tilted his head as if he was solving a new problem. Eventually, he replied, “I have never been on the surface, but I will... consider it. It’s time for my meeting with BioScience.” Shaun slowly stood from his chair then added, “One more thing. I’d like you to join our next meeting.”

“Me? Why?”

Her son merely studied her for a moment. “I want you to understand the Institute better. I have a meeting with Facility tomorrow, we should start there. Dr. Filmore, you know her... She can be trusted.”

His target was on the move. Unit X6-88 discreetly followed.

His latest mission: Surveillance.

Location: The Institute.

Dr. Ayo had instructed him to follow Mrs. Taylor since her visit to the SRB yesterday.

So far, her day had been uneventful. Breakfast in the cafeteria instead of her private quarters, a
department meeting with Facility, then an arranged tour of the older section of the Institute, accompanied by Dr. Filmore.

Conversations between the two women included the topics of energy conservation, daily lives of the Institute members, daily lives of the pre-war American suburban families, marriage, husbands, and offspring.

It was such a boring assignment.

His target was a mystery. A human who was neither a member of the Institute, nor a filthy surface dweller. True, she used to live on the surface, but that’s before the bomb, before that place had turned into hell. She was the mother of their great leader, although she was technically half his age. Her appearance did not resemble Father’s, but DNA never lied.

That was his conclusion on his target so far.

From afar, X6-88 observed as his target approached the atrium.

She paused at one of the flower beds and touched the petals. Nearby, a gardener worked quietly. Never once did he dare to look at the woman in the eyes.

The synth was behaving properly as he should, X6-88 noted.

Scientists around rarely stopped and examined the plants, unless they were from BioScience. Even then, the scientists from BioScience merely recorded necessary data for future studies. His target, though, was not collecting data for scientific purpose. She was simply… admiring the flowers.

What a waste of time.

Just when the courser expected his target to lose interest in the plants, she turned to the gardener and said, “The flowers, they’re pretty.”

The gardener nodded while staying at a respectable distance.

“Are these chrysanthemums?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” The gardener talked only when talked to. X6-88 approved.

“My mother used to plant them. They’re pretty hardy, she said. We also had… what’s the name? ...Ranunculus! They’re the prettiest, I loved them.”

“I’m not familiar with that species.”

“It has many petals, round. Looks sort of like a rose, but without the thorns.”

“Rose? I’m not familiar with that, either. I apologize, ma’am.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” said Mrs. Taylor with a gentle smile. “They probably didn’t survive the bomb. A lot of beautiful things died on that day…” Her smile died for a brief moment but it returned. “What’s your name?”

The gardener seemed to be startled by her question. “...Excuse me, ma’am?”

“Your name. What should I call you?”

“Unit designation Z1-14, ma’am.”
She nodded. “Thank you, Z1-14.”

The synth froze.

“Something wrong?” asked the woman.

“...Nothing, ma’am. I... No one has thank us before.”

“They should. Even if you’re doing your job, you’ve done an excellent job. So, thank you.”

His target strolled to past the atrium and entered the corridor that connected the two sections of the Institute. From a discrete distance, X6-88 followed.

The boring assignment continued with nothing special to report at tonight’s debriefing, unless Dr. Ayo was interested in knowing child-rearing tips or what types of plants Mrs. Taylor’s mother had planted in the backyard.

When he emerged from the short hallway, his target had disappeared.

It can’t be. Frowning in dismay, Unit X6-88 quickly scanned the immediate vicinity.

“You’ve been following me,” said a voice from a hidden corner. His target.

Although annoyed that the table had turned, X6-88 remained emotionless.

Mrs. Taylor stepped into the light and stopped only two steps in front of him. “Is that an order from Dr. Ayo?”

X6-88 didn’t reply.

Almost a head shorter, the woman stood as tall and proud as her much smaller body could be next to the courser. Her eyes shone, showing no sign of fear. X6-88 had seen this expression before in Father.

“X6-88, right?” His target was not at all deterred by his lack of response. “If there’s anything you want to know, you can ask me directly.”

“When did you find out I was following you, ma’am?”

“This morning.”

Impressive. “I’ll do a better job next time.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Mrs. Taylor snapped. Again, her tone reminded the courser of her son. “Am I under some sort of investigations? What is the system here? Guilty until proven innocent? Tell your boss to come to me if he has a problem.”

For someone her size to stand against a courser, openly voicing her dismay against the SRB, X6-88 had to give her credit for her bravery.

He shouldn’t be surprised. After all, she was the mother of the greatest man in the Institute.

“Unfortunately,” the courser replied, “Dr. Ayo is preoccupied with our current investigations.”

Snorting, the woman walked away, knowing he would follow.
The courser did.

“If you want to get information from the reluctant witness,” said Mrs. Taylor as she headed to the other side of the Institute, “ barging into their office or their home is not the way to go.”

Curious, X6-88 asked, “How would you approach the problem?”

“Listen to them. Really listen to them. Read between their lines, learn about what’s troubling them. You help them, and they’ll help you.”

“And if they don’t help you?”

The woman only shrugged. “At least you’ve done a good deed.”

X6-88 snorted. “A waste of time.”

“Trust, the most valuable resource. It takes time to build,” Mrs. Taylor continued. “It’s like the flowers at the garden. You don’t drop a seed and expect to see a flower blooming the next second. Sometimes, you don’t see anything for a while. And then, one day, something will come out of the soil.”

Flowers and investigation? This woman was strange.

“I’m heading to the cafeteria,” said Mrs. Taylor. “Why don’t you join me for a cup of coffee?”

What? The courser couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. “I don’t drink coffee, ma’am.”

Suddenly, she laughed. Her laughter was light and airy, almost like a whisper to herself. But the courser’s exceptional hearing picked up each and every pitch.

Did he say something funny? X6-88 disliked being ridiculed. “What?” he demanded.

“It’s just a phrase. You can have anything you want -- not that we have a great selection here…”

“I do not require any food or water.”

“If you’re planning to follow me, at least act natural,” the woman told him. For a brief moment, her gaze hardened like steel. “Either join me at the table or wait for me elsewhere. You’re going to scare the people away by standing at the corner.”

“You do notice people are afraid of the coursers. Why aren’t you?”

His target stopped and looked straight into his eyes. “If you’re ordered to kill me, I’d be a pile of ashes on the floor right now. But I’m still breathing.”

“True.”

“I know you’re doing your job, so do it.” The woman resumed her walk. “If we are going to see each other a lot, I think a proper introduction is needed. Tell me about yourself.”

“Unit designation X6-88.”

“I know that. And?”

“I am a courser.”
“Really? I had no idea.” One corner of her mouth twist up slightly. “Anything you like or dislike?”

“How is this relevant to my assignment?”

“It’s called ‘Getting to know the person you have to work with.’”

“My job is to observe you. Nothing more. I fail to see why you want to know me.”

The woman merely shrugged. “Why not?”

“You asked the unit in atrium its designation as well.”

“I did. And?”

“Why?”

Again, she answered, “Why not?”

“Because we are synths.”

“So?”

So? X6-88 didn't know how to respond. They're machines, she's not. They're tools, even coursers were nothing but highly skilled killing machines. Why would she bother to get to know them?

With another mysterious smile, the woman led the way to the cafeteria.

Slightly baffled, but oddly intrigued, X6-88 followed as he had been ordered to do so.

Perhaps a cup of coffee wouldn’t hurt, if he could get over the foul taste.

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“You’re kidding,” said Dr. Volkert.

“Have you ever seen me joked around?” asked Shaun.

“Not since we were kids.” The doctor shook his head. “I can’t let you go up there. The radiation level on the surface is not someone with your current condition could endure. Your latest test results came back. It’s far from ideal—”

Shaun waved a hand. “I’m dying. Tell me something I don’t know. Let’s skip that part. What I want from you is some Rad-X.”

“Shaun, listen to me. The Institute needs you. We’re at a critical time.”

“I know that. But I also know my days are counting. There are things I want to do before I can’t move anymore. Help this old friend, Dean.”

“Ah, the bucket list.” Dean Volkert released a long breath. “Never thought a man like you would have one. You’ve accomplished so much, kiddo.”

“Kiddo.” That’s a name he hadn’t heard in decades. Shaun Taylor chuckled quietly; it’s a sound he rarely made these days. “You’re only a few months older than me, old man,” Shaun replied with
the usual banter, although now his voice was no longer crisp and clear like his ten-year old self.

For a moment, the two old men turned back the hands of time and talked to each other without baggages.

“I’m proud of you, Shaun.”

Never a man with many words, Shaun Taylor could only nod faintly. Volkert would never know how much his words meant to his dying old friend. Or, perhaps, Volkert knew. He was always the smart, caring big brother to the little orphan in the lab, ever since the first day they’d met.

“You’ve made up your mind, huh?” said Volkert.

Again, Shaun nodded.

“Are you certain?”

Was he really certain? Shaun had considered her mother’s request last night. Strange as it might, her request was not unreasonable, and it was understandable.

“Just a quick stop at the old house,” said the director to the head physician, “then to Diamond City to see her old robot. It won’t take more than an hour.”

“I’ll make necessary preparations. I want you and Mrs. Taylor to stop by before you head off.”

“Thank you, Dean.”

Phase one: Release and observe. Phase two: Retrieve and interact. So far, his plan had been right on track. The first two phases had been completed. It’s time for phase three.

Reconcile and integrate.

He had to gain his mother’s full trust and loyalty; he had to work with her. Soon, all these would be in her hands. The Institute -- his dream, his legacy, his life’s work.

Was it necessary to go to the surface? Perhaps not. But Shaun was curious about the world he’d come from, and most of all, the man who was his father.

Some distant ancient wisdom stated that when a person aged, he would long for his roots. Shaun never believed it. He still didn’t, despite his old age, despite having one foot already firmly planted in the coffin. It was merely scientific curiosity that made him want to see his birthplace, nothing more.

Or was it?

______________________________

Idle.

Idle. There was nothing to do but wait.

Lately, he hated idling. Deacon spun his brown cap around and around with his nimble fingers -- the same cap Nora had dropped the day she’d been taken.
November 10th. It was her birthday today. That woman was turning thirty, or was it two hundred and forty? Did someone give her a cake? Deacon doubted it.

He knew the truth about the Institute, the gruesome reality awaited the captured victims. But Deacon forbade his thoughts to wander to the much darker place, or else he might turn into the person he was fighting to stay away from. The fuck-up man he once was, the poster-boy who represented this shithole of a place. That man was still somewhere inside, hidden, buried, but never gone. All it would take was a trigger to awake the beast within, something like the brutal murder of his late wife.

Deacon took a bite of the Fancy Lads Snack Cake.

Time had done its thing on his memories. Barbara’s face had become a blur in his mind, her voice was long forgotten. The only solid memory he could recall was her love for this pre-war snack, which tasted every bit as stale, overly sweet, and dry as it had been twenty years ago.

Idly, he wondered if Nora knew how to bake a cake. He had a feeling she did. And he would pay every cap he had just to have a bite.

Releasing a quiet sigh, Deacon brought the snack to his eye level and mumbled, “Happy Birthday, partner…”

The door to the catacomb opened with a creak. Most of the agents were too far into their dreamlands to notice a young man’s return. But not Deacon. He was very much awake -- awake and restless.

Deacon leaped on his feet and approached the kid. Drummer Boy’s face was flushed in pink, from the pre-dawn chill and the wind.

“What do you have?” asked Deacon.

“Old Man Stockton has a new package,” said Drummer Boy as he cracked open a bottle of Nuka-Cola. “Details will be in Diamond City dead drop later this afternoon.”

Another fresh out of the Institute runaway, another opportunity to get information while they still remembered. However slim the chance was, Deacon couldn’t afford to let it slip away.

“Which dead drop?” There were three in DC, used alternatively to throw the enemies off. It’s a system set up by none other than the man in sunglasses himself.

Drummer raised up two fingers as he drained the bottle in one long gulp.

“I’ll get it,” Deacon told the young man.

“I thought you hate Diamond City.”

“I hate the Institute more.”

A/N: A long chapter. Finally, we get to see a different side of Nora. While her Strength, Endurance, and Luck are lacking, her Charisma and Perception are solid 10. Nora probably dumps most of her points into speech, after all, she’s a lawyer.
Next chapter… well, I’ll let you guess. See you then.

As always, thanks for reading.

Title: “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” - Henry Hall, 1933, Don Bestor & his Orchestra, 1933.

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A tiny noise woke her up. The room was dark. Next to her, Nora saw a faint yet familiar silhouette of her husband sleeping soundly. With practiced stealth, Nora quickly got out of the warm bed and headed out of their bedroom, quietly closing the door behind her.

Then came the noise again, louder this time.

Lights were on in the bedroom across the hallway. The occupant was up early this pre-dawn morning, and he was not about to let the members of his household sleep in.

“Hush now, little Shaun,” said Codsworth as he was busy preparing the diaper changing table. “You’re going to wake up the entire neighborhood once again.”

The baby in the crib didn’t care, nor did he understand a word the robot had said.

Who would have thought a robot would be so good with an infant? Codsworth was a natural, the perfect babysitter any parents could ask for. His flamethrower and buzz saw had given Nora a pause at first, but the Mr. Handy was nothing but patient and gentle with the demanding baby. He should have been called Mr. Nanny instead.

“Hey, hey, what’s the matter?” Nora picked her son up before the baby woke up his dad. “Stinky diaper, huh?”

“Oh, mum,” said Codsworth. “Didn’t see you there. Did he wake you?”

“Don’t worry,” Nora told the Mr. Handy with a tired smile. “I’ll take care of it, Cods. Could you prepare a bottle for our little master?”

“Little master, indeed.” Codsworth chuckled. “Babies. They are so adorable, yet so demanding.”

“This won’t last forever,” said Nora as she put the baby on the table.

Soon, Shaun would be properly potty trained, then he’d start to talk, and walk, and run. He would go to school, then more schools, and after that, he would be off chasing his dreams, whatever they might be. Perhaps after that, he would settle down with a nice lady, and have little babies of his own. Circle of life.

One step at a time. “Don’t grow up too quickly, okay?” said the mother to her infant son.

Wipes, ointment, powder, and fresh new diapers. All the necessary arsenals were already prepared by Codsworth. Old diaper off. Baby bottom wiped clean. Applied ointment or powder if necessary. Then put on a new diaper. All seemed so easy. But what the nurse had never told her was the little accident that could happen when the diaper was off.
Lucky for her, this time it was accident-free. Nora did what she had done hundred of times since she’d brought the baby home. Within minutes, the baby was once again fresh and clean, at least until the next diaper change.

“Your breakfast is ready, young Mr. Shaun,” said Codsworth, floating in with a bottle of warm milk.

“Thanks, Cods.”

“Let me take the stinky out of the room.” The Mr. Handy promptly picked up the recently filled trashcan by the changing table. “Ick. Am I glad I do not have a nose…”

With the baby in one arm and a bottle in her other hand, Nora sank down onto the armchair with a tired sigh. “Here you go, sweetie.”

Little pink mouth latched onto the bottle and sucked it with all his might. Her son was growing bigger each day. His limbs were longer than they had been only two weeks ago, his clothes were already starting to get a bit too small.

“I wonder what Shaun will grow up to be,” said Codsworth when he returned. “Will he be a soldier like sir? Or a lawyer? Or perhaps a detective like your father?”

“Whatever he wants to be,” the mother replied as she put the bottle down, then gently shifted the baby in her arms and held him against her chest. “As long as he is safe and happy, that’s all I ask for.”

“He will grow up to be a marvelous young man, I am sure. Handsome like his father, smart like his mother. Oh, I cannot wait for that day to come.”

Patting her son’s back, Nora gave the robot a teasing smirk. “What? You don’t want him to look like me but with his dad’s brain?”

The robot chuckled. “That would mean trouble for us, mum. A gorgeous young gentleman with your look, and Mr. Nate’s easy-going, unguarded nature. Think about all the ladies he will have to fend off. All the phone calls to our house asking for Mr. Shaun. My god!”

The tired mother laughed quietly. “We can’t have that, can we?”

And then came the burp from the satisfied infant. For now, they have a happy camper in the nursery. Both the mother and the robot released a sigh of relief.

The sky began to turn grey. Dawn was coming. Another day had arrived.

“You should get some sleep, Miss Nora,” said Codsworth.

But as soon as Nora placed the baby back to the crib, the fussy baby began to cry.

“Shhh, shhh…” Nora picked her son right up. “It’s okay, it’s okay… Mommy’s here.”

Like magic, the crying stopped when the mother held her baby close to her chest, soothingly patting his back. Nora knew then, she wouldn’t be able to catch a wink of sleep until her son was happily in his dreamland.

“Ah, a mother’s touch,” said the Mr. Handy. “So magical.”

“I got it, Cods. Thanks.”
“Then I shall prepare some early breakfast for you. How does pancake sound?”

“Delicious.”

“Pancake it is.”

“You’re a life-saver, Codsworth. Thank you.”

“Just doing my job, mum.” Codsworth sounded like he was beaming ear to ear, if a Mr. Handy could smile.

As inviting as the armchair seemed, Nora knew from experience that the moment she sat down, Shaun would complain. Fighting back the ever-present exhaustion of motherhood, Nora paced around the room as she gently rocked her son to sleep.

Unconsciously, she started to hum a simple tune under her breath until the melody became a song.

“You are my sunshine. My only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are gray.”

Soon, the fussy baby fell asleep in his mother’s arms.

“You’ll never know dear, how much I love you…” Smiling to herself, Nora pressed her lips on her son’s forehead before she ever-so carefully put him back into his crib. “...Please don’t take my sunshine away...”

The sunshine hit her eyes. Nora closed her eyes for a few seconds and enjoyed the familiar warmth on her skin. It was November, the air was cool, the sun was mild, and the sky was clear. The weather couldn’t be more perfect.

She’d missed the breeze, missed the unfiltered fresh air, missed the sun, the rain, the fog, and the snow. Born and raised on the surface, life underground was hard to adjust. No matter how advanced the Institute was, perfectly controlled temperature was no replacement for the nature.

Although now nature was tainted by radiations and pollution.

Her arm was still a bit sore from the anti-radiation shot Dr. Volkert had insisted on administering. The good doctor had also insisted on the length of the trip, no more than an hour. It was all she could get, Nora planned to make the most of out if.

An item in her pocket weighted heavily, not because of its physically weight, but the importance.

“...So bright.” Next to her, Shaun mumbled to himself and shielded his eyes from the afternoon sun.

They had materialized near a creek behind their old house at Sanctuary Hills.

“All clear, sir,” X6-88 reported. The courser had teleported to the surface earlier to scout the premise. “Several surface dwellers have taken up resident in this place. Three men, two women. One of them is very old. None of them has seen me.”

“Thank you,” said Shaun.
Nora took the lead and headed up the slope. She pointed at the light blue house with white picket fence. “That’s our house, Shaun.”

The paint had long faded and peeled. Wooden picket fence broken, wall panels fallen, window frames rusted. Yet, in Nora’s mind, she could still see the the picture-perfect idle suburban neighborhood that it had once been.

She stepped over the fallen fence and walked into the backyard of their old house. “We used to have a flower bed over here. I was planning to plant some roses by spring. And perhaps some ranunculus. Your grandmother used to have the best green thumb. Me? Guess I’m more like your grandpa.”

Her parents. She missed them both.

“Behind that window was your room. Welcome home, Shaun.”

Shaun’s expression was hard to read, even for Nora who had spent her entire career reading people. There was a constant grimace on her son’s face. The sun was bothering him, and most likely so was the smell in the air.

Nora led the way to the side yard, away from the sunshine. Their family car remained after all these years. The coat of paint stood no chance against radiations.

“Your car?” Shaun asked.

“Ours,” Nora corrected him with a gentle smile. She noticed a subtle head tilt and a mild frown on her son’s face as he studied the car closely. “It was black.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. Whether he was surprised that she knew what he was thinking, or he was surprised by the color of choice, Nora didn’t know.

“I drove us to the hospital that night you decided to come out and see the world,” she told him, reminiscing the most important night of her life. “I still remember. It was three in the morning. The moon was high up. You were kicking me. You didn’t want to wait for the sun to come up.”

“Where was Father?”

“Alaska. The war was over. He was scheduled to return a few days later. He was supposed to arrive just in time for your due date. But…” She looked at him with a gentle smile. Standing in front of her was a tall, old man, but in her mind, she saw a tiny baby with a wisp of black hair and big round eyes. “You’d a mind of your own. You always have.”

“Sir,” said X6-88, “someone’s coming.”

Almost immediately, the courser’s weapon was in his hands.

That someone turned out to be a tiny old woman with a hunch on her back.

“Ah, there you are,” said the old woman as she approached very slowly. “I knew you were comin’.”

“That’s close enough,” warned X6-88.

Nora put a hand on the courser’s rifle and pressed the gun down. Tried as she might, the weapon didn’t even drop an inch.
“Afraid of a harmless old woman, are we?” the old woman chuckled.

“Stand down,” Nora ordered, verbally this time.

Still, the courser didn’t back down until he’d received a nod from Shaun.

“How did you know we were coming?” X6-88 demanded. “Who gave you the intel?”

Unfazed by the intimidation, the old woman chuckled. “My Sight, kid. I can see things that were, things that will be.”

The courser frowned. “What kind of nonsense is this?”

“Wait for me inside the house,” said Nora to Shaun before things escalated.

Her son merely looked at the old woman with disinterest before he headed into his former home. His bodyguard trailed his every step.

“We met before,” said the old woman. “Concord. You saved us.”

The very first time she’d killed someone. It was hard to forget. Nora tried to recall a name. “Mama Murphy, isn’t it?”

Mama Murphy nodded. “You’ve found your son.” It was not even a question. “But he ain’t what you’re lookin’ for, is he?”

Somehow, the old woman knew. “He is still my son,” said Nora. Whether he’s six or sixty.

“What makes a family?” asked the old woman. Her face was wrinkled, her voice was weak. But there was something about this Mama Murphy that made Nora wary. It’s almost as if the old woman could see right through her. “Your greatest strength is also your weakness.”

“What do you mean?”

The old woman chuckled under her breath as she raised a shaky hand and tapped on her own chest over her heart. “You’re not one of us, yet you are here with us. Choose your path carefully, kid. That is my advice, free this time. Next time, bring me some Jets, I’ll show you more.”

There won’t be a next time.

“We will meet again,” said the old woman as though she could hear Nora’s thought. “Go now, your family is waitin’.”

Nora looked inside the house that used to be her home. Her son had disappeared into his old room, where it had once been his entire universe.

“Not here,” said Mama Murphy. “They are waitin’ for you in the Green City. And they will continue to wait. A week, a year, a decade…”

“They?”

“A man with pink neon heart. A man with three arms.” The old woman then looked straight into Nora’s eyes. “And a man with many faces.”

Deacon? He’s in Diamond City?
Unconsciously, Nora’s hand went to the item in her coat pocket, covering it, protecting it.

“You’re a ghost here, kid. A ghost should not be seen, don’t ya think?” said Mama Murphy with a mysterious smile. She turned and slowly walked away, all while mumbling to herself, “...I wonder when Preston is comin’ back from his patrol…”

The room was small. The only furniture was a broken wooden table of some sort, a torn armchair, and an empty crib. The crib was tiny. Had he ever been this small?

On the floor by the crib was a broken toy. Logical deduction told him this was once his, but Shaun couldn’t recall seeing this in his life. Donning on a glove as if he was handling a some unknown materials in the lab, Shaun picked up the object and studied it.

There were small rockets, each dangled at the end of a thin metal rod. The three metal rods were connected, presumably equally spaced at a 120 degree angle. In the center where the rods met, there was a small device of some sort. A simple motor, Shaun realized as he examined it closer. Most curious, indeed...

“We used to hang this over your crib,” said his mother’s gentle voice broke Shaun’s concentration.

“How did it work?”

“The rockets would spin around and around, and you’d stare at them until you fell asleep.”

“Ah. Hypnosis of sort.”

The smile on his mother’s face was brighter than the sunlight outside. “Maybe. It's just a toy, son. Your favorite. You cried so hard when you woke up one day and found it missing.”

“Missing?”

“It was broken. Your dad was fixing it when you decided to wake up from your afternoon nap. You were not pleased, to say the least.”

Shaun remembered none of this. “I was a… difficult infant?”

His mother laughed lightly. It was a sound he was getting accustomed to. “You were fussy,” she told him, although it didn’t sound like a complaint. “Sometimes putting you in the crib with the rockets wouldn’t do the trick. I had to carry you and walk around the house under you fell asleep.”

No one had ever carried him around in the Institute... “You should have ignored me. When an infant is tired, he will fall asleep.”

The look his mother gave him was something Shaun had never seen in another person. It was foreign, comforting, and very warm. “And let you wake up the entire town? I could never leave you alone when you cried, son.”

The unsettle feeling inside intensified. Could a person feel happy and sad at the same time?

X6-88 saved him from searching for an appropriate reply.
“Sir,” said courser, entering the room “Watcher reports a man with a primitive weapon is approaching. ETA two minutes. Your orders?”

“Leave those people alone,” said his mother immediately. “Come on, Shaun, let’s head to the vault before we attract more attention.”

“I will have us relay to our next stop,” said X6-88.

“It’s only a short hike to the hill behind,” his mother said. “This… teleport thing is making me uncomfortable.”

“It is perfectly safe, ma’am,” the courser assured her.

“How does it work again?” His mother frowned. “Taking our molecules apart and putting them back together? I’d rather walk.”

“Let’s walk,” Shaun agreed.

The sunlight hit his eyes. Shaun squinted.

So this was what sunshine felt like. Warm, bright, and uncomfortable. Ultraviolet radiation burnt his skin, polluted air filled his lungs. This was the surface world.

Unsafe levels of radiation had destroyed the world that used to be thriving. Now it was a wasteland.

“It was a week before Halloween when it happened,” his mother told him as they crossed the short wooden bridge. “I made the cutest red devil outfit for your first ever Halloween costume.”

“What is this… Halloween?”

“An annual festival, where the kids dressed up in costume and went around neighborhood asking for candies. Trick or treat.”

What a weird and useless festivity.

His mother continued, “Your grandfather took me trick-or-treating every year when I was a kid. Your dad and I were really looking forward to continue the tradition…”

“And the bomb dropped.”

“And the bomb dropped,” his mother echoed, her voice quiet. “...That day, your dad was supposed to give a speech at the Veterans Hall. We were getting ready in the morning. The tv was on, we heard the news about bombs all across the country… And then, it was chaos. We didn’t have time to grab anything when we were ushered to the vault. We had to leave Codsworth behind…”

For a moment, she turned silent as they headed to the top of the hill.

“...We walked up this path,” his mother continued when she was ready, “I was holding you. Your father had his arm around us the whole time. Our neighbors, some were yelling, some were crying. We were all terrified. Even your dad was.”
They stopped at a fallen, broken metal fence near the top of the slope.

“This was where they put a gate. Those who had signed up with Vault-Tec could go in. Those whose names weren’t on the list…” She glanced down at something on the ground.

Nearby, almost hidden by dry weeds, was a human bone. By the shape and size, Shaun estimated that it was an adult forearm.

His mother resumed the path and continued to the now opened area, where a circular concrete platform was located at the far end.

“That’s the elevator down, sir,” said X6-88. “A team was sent to scout every corner of the vault this morning. It’s all clear.”

Shaun nodded. “Turn off all the surveillance.”

Without any hesitation, the courser relayed his message back to the Institute, “All surveillance cameras off.”

His mother pointed towards a hillside faraway. “That’s where the bomb dropped. I saw it. We barely escaped the blast when the elevator took us down to the vault. The heat, it was so intense even though we were so far away…” She turned back to him and asked, “Are you ready, son?”

Shaun stepped up to the platform.

“So this is the vault,” said Shaun.

Dark, damp, and it smelled like mildew. The lights above flickered as they headed into an area with a table and some lockers.

“We arrived to the processing table over there,” his mother told him. “We were given the suits and told to change. Next thing we knew, they wanted us to head to the pod for a quick decontamination process or something… We had no idea what we signed up for.”

“No doubt,” Shaun huffed, frowning at those bastards who had tricked his parents. When had this become personal? He couldn’t tell. “They promised you safety for the whole family, while in fact, they were conducting questionable experiments on their subjects.”

“If the Vault-Tec representative hadn’t knocked on the door that morning, we wouldn't be standing here.”

She led them down a hallway. Through the window on the right, Shaun spotted rolls of cryogenic pods within a sizable chamber. His mother, however, didn’t enter that room. Instead, she headed down to a smaller room at the end of the hallway.

“This was where they took us,” she told him as they entered.

The temperature was uncomfortably cold. Shaun took a curious peek into a nearby pod and saw a woman within. Dead, but not decomposed, thanks to the sealed device.

“There he is,” said his mother, stopping at the last pod. “Your father, Shaun.”
“My condolences, sir and ma’am,” said X6-88, who then stepped out of the chamber and waited for them in the hallway.

“Hey, hon,” said his mother to his father, her voice trembled. “I’ve found him. I’ve found Shaun. He’s… not a baby anymore. He’s safe. Safe…that’s what matters. He looks just like you. The man who killed you is gone. Rest easy, Nate. I’ll look after our boy.”

Perhaps he should say something, or at least feel something, but all that Shaun felt was nothing more than curiosity when he looked upon the man inside the pod.

As with the rest of the corpses, his father’s body was surprisingly well-preserved even though he had been dead for sixty years. Through the somewhat frosty window, Shaun could clearly see his father’s face. The shape of his nose, the jawline, the cheekbones, even the jet black hair. It was almost as though the old man was looking at his younger self.

So this man, his mirror image, was his father.

“Fascinating,” he mumbled to himself under his breath. Somehow, Shaun felt he should say more. “...He was so young.”

“He was thirty one,” his mother replied quietly. “There were times I wondered what if your father had survived instead. He would be much better suit to survive up there in the Wasteland, looking for you.”

Yes, what if it was his father standing next to him right now? Would his father make a decent leader?

His father was experienced in battlefields, but could he handle someone like Ayo? Somehow, Shaun doubted it.

A soldier who was trained to carry out orders without questions. Or a lawyer whose job required her to question every single thing. Shaun knew which one he preferred. The Institute needed a leader with finesse, not someone who could shoot a target -- they already had coursers for those jobs.

Life had dealt him a good hand, and Director Shaun Taylor intended to make the best out of it.

__________


The man in the mirror looked every bit like an authentic Diamond City guard. Satisfied, Deacon closed the locker of his secret stash and headed back into the dark alley. He made a turn and walked into the street by the former baseball stadium as if he had been there all along. Whistling a random tune while swinging his baseball bat in one hand, Deacon approached the gate of the settlement.

Just like any other guards who had returned from a boring round, Deacon nodded at the gatekeeper, and even casually exchanged greetings. No one bat an eye when the man in sunglasses waltzed right into the most guarded city of the Commonwealth.

Of course they didn’t. When the master of disguise was at work, no one ever suspected a thing.
A/N: 7000+ words are a bit too long, so this chapter is broken into two parts. Part two coming up in a week or two.

Title: “Wonder When My Baby's Coming Home” -- Kay Kyser, 1942.

As always, thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail -- pinoko19, tumblr -- pinoko-k.
Wonder When My Baby's Coming Home - Part Two

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Twenty Three: Wonder When My Baby's Coming Home - Part Two

When the blinding light flashed, Shaun could have sworn his heart had stopped beating. Technically, it had, when his body was broken apart in molecular level before everything reassembled back piece by piece.

Truth be told, the director of the Institute disliked teleportation as much as his mother did. As a scientist, Shaun understood the concept, accepted its necessity, and even admired the elegance of the instantaneous method of traveling. Yet, as an old man, he didn’t need to feel his heart stopping any more than necessary.

Soon enough, it would stop beating forever.

When the light was gone, Shaun found himself standing on solid ground, his heart was still very much beating. For now.

They had been transported inside an office of some sort, far away from the vault that was now his father’s tomb. The first thing Shaun noticed was how grimy the floor was. The second thing was a sharp stench that had assaulted his nose. The third was the screeching scream of a man. All were equally unpleasant.

“What the--” yelled a rather fat man, springing up from his armchair. A glass of brown liquor slipped from his clumsy fingers and smashed onto the dirty floor.

Shaun scowled at the spill.

“...Oh, it’s you,” said the man to the courser. “Scared the crap outta me! Here for my report? A little too early, ain’t it?”

“Show some respect, Unit,” the courser snapped and sidestepped to reveal the director behind.

When the fat man’s eyes met Shaun’s icy cold ones, he gasped and snapped to attention. “Sir! I...I didn’t know you would come, Father.”

“Unit?” asked his mother.

“He is one of ours,” Shaun explained.

Sooner or later, she would find out. Once she sat on his chair, his mother would slowly learn every bit of the Institute’s secrets, whether she liked it or not. Shaun himself had uncovered some ugly truths he would rather not know, including his own father’s death.

“Mrs. Taylor,” said Mayor McDonough with a respectful bow, “Unit M7-62, at your service.”
“That’s the point, ma’am,” said the mayor. “I didn’t know you’re the mother of our great leader when we first met. Who would have thought our director’s mother would be so young and—”

Shaun coughed to cut the unit’s rambling. He was not about to stand and suffer from the stench a second longer than necessary, especially not while listening to pointless small talks. It irritated the old man to no end.

Wisely, M7-62 asked, “What brings you here, sir?”

“We’re here for the Mr. Handy named Codsworth,” Shaun told him. “My mother would like to see him.”

“Ah, Codsworth. Yes. I’ll have it bring to you right away, ma’am.”

“I’d like to go see him,” his mother said. “Give him a surprise. Is he at Valentine’s?”

“He’s currently working at Power Noodles,” said M7-62. “Quite a popular fixture among the locals.”

“Let’s go, Shaun.” His mother then turned to the courser. “It’s probably best if you stay here, X6-88. If the people see you…”

“I will not leave the director’s side, ma’am,” the courser insisted.

“Mrs. Taylor has a point,” said M7-62. “People are jumpy already. If they see a courser walking down the street, they’ll call the guards, and… Well, let’s not spill any blood today if we can. I have a city to run.”

“I will be fine,” Shaun assured the courser. The smell and radiation would kill him sooner than the potential physical threats.

“You will, indeed, sir,” M7-62 added. “This is the safest place in the Commonwealth. I will let the guards know you and Mrs. Taylor are my VIPs. You will be under their protection. No one would touch a hair on your head, Father.”

“I will hold you personally accountable, Unit,” the courser warned the mayor. He then reluctantly told Shaun, “I will be watching, sir.”

“The elevator, sir, this way.” The mayor walked them out of his private office.

Upon a second look, Shaun noticed the office was filled with pre-war furniture that belonged to the dumpster. The floor was not only grimy but sticky under his polished leather shoes. Even the door threatened to fall apart with a squeak when the mayor pushed it open.

Right outside the mayor’s office, a young woman sat by the desk. Her eyebrows arched when she saw the mayor’s guests. Shaun noticed she froze when her eyes landed on the tall man in black long leather coat.

Interesting.

Coursers -- they gave everyone pause. Even when the woman was one of many agents of the Institute.

The secretary gave them a polite nod but otherwise said nothing. Although she tried to hide it, her
discomfort was apparent to Shaun’s observant eyes.

Unit M7-62 stopped in front of a broken window near the secretary desk. “This elevator will take you to the city. Watch your step, sir.”

The so-called elevator was nothing more than a metal rack that could hold two adults. Shaun scowled at the platform. “…Is this safe?”

“Don't worry, sir,” said M7-62. “I use it everyday.”

“You are not the director of the Institute, Unit,” X6-88 interjected. “Perhaps you should teleport down there, Father.”

Teleportation or metal platform. The Institute's state of the art technology or the ancient one.

“We don't want to attract attention, son,” said his mother. “People are scared of the Institute. If they know we are here…”

Logical precaution. Shaun had no choice but to agree.

His mother stepped onto the platform then held out a hand for him. “Come on, let's pretend this is an amusement park ride.”

“Amusement park?” Although reluctant, Shaun took her hand nonetheless. It was soft and warm, very much like the woman herself.

His mother gave him a patient smile. “It's a place where people used to go to have fun. I wanted to bring you there when you're old enough.”

Fun. The word was so unfamiliar it might as well be a foreign language.

When the platform suddenly rattled, the old man’s heart leaped as he thought they were about to drop to the ground. He felt a soft, assuring squeeze from his mother’s hand; her comforting grip never once loosened as the shaky platform began its descent.

The view of the Diamond City laid out in front of him, and it was nothing but a chaotic mess.

Buildings, far from being structurally safe, leaned against one and other. Some were even built on top of flimsy rooftop of other buildings. Where were their structural engineers? Did they even have one?

Shaun frowned at the pure chaos.

This was the largest settlement in the Commonwealth, under the watchful eyes of the Institute through the mayor and his secretary. It reminded Shaun of experiments he’d performed when he was a child: Observing the behaviors and interactions of his lab specimens through a distant viewpoint.

Although, right now, he was standing inside the specimen’s cage, breathing the stench-filled air, hearing the headache-induced noise. It was as if he had landed on another planet.

“...The smell,” the old man mumbled to himself with a grimace. “How could they stand it?”

“You’d get nose-blind after a while,” his mother replied.

“I doubt I would. I can’t believe people live like this. This is… primitive.”
“It’s the best they could do, Shaun. This used to be a baseball park. It’s already here when I was a kid. We were supposed to come here for a game the day the bomb dropped, it was supposed to be your very first baseball game.” His mother pointed at the cluster of makeshift buildings in the center. “That was the field where they played. The grass used to be so green…”

“And now,” Shaun continued his mother’s unspoken thoughts, “look at this mess.”

“Yet people survive. That’s what matters, isn’t it?”

“Survive and live like animals?” Shaun huffed. “They have two hundred years to improve on their living conditions, and yet this is what they end up with. They’re beyond help, Mother.”

The platform stopped before she could respond. The mother and son stepped onto the former baseball field.

Shaun scowled at the dirt, the filth, and the mess.

“Mrs. Taylor?” a young man in some sort of weird padded uniform approached. “Danny Sullivan. The mayor informed me of your visit. I’ll escort you to Power Noodles.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sullivan.”

“Oh, please, just call me Danny. We’ve met. It was my shift as the gatekeeper when you first visit our city.”

“You still remember me?”

“Hard to forget, ma’am… Er, I mean, the fight the mayor and Piper got into, and they got you involved… You were looking for your son, I remember. Have you found him?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, thank god! I’m so glad you’ve found him. Good news are hard to come by these days.” The young man couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut.

Their presences turned more than a few heads. Their spotless white tailored coats attracted the attentions from people nearby. It was as if they were two aliens walking on planet Earth. In a way, they were. Neither of them belong to this place.

“How is everyone?” his mother asked as they headed deeper into the settlement. “Piper? Nick?”

“Piper is Piper. Poking her nose where it doesn’t belong. Nothing will ever change that. And Nick, he’s been busy. I’ve heard he’s looking for you. They said you were kidnapped…”

Although alarmed, Shaun kept a perfectly disinterested face.

His mother merely smiled at the young man. “Do I look like I was kidnapped?”

“No… You look good, ma’am. Better than before, if that’s even possible. I’m sure Codsworth would be thrilled to see you.” The guard waved at the noodle stand in the middle of the marketplace. “It’s his new job, helping Takahashi. Go ahead, Mrs. Taylor, take as much time as you need. I’ll be right here.”

There, behind one of the primitive food stands, stood two robots. One of them was a Protectron, Shaun recognized from his early study. And the other, a Mr. Handy.
“Codsworth,” his mother called, beaming in a way Shaun had never seen on her face.

Was she truly that happy to see a old robot? It's just a robot…

“How may I serve you--” The robot dropped the utensils when its optical sensors turned to its mistress. “By the god! It's you, mum! You're back!” It glided around the stand and hurried to its mistress. “You're back! I knew you'd come back. And this time I didn't even have to wait for two centuries!”

“Cods, listen, I found Shaun.”

“You have? Where is our little Shaun? Is he all right?” The robot twisted its visual sensors around, looking for a little boy. It was then all three orbs focus on Shaun. “And who might this gentleman be?”

“Codsworth…” His mother stepped aside to let the robot have a clear view of her son. “This is Shaun.”

“Ah, what a coincidence!” said the Mr. Handy cheerfully. “My young master is also named Shaun. Such an adorable little fellow, that one… I do miss him so much. Oh but listen to this old robot rambling! Thank you, kind sir, for bringing Miss Nora back home.”

“This is Shaun, Cods--”

“I heard you, Miss Nora. My sensors are at tiptop shape.”

“No, Codsworth, he’s our Shaun.”

Then, all the motors inside the Mr. Handy seemed to stop spinning at once. Its orb-like visual sensors zoomed in onto Shaun’s face as the old robot glided towards the old man, until its metallic body almost hit his organic one.

Unflinching, Shaun stood his ground and studied the robot’s reactions. The shutters on its visual sensors closed to a pinpoint, then widened, then closed again. If it were human, the Mr. Handy would have been blinking, squinting, doubting its own eyes.

Fascinating.

It would have been an intriguing study in his younger days back at the Robotics department. A rudimental robot’s imitation of a strong human reaction.

“...S...S--Shaun?” The robot’s voice came out of its audio speaker in a weaker volume.

“Yes?” the old man answered, noting every detail of the robot’s responses.

“S..Shaun…” The robot gasped, although it didn’t have lungs, nor did it need air. “By the God! It IS you!”

“You can tell?” asked Shaun curiously.

“Facial recognition matched Mr. Nate’s almost 92%!“ Codsworth bobbed up and down in the air, its metallic arms flailing. “Oh god, it IS you!”

For a second, Shaun wondered if there was a software malfunction in the robot, until he realized it was an impressive mimic of hyperventilation. Most fascinating, indeed.
“Shaun!” the robot cried. “Oh, how I missed you! You are all… all… grown up! Oh..oh…”

Codsworth sobbed, or at least his audio output mimicked the sound of sobbing. “I knew Miss Nora would find you! I knew it! She never gave up on you. We never gave up on you! I’m so glad you’re home!”

The robot’s affection was something Shaun had never expected. Could a machine really feel? Could it truly miss its master? Or was it just a code embedded in the programming to make the robot more human-like? If an old robot like Codsworth could ‘feel’, by that logic, more advanced models like third-generation synths should have thoughts and feelings as well. Otherwise, the Institute’s greatest creations would be inferior to a two-century old technology.

The last thought was utterly unacceptable.

“Oh, this calls for a celebration!” said Codsworth. “Perhaps I should cook your favorite dishes, Mr. Shaun. Oh what am I saying? You were only a baby, your favorite meal was milk! Ha! What would you like to eat, sir? Pizza, maybe? That was your father’s favorite! Or steak, perhaps? Or--”

“Codsworth,” his mother interrupted, “Shaun and I… we can’t stay here.”


His mother stepped up to the robot and instructed in a low voice, “Please listen carefully. I don’t think I’ll be back anytime soon.”

“Where are you going, Miss Nora?”

“Shaun has a home elsewhere, and I’m staying with him.” She reached inside her deep pocket within her jacket and pulled out something. What she placed it on the greasy counter of the noodle stand was an old, tattered book. “Give this back to Nick Valentine. I borrowed it from him. Make sure he gets it. Books are too hard to come by these days… So are good people.”

“Mr. Valentine is his office,” said Codsworth, “why don’t we go see him? He’d be delighted to see you!”

“No.” His mother's hand lingered on the book for a moment. “No, he won’t…”

His mother couldn't let go of the old world, Shaun noticed. He could hardly blame her; after all, this was all she knew. If she liked books, perhaps he could dispatch a team to collect old books for her to read.

“What do you mean?” asked the Mr. Handy.

The stench in the air became unbearable, the constant background noise even louder. The subtle pain returned and magnified as the old man’s body began to complain. Shaun knew he had to end this visit soon.

“It’s okay, Mother. Tell him.”

Somehow, his mother hesitated.

Was she ashamed of him? No. No, it couldn't be. The Institute was the future of humanity, and he was their leader.

“I am the leader of the Institute,” Shaun announced proudly.
“...You...you what?” Once again, the robot’s visual sensors all turned and focused on the old man.

“Your audience sensors are not malfunctioning,” Shaun confirmed. “I grew up in the Institute, and, through hard work, later on became the director. It’s nice to see you again, Codsworth, but my place is not here.”

“...But...but…” The robot was visibly distressed, if that was even possible.

Then, Shaun noticed a sudden flash of horror in his mother’s eyes as she glanced into the crowd.

“Something wrong?” Shaun asked, looking into the people that somehow had gathered around them.

There was more than mere curiosity in the surface dwellers’ faces. Their eyes were full of greed, hunger, hostility. In this corrupted surface world, on this filthy ground that once had been a field of perfectly mowed green grass, the pristine white coats on the mother and son stood out among dusty outfits of the surface dwellers.

It was as if both Shaun and his mother were some sort of exotic new specimens, ready to be captured and studied.

It was no wonder his mother sudden felt uncomfortable. So was he.

Step by step, the surface dwellers closed in.

The smell, the noise, everything about the crowd suffocated the old man. His head began to spin.

“We should go...” Shaun told his mother before he called, “...X6-88...” It was all he could say to the comm before his legs gave in.

His aging body had failed him. The last thing Shaun remembered was his mother’s beautiful features twisted in absolute horror.

He saw her.

He saw her, standing in front of him, no more than a few steps away.

Deacon couldn’t believe his own eyes.

There she was, looking even better than the day she had stumbled out of the vault. Gone were the leather jacket and cargo pants. Tailored white coat looked good on her.

She saw him.

She was able to spot him among the crowd that had gathered around her.

How observant. Deacon was proud.

When their eyes met, for a fraction of a second, Nora beamed like the sun in a clear summer sky.

Then, almost immediately, something shifted. Her blue eyes widened, horrified.
Something was clearly wrong.

Deacon took another step closer.

*I’ve been looking for you!*

Very discreetly, Nora shook her head. Her eyes shouted the words she couldn’t speak. “*Don’t come closer!*”

*You okay? What’s wrong?* Deacon took yet another step despite her warning.

“*Please. No!*” she pleaded silently.

*Whatever it is, I can help you.*

The old man next to her suddenly buckled.

Terrified, Nora quickly reached over to support the man’s taller frame. “*Shaun!*”

*Shaun?*

Just when Deacon pushed the crowd out of his way to give his partner a much-needed hand, a figure appeared out of nowhere behind the old man. A tall man in long black leather coat.

A courser.

*Shit!*

Deacon’s instincts shoved him back into the crowd before the courser could spot him.

“*Emergency extraction,*” said the courser to no one in particular as he easily held up the old man with one arm. “*Three to relay. Now!*”

And then, it happened again. A blinding flash enveloped the woman and the two men. When the flash was gone, so was Nora.

*No!*

Shoving the people aside, Deacon rushed to scene where Codsworth was left alone, staring at the dusty ground where his mistress had been only a few seconds ago.

“*...She’s… She’s gone…*” the Mr. Handy mumbled. “*She’s…*”

“What the hell happened?” Deacon demanded.

“She’s gone…” Codsworth repeated. “And Shaun… Oh god! Is he okay? I can’t believe! It’s been two centuries since I’d seen him, and he’s… he’s gone, too! They’re all gone!”

“Who was that man? Where did they take her?”

“That’s Shaun, Mister Deacon! Our Shaun!”

For a fraction of a second, Deacon’s brain refused to connect the two obvious dots.

“And he’s…” said Codsworth, whose voice was on the verge of nonexisting tears. “He’s…”

“He is what?” Deacon snapped, his patience was all but gone.
“He said he’s the leader of the Institute! But how could that be?!”


Nora’s missing baby was now an old man. And that old man was the leader of the Institute.

Nora Bennett, the woman who had stumbled out of the vault and into his life, the woman who had become his partner after going solo all these years, the woman who somehow refused to leave his mind, was the mother of the leader of the Institute.

The very same Institute. The most hated boogeymen of the Commonwealth, the very group he had dedicated his life to fight against.

The news hit Deacon like a sucker punch in his stomach. For the longest moment, he was dazed, out of breath. Steel blue eyes behind the sunglasses widened, unblinking. His mouth gaped open, yet no words came out of it, not even a sound.

His partner, his Project Wanderer, was now on the opposition side. And he had brought her to see Dez and Glory. He could swap face and be a new man anytime he wanted, but Dez? Glory? They had been exposed because of him.

All these years of necessary precautions, of paranoia, the liar had finally made one fatal mistake. The Railroad was compromised because of him.

It was his fucking fault.

Deacon’s world crumbled.

A/N: I expect some of you might be throwing things at the screen. Sorry if you’re expecting a Deacon/Nora reunion. Don’t give up on the story just yet. Not everything is sunshine and rainbows, but every cloud has a silver lining.

As always, thanks for reading.

Contact info: gmail -- pinoko19, tumblr -- pinoko-k.
“Cancer?” Nora repeated the word as if it was vocabulary from a new language. For the longest moment, her mind refused to accept the fact that her son had cancer.

Doctor Dean Volkert nodded. “His trip to the surface has taken a toll on him.”

“Oh god. It’s my fault…”

“You didn’t know,” said the doctor. “Shaun has kept his illness a secret. Only three people in the entire Institute know. Four, now.”

Nora was too afraid to ask, but she had to. “...How...long?”

“Six months at best.”

“Six months?!” Nora snapped, her usual patience now was running thin. “What about treatments? Surgeries? Anything!”

“I’m really sorry, Mrs. Taylor,” said Dr. Volkert sincerely. “Shaun and I… we’ve been friends since we were little boys. Even I couldn’t talk him into getting treatment.”


“The side effects could be unpleasant.”

“How bad?”


No. No, no, no… Nora’s heart sank to the bottom of her stomach.

“No. No, no, no…” The doctor paused with a quiet sigh. “I’ve to be honest, Mrs. Taylor, there’s no guarantee. The cancer cells have spread all over his body. Isolation treatment is no longer an option.”

Nora took a staggering step back to keep herself from collapsing. No, she couldn’t collapse right now, physically or mentally. Her son needed her.
“That said,” Dr. Volkert quickly added, “with treatment, Shaun could live for another year, maybe two. But we’re running out of time. The treatment has to start now, or it’ll be too late. You should talk to him, Mrs. Taylor. If anyone could change his mind, it’s you.”

She had just found her son, and now she was about to lose him once again.

Nora’s world crumbled.

“You sure that’s what he said?” Nick Valentine asked again.

“Yes, Mr. Valentine,” Codsworth replied, his voice was drowned in tears that his eyes were not capable of producing. “Our little Shaun… The leader of the Institute? How… how did this happen?”

Sitting across the synth in his clustered detective agency, Deacon had not spoken. In his hand was a book that he had searched through the Commonwealth to find. A book that he had lent to his partner -- his former partner.

In Search of Lost Time Volume One. By Marcel Proust.

“How indeed…” mumbled Valentine. As shock as he was, Nick Valentine retained a clear head and wrote down every word the Mr. Handy said. “Talk about a twist,” said the detective with a sigh. “The enemies brainwashed her kidnapped son, and now her kid is one of them. This has to be hard for our pre-war dame.”

Valentine's comment hit Deacon like a baseball bat. Blinded by shock and betrayal, he had not even considered how Nora would feel.

Does it matter?

Swallowing a sigh and buried any upcoming thoughts on his former partner, Deacon idly spun the book on a finger to give himself something to do. Anything but to think about the dark-haired woman and their short but fun time together.

Valentine continued, “And you said Shaun fainted and a courser took him away.”

“The man in all black just… poof, and there he was,” Codsworth recalled. “Then he held Shaun up and… and poof! They were gone! All of them!”

“Teleportation,” the synth detective concluded. “Something happened to Shaun. The question is what.”

“And Miss Nora,” the robot added, “she said she had to stay with Shaun. But… but…”

“But how could she?” Deacon broke his silence and voiced what had been on his mind. “How could she after knowing what the Institute has done?”

The bitterness of both his words and his tone surprised Deacon himself.

Was he angry at her for being the mother of the big boss of the boogeymen? Or was he angry at himself?
Was the Railroad so desperate that he had to place his bet on a complete unknown? For someone who was so skilled at reading people, had Deacon finally failed and misread her all this time?

His instincts, his gut, his heart, all screamed at him, telling him something was off. Nora had spotted him, even warned him not to approach with a courser lurking within striking distance. Had she wanted him dead, he would be a pile of burning ashes on the dirty ground by now.

So, why? Why was he still breathing? Why hadn’t she ordered the courser to haul him back to some secret dungeon? Why had she even bothered to warn him?

Unless…

Unless she’s on your side, whispered a tiny voice inside his head.

His nimble fingers momentarily froze at the intrusive thought. The tattered antique paperback toppled from his fingertip and dropped onto the floor.

It was then he noticed something was stuck in between the yellow pages. It was a corner of a white piece of paper, too new to be two-century-old.

Deacon jolted from his seat.

He knew exactly who this was from.

“What’s wrong?” asked Valentine.

Ignoring the detective for the moment, Deacon quickly flipped the book upside down and shook it until two neatly folded notes fell onto Valentine’s desk.

The liar and the detective shared one knowing glance before each man grabbed a note.

Nick unfolded his paper and read, “‘Must read list. Charles Dickens. John Newbery. George Orwell. Mark Twain…’”

“Names of pre-war writers,” Deacon answered automatically as he read his.

On this little piece of paper, written in delicate handwriting was a simple paragraph.

“Attorney-Client Privilege: An attorney speaking publicly in regard to a client’s personal business and private affairs can be reprimanded by the bar and/or disbarred, regardless of the fact that he or she may be no longer representing the client.”

Attorney-Client Privilege. Deacon had heard of this term before, right from his lawyer partner’s mouth. On the day she’d been taken, he’d hired her to be his lawyer, at the price of one bottle cap.

She had told him then that his secrets would be safe with her.

“Nothing but names on this one,” said Valentine. “What’s on yours?”

Heart racing, Deacon snatched the note from the detective’s hand and read it himself.

“Must read list:

Charles Dickens.
John Newbery.

George Orwell.

Mark Twain.

W. Shakespeare.

Jane Austen.

Scott Fitzgerald.

George Eliot.

Jack London.

Louisa May Alcott.

William Butler Yeats.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Patrick O’Brien

Oscar Wilde"

Just as Nick had said, this one had nothing but names of famous authors.

His eyes scanned the names again and again to find a pattern. A list of seemingly random authors. It was not alphabetically or chronologically ordered. The names were grouped in three or four, with no apparent links between the authors.

Was this really just a list of writers she liked?

No, Deacon refused to believe, there’s more to it then that.

There had to be a message within.

Come on, Deacon, find it! Find it!

“Huh, Attorney-Client Privilege?” Valentine mumbled to himself after he read the other note. “Did Miss Bennett miss her old job that much?”

“Miss Nora was a very good lawyer,” said Codsworth. “The people she’d helped were often unfortunate ones in need. Or so Mr. Nate had once told me. That was before my time.”

Deacon blocked all the noise and chatters. He had to concentrate, he had to find the hidden message. Her message to him.

And suddenly, he saw it.
The initials.

D NOT SAFE LAY LOW.

This realization hit him like a ton of bricks.

This message, along with the other note, all point to one thing.

Even though her son turned out to be the leader of the Institute, even though she knew about the Railroad, about him, one thing remained unchanged.

She had been protecting him, and she would continue to, no matter what.

In a place where perfect copies of synthetic humans were created, even the best scientists couldn’t defy mother nature, whether it was common cold or cancer.

Nora sat by her son’s bedside, just like the many nights she’d spent in his nursery by his crib.

In what felt like only a few short weeks, her infant son had now turned into an old man.

She had never even celebrated a birthday with her baby, and now, he was dying.

The man lying in bed looked so fragile. Tubes connected to his arm, cocktails of drugs and nutrients slowly dripped into his vein. Nora gently took his hand in hers. Hands that used to be tiny and chubby, now were bigger than hers, wrinkled and cold.

After what felt like a century, her son opened his eyes.

“Shaun?”

Warm brown eyes that looked like Nate’s scanned the room for a few seconds before recognition set in.

“We’re in the medical bay,” Nora told him. “You’re okay, now.”

Shaun released a long, relieved breath. “...Yes... I can... breathe...”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ask you to go to the surface with me.”

Her son shook his head faintly. “...I wanted to see it with my own eyes. Now I have...”

“But Dr. Volkert warned you not to go. Why didn’t you listen to him?”

“Ah... Dean told you.”

“Cancer.” That one single word was so hard to utter. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“...I was about to. There is something I need to ask of you.”

“Anything.”

“When I’m not here, I want you to take my place.”
For a moment, Nora wasn’t entirely sure what he meant. “Your place?”

“As the director of the Institute.”

So shocked by the request, Nora could only blink. “What?”

“This…” He waved a hand weakly, gesturing at his room. “...All these. My lifework, my legacy, I want you to protect it. I want you to lead the Institute.”

“What… why? There are others.”

“They are scientists. They’re experts in their fields. But leading the Institute… it requires someone with not only a brain, but a heart, dedication, and perseverance. I didn’t realize until I became the director. You have shown you possess all those with your time on the surface, through your search for me.”

Nora felt a sudden chill down her spine. “...It was all a test?”

“Forgive my caution. I need to make sure. Now, I am certain you are the correct choice.”

“No! I’m here because of you, son. And only because of you. I don’t care about the Institute.”

“The Institute is me, Mother. My whole life is dedicated to it. Look what I’ve accomplished.”

“The Institute killed your father, Shaun! They stole you and experimented on you. You never had a chance at a normal life because of it!”

“From your point of view, it might seem so. But, I have a good life because of it.”

Nora couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “A good life? I read the files. They locked you inside a lab until you were five, until they no longer needed you. That’s not any way to raise a child.”

“It was necessary to protect my DNA source, as I’ve explained to you before.”

“You’re not a lab rat, Shaun. You’re a human. You’re my son!”

The old man in bed suddenly coughed. His breath turned short and shallow, his wrinkled face scrunched in pain.

All the fire in Nora’s gut extinguished in a flash. However angry she was at the establishment, however unreasonable Shaun’s request was, this was her son, her own flesh and blood. This was the tiny little baby that had grown inside her for ten months, the infant she had spent hours of pain and sweats and blood to deliver, the child she would give her life for without hesitation, no matter how old he was.

“You okay?” asked Nora, soothing her son’s chest. “I’ll call for Dr. Volkert.”

“Consider... my request, Mother,” said Shaun, his voice weak. “Protect your boy’s dream…”

The air in the medical bay suddenly became suffocating.

“You’ll get better,” Nora lied, perhaps more for her own benefit. “There’s treatment.”

“...Did Dean tell you the side effects?”

“Yes…”
“Then you’d understand. Even with treatment, how long would I last? A year? Two? ...I’m tired. I don’t want to fight anymore…”

“No!” said Nora louder than she intended. “No, you can’t give up, Shaun!”

“I’ve lived a long life, Mother. Let me leave with dignity. It is my wish… my request.”

“But I’ve just found you, son...” Perhaps it was selfish of her to ask for more time, but Nora couldn’t, wouldn’t let go.

“I do regret our time together is limited. Let’s make the most out of it, while I’m still able…”

Her chest tightened, her vision blurred, but Nora refused to drop one tear in front of her son. Taking his cold hand in hers once more, she forced a smile and nodded. “Yes. Let’s…”

“What?!?” the alpha of Railroad yelled.

Desdemona’s reaction was well within Deacon’s expectation.

Standing next to the alpha, her second-in-command Doctor Stanley Carrington gave Deacon a dirty look that screamed ‘you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.’

Carrington’s reaction was also expected.

Deacon had known this two for more than a decade. Like them or not, they were the closest things he had to a family. And, regardless of what stupidity one member had committed, family should stick together.

Right?

Deacon honestly didn’t know. His last family member had been brutally murdered in front of him more than two decades ago. Her skull had been smashed open, an implant had been pulled out of her brain.

An implant, a synth.

His late wife was a synth created by the Institute. The same Institute that was now led by his partner’s son. And Deacon had no fucking clue in both cases.

“What have you told her?” Desdemona asked after taking a long drag of her cigarette.

Deacon shrugged. “Nothing much.”

“‘Nothing much’?” Carrington snorted. “She was here in the church. For god's sake, she's seen you, Dez.”

Deacon couldn't deny that. “I didn’t tell her we’re partying with a bunch of skeletons in the basement.”

“And she’s never asked you where our current HQ is?” asked Desdemona with a frown.
“Not once,” Deacon replied. “As far as she knows, the church was a random meeting place.”

“‘As far as she knows?’” Again, Dr. Asshole huffed. “As far as we know, she knows much more than she lets on. Wake up and smell the coffee, Deacon, you’ve been played.”

Had he?

No! yelled his heart. No, his gut concurred.

“No,” said Deacon outloud. “If she’s been on the Institute’s side, why would she bother to smuggle the messages out?”

“What messages?” asked his boss.

From his pocket, Deacon carefully retrieved two neatly folded notes. He then carefully unfolded them as though they were some precious artifacts and put them on the table.

For the longest moment, the leader of the Railroad and the resident doctor frowned at the both handwritten notes in confusion.

“What the hell is this?” asked Carrington.

“What does it look like?” said Deacon.

“A list of names,” the doctor replied. “Pre-war authors. And the other one listed the definition of something called Attorney-Client Privilege.”

“She was a lawyer,” Deacon explained. “Go ahead. See if you can decipher them.”

Taking it as a challenge, Carrington took another closer look at the notes, then held each one against the light to see if there was any hidden words on the plain paper.

Eventually, the resident smartass had to admit defeat.

A strange surge of pride arose from Deacon gut. His partner’s code was too hard to crack, even for an intelligent man like Stanley Carrington.

Deacon pointed the Attorney-Client Privilege. “This is her way of telling me that my secrets are safe with her. She’s not just a lawyer, she’s my lawyer.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Deacon?” his boss demanded.

“I hired her. Best one cap ever spent.” Ignore the looks of confusion, Deacon pointed at the list of names on the table. “And this is further proof that she is taking her duty as my lawyer very seriously. Check out the initials of the last names.”

Deacon stepped back, then watched as the light bulbs switched on inside their heads.


“For starter,” said Deacon, “I was her partner. Those bastards took her from me right under my nose. By now, I’m probably on top of their wanted list. And… Well, there was another minor incident…”

He could hear Carrington’s eyes roll without even looking at the man’s face.
“Now what?” asked the doctor with a heavy sigh of exasperation.

To that, Deacon shrugged and told them as if he was telling them what he had for breakfast, “I was spotted by a courser the other night when I was trying to free a synth.”

“You what?” His boss scowled.

“Hey, I’m still in one piece.” Deacon skipped yet another detail of how close to death he had been. “The important thing is, so is our Wanderer. She looked unharmed.”

“She’s the mother of their leader, what do you expect?” said Carrington. “I suggest we relocate ASAP.”

“If she wanted to take down the Railroad,” Deacon countered, “all she needed to do was to snap her fingers, and I’d be the VIP of their secret dungeon. She saw me, Dez. But she did her best to warn me to stay away because she knew a courser was nearby.”

“Or maybe she didn’t want you to kill her son,” said Carrington. “Have you thought about that? Don’t tell me you really think she cares about you.”

Yes, his heart told him. Yet both his brain and his survival instincts told his heart to shut the hell up.

“I don’t know,” the liar replied honestly, for once. “What I know is, if she wanted me dead, I wouldn’t be here to deliver this intel.”

“She let you go this time,” said Desdemona, “but we can’t guarantee she’d not sell us out in the future. It’s us versus her own kid, Deacon. Where do you think her loyalty lies?”

Where? Deacon had been asking himself the same question for hours.

“She knows about the slavery, the synths, and all good stuff,” said Deacon. “I don’t think she could ignore the evidence.”

“You don’t think…” The doctor huffed. “How reassuring.”

“She’s a lawyer,” Deacon reminded the other man. “Critical thinking is her job requirement.”

“She’s also a mother,” Desdemona pointed out. “Heed her advice, Deacon. Lay low for now.”

“Dez, if I could find her, if I could talk to her, maybe she could help us free the synths from within.”

It was farfetched, even by Deacon’s standard. But if there was a glimpse of hope, Deacon refused to give up.

“Lay low,” his boss repeated, her tone firmer this time. “Project Wanderer is cancelled.”

“What?” Deacon frowned.

“Agree.” Dr. Asshole gave the sunglasses-wearing agent a chilling side-eye of disapproval. “I don’t care what type of shenanigans you’re getting into outside, but don’t paint a giant red target on our backs. You know better than anyone else, Deacon, we’re on our last legs. We need time to recuperate and regroup.”

The two men might not always see eye to eye, but Deacon respected Carrington’s intelligence and
wisdom. And this time, as much as Deacon hated to admit, he knew the doctor had a point -- a very good point.

The air within the catacomb had become too stuffy, threatening to suffocate the man in sunglasses.

He had to leave. He needed air. He needed time to think. And he needed space to be alone with nothing but a good book.

“Fine. Have it your way,” said Deacon, who then headed straight to the exit, slammed the door behind him, and disappeared into the dark tunnels.

The door to her apartment closed behind her. Nora’s stoic front crumbled like a sand castle under a crushing wave.

How did this happen?

In a few short weeks, her life had turned upside down. Her husband was dead, her son was dying. All because of the goddamned Institute. And now her son wanted her to succeed him as the director?

Shaun’s request had taken her by surprise. Was this the reason why he had released her from the vault? As much as Nora hated to admit, she knew it was very likely. What a dying man needed was not a mother, but a successor.

Could she overlook what the Institute had done to her family and families of others? Could she, in all good conscience, stay here without Shaun? Could she ever forgive and forget?

The answers were all no.

She was here because of her son, and only because of her son. The Institute had stolen her baby, murdered her husband, all because they had to make synthetic humans, to create an improved model of robotic slaves. All in the name of science. What else had they done? Nora shuddered to even think.

Both her heart and her mind screamed at her, telling her not to accept the role as the director. She didn’t belong here. This was not her home, and it would never be.

But this was her son’s legacy, his hard work. And to protect it was his one and only request for his mother. How could Nora deny a man’s dying wish, especially when the man was her only son?

Nora let out a long, tired breath.

There had to be a better way to resolve this. There had to be.

For now, though, Shaun’s health was her first priority. The rest could wait.

Peeling off the white coat, Nora put her hair up in a loose bun and reached for a book on the desk. It was then she remembered the book was no longer in her possession.

It’d become a habit of hers to read Proust each night. Through the stained pages and old-book smell, she had found comfort and much-needed familiarity of the old pre-war world. And now, the
book had returned to its owner, along with the pieces of paper she had hidden in between the pages.

Did Deacon find the notes? Did he decipher them? Nora could only hope.

It was her only chance to warn him, to assure him that she would protect his secrets, no matter what.

Would he trust her, though?

She opened a drawer and retrieved an envelope. Within contained a note that answered her question.

“You can’t trust everyone.”

Nora read that one line again and again. She could almost hear her former partner warning her, guiding her.

She couldn’t trust everyone. But could she trust her own son?

“He’s raised by the enemies,” said a tiny voice inside her head that sounded suspiciously like the man in sunglasses. “Do you really know him?”

No. But… he’s my son.

“People change. Listen to your gut. Trust your instincts.”

Could she trust herself to make the best decision?

What would her father do?

“You watch with your eyes, kiddo,” her dad had told her. “And listen to the things people don’t tell you. Read between their lines. Observe their behaviors. Their words might tell you one thing, but their actions might show you something else. Always remember, actions speak louder than words.”

Actions speak louder than words.

When she looked beyond perfect sales pitch of ‘Mankind Redefined’, underneath the pristine surface of the Institute, what could she find? Slavery? Morally-questionable experiments? Death counts of hundreds?

Nora intended to find out.

From the bottom of the drawer, Nora pulled out another book instead. This would be her bedtime reading from now on. A stained, tattered booklet that once used to be a top secret classified training material for U.S. Army.


Her thoughts went to the man who had handed her this manual as if he was passing her his favorite magazine. Idly, she wondered what Deacon was doing. Wherever he was, Nora only hoped that he was safe.

Shaking all the thoughts away, Nora flipped to the first page and started to read.
It was dark, with nothing but a lantern to light up this hidden sanctuary underneath the Commonwealth.

Underground suited him, Deacon always knew. Far away from the prying eyes of the opposition and any immediate potential danger, the paranoid man allowed himself to relax if only for just a short moment. His tired muscles sang for joy for a well-deserved break, but his mind refused to stop.

How the hell did this happen?

In only a few short weeks, a stranger who had crawled out of the vault had become his partner, and now she was the mother of the Institute’s leader. What. The. Fuck?

The cancellation of Project Wandered was hardly a surprise. Deacon had seen this coming long before he’d stepped foot into the catacomb. But it didn’t mean he had to like it. They were right to be cautious, smart to be suspicious, because it’s not just their asses on the line, but the lives of many agents and their loved ones.

Deacon’s mistake could be fatal, devastatingly so.

But it wasn’t a mistake, was it? His former partner was safeguarding his secrets. Whether it was done out of gratitude or professionalism, Deacon didn’t know.

Or maybe she knew the Institute was wrong. Deacon could only hope.

Under the dim, amber light, the liar took off his sunglasses and read the two notes over and over again. If only the notes were longer, if only she could tell him more…

If only he could talk to her once more.

Deacon let out a long, silent breath, then carefully put them back into his pocket. His gaze settled on a book lying quietly next to him. One of his prized possessions. In Search of Lost Time, Volume One. Swann’s Way.

This book had somehow survived through a nuclear bomb. So had his former partner. His thought went to the woman out of time. Idly, he wondered what Nora was doing. Almost immediately, though, his instincts shoved all thoughts away.

Perhaps it’s for the better if he could forget all about her. Perhaps…

If he could.

Blocking all incoming thoughts about a certain Frozen Banana, Deacon flipped to the first page of the book and started to read.

Unexpected variations could occur in even the most controlled experiment. An experienced scientist had better learn to think quick on their feet.

This incident, though, caught the old man by surprised. Was his body falling apart this fast? He
thought he had a few more months...

No matter. Shaun Taylor knew what to do.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” asked X6-88 in his polite yet monotonic voice as he entered the director’s office.

“Yes.” Shaun shifted on his chair, making every effort to appear as normal as he could be. But it was all an act. No doubt the courser knew as well. “The… incident back in Diamond City, have you reported it to Dr. Ayo?”

“No, sir,” X6-88 replied. “Dr. Volkert has informed me the incident is considered highly classified. I should not discuss it with anyone, even when asked.”

Shaun released a secret sigh of relief. He could always count on Dean Volkert as he’d had for decades. “Did Dr. Ayo ask?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“What Dr. Volkert told me. ‘Father and Mrs. Taylor have returned safely. The smell on the surface was the cause of his nausea. He is now resting after standard decontamination procedure.’”

“Very good.” Shaun nodded. “Are you currently on any assignment?”

“Yes.”

Shaun knew the answer, yet he asked, “What is it?”

The courser replied without a hint of hesitation, “Dr. Ayo has instructed me to monitor Mrs. Taylor.”

X6-88’s candor didn’t surprise Shaun. After all, he was the father of all synths. “I see… From now on, you work for me directly.”

There was a slight shift of expression on the courser’s face. A faint raise of one eyebrow. It was subtle, but it didn’t escape the old man’s eyes. To the synth’s credit, his face quickly reverted back to the stone-cold mask.

“I’d be honored, sir,” said X6-88 without a hint of emotion.

“Continue to report to Dr. Ayo about my mother’s activities. But, report to me first. I’ll tell you what to tell him. Do not mention my latest assignment for you. Our conversation today never happens.”

“Understood.”

“There’s another thing I want you to do.”

“Anything, Father.”

- End of Part Two -
A/N: Sorry if you expected to see: 1, Drunken Deacon drinking his sorrow away. 2, Mega angst drama. To me, the one defining trait of Deacon is paranoia. I can’t see him getting drunk in public, this would make him vulnerable. It goes against his paranoid/cautious personality.

As for the betrayal, there are more than enough drama and angst in coming, no need to drag the betrayal plot longer than necessary.

To those of you who guessed that there’s more to the book than meets the eyes. Bravo! I had Nora put the book in her bag chapters ago just for this moment.

As always, thanks for reading.

Hope to see you next time!

Title: “My Heart Tells Me” -- Frank Sinatra, 1943.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
The decorative string lights on the artificial pine tree blinked at a frequency of precisely once every two seconds. Colors from the lights painted the dull grey wall nearby with a mix of red and green, then yellow and blue. Red and green. Yellow and blue.

The tree looked utterly out of place in the laboratory. Yet, once a year, it would make an appearance at this same spot, with the same lights.

Tonight, the lab was empty except for one dark haired man sitting in front of a workstation. But he was not alone. Next to his workstation, a bald man sat, naked from head to toes. The lack of clothings didn't bother that either one, for the naked man was not even a human. It was a robot -- a synthetic human.

A small device was attached to the robot’s cervical spinal nerve 6. Wires from the device were connected to the workstation, where the scientist was busy typing.

His concentration blocked out the blinking lights on tree. His eyes focused intently on the screen, on the results of the latest experiment, which were less than ideal.

There was an error somewhere in the code, and he intended to find it and fix it.

Frowning at the disappointing outputs, the man nevertheless kept a cool head and reached for his log. Failure was part of the process, trial and error was the foundation of his work. The important thing was to find the mistakes, correct them, and try again.

And sometimes, again, and again, and again.

Eventually, he would get the results he wanted.

On the log, the man meticulously recorded every details, starting with the time and date.

December 24, 2255. 18:45.

To most of his colleagues, tonight was one of the few special nights in a year. Even Dean had picked tonight for marriage proposal. The man briefly wondered if his best friend had better luck with the future wife than he had with his test results.

Christmas Eve. The man could never completely comprehend the need to make this particular day special. He understood the origin of the festival and the myth behind it, of course, but he couldn’t see why men and women of science still celebrate a century-old tradition, especially when they didn’t even practice the religion to start with.

But then again, the man often found his colleagues hard to understand. As he, no doubt, would
appear to be hard to understand for most of them, except for a few good friends. That never bothered him anyway. Being understood was never one of his goals. He had a purpose in this place, a dream that he was chasing. And the dream was sitting right next to him, in a form of a synthetic human.

“Doctor Taylor?” a voice interrupted his work.

Shaun Taylor spared a brief glance at the intruder. “Yes?”

Alan Binet, the young intern with sandy blond hair.

Shaun knew him. In fact, he was the one who had asked for Mr. Binet to join the team. A young man excelled in all his subjects, especially programming and mechanical engineering. With a mind like his, Alan Binet would make a wonderful addition to Robotics.

“The lights are still on,” said Binet, “I thought someone forgot to turn them off.”

Shaun cast a curious look at the intern. “I thought you left. What are you doing here?”

“Oh!” The young man lit up, although his expression quickly changed to an embarrassed one, Shaun noticed. “Came back for this.” Binet waved at a small box in his hand. “Left this in the office. It’s a gift for a… friend.”

Female friend, no doubt. Still, Shaun didn’t bother to ask. It's not his business.

Binet continued, “And you, sir?”

“Documenting the latest test result,” Shaun replied as if he’d asked the most obvious question.

“Er, I mean, it’s Christmas Eve.”

“And?”

For a split second, the young man was dumbfounded. “…And Christmas Eve is a time relax and spend with family and--”

“I don’t have any,” stated Shaun as nothing but a fact.

The young man’s face turned bright red for his mistake, although Shaun wasn’t offended, nor was he at all bothered by the fact that he was all alone.

“I--I… I’m sorry.”

Shaun waved away the intern’s unnecessary concern. “There’s nothing to be sorry about, Mr. Binet. I was merely stating a fact. I don’t find spending my evenings here as any form of inconvenience. In fact, I find it… relaxing.” His gaze wandered to the robot he was diagnosing.

“The third-generation models have been vastly improved on in recent years, but there are still a lot of rooms for improvements. As such, there are always testings need to be done, programs need to be fixed.”

The flush on the young man’s face had subsided as he listened with great interest. “But they are already so lifelike.”

“Comparing to the first two generations, no doubt. But we mustn’t be satisfied.” Shaun pointed at the face of the robot. “Notice their expressions and their movements? They are far from natural. And the way they retain information and subsequently self-correct their mistakes? It’s something
I’ve been working on. I hope, one day, they would be indistinguishable from humans. Perhaps even better than us…”

“Better than us?”

“Why not? Why limit ourselves to merely duplicating the most perfect machines? Why not improve on them? Robots don’t need to sleep or eat. They don’t age.”

There was a curious glint in Binet’s pale blue eyes as he studied the robot. “Doctor Taylor… If I may…”

“Speak your mind, Mr. Binet.”

“…Is it true that the third-gen was created from your DNA?”

“Yes.” The exact experiments had become hazy memories, but Shaun would never forget the needles, the bright lights, the cold lab table, and the pain.

“That’s incredible! Because of you, mankind has made a step forward to the future. You must be so proud. In some ways, you are the father of the synthetic humans.”

Father? Shaun had never considered that.

“Whatever you may have heard,” Shaun told the young intern, “leave them all at the door when you enter my laboratory. I am just a scientist, like the everyone else in Robotics. There are deadlines to be met, projects to be done.” Speaking of work… “Now, if there’s nothing else…”

Just when Shaun was about to focus back on his work, he noticed the young man lingered behind.

Holding back a sigh, Shaun asked, “Yes?”

“If you don’t mind, you’re more than welcome to join us for dinner. You need a break, Dr. Taylor. Unlike the robots, we humans have to eat.”

Perhaps Binet was right, work could wait for a few more hours. The colorful lights blinked on the artificial tree at the corner of the sterile lab, creating a hypnotic effect on human mind. Red and green. Then yellow and blue. An offer than Shaun would refuse under normal circumstances, now seemed somewhat appealing.

And his stomach definitely agreed.

“…Perhaps I shall.”

“Wonderful!” The grin on Binet’s face was as bright as the lights on the tree. “My mother would be absolutely delighted to see you. My father always talks about your works in Robotics.”

“Dr. Binet is an excellent mentor, and a genius in programming. You can certainly learn a lot from your father.”

“I prefer to find my own path.” Young Binet shrugged. “There’s something magical about finding bugs and fixing them. And when the program runs… Nothing in the world beats that feeling.”

That was the moment Shaun knew he would get along with this young man.

“I’d better run and deliver this.” Alan Binet waved at the forgotten present in his hand. “I’ll go on ahead and save you a seat at the table, Dr. Taylor. Don't forget to stop by! After all, we should
spend this time of the year with family and friends.”

Shaun glanced at a steaming bowl of murky yellow concoction on the table in front of him. “What is this?”

“Chicken soup,” his mother told him. “Dr. Volkert said you’ve hardly eaten anything.”

“I don’t have the appetite.”

“Well, at least give this a try. Your grandma used to cook this for me when I was sick. We don’t have the same ingredients here, of course. So I improvised.”

After stirring the hot liquid with his spoon, Shaun took a cautious sip. His skepticism turned into surprise upon the first taste. It’s hot, savory yet light, and strangely soothing.

“It’s… unlike anything I’ve tasted.”

“Pre-war home remedies,” his mother said. “I bet it’s not in the Institute's database.”

“It's not,” Shaun replied with all seriousness despite his mother’s obvious joking tone. “Our culinary database is limited to items on the cafeteria menu of the CIT, and the recipe records from the Department of Food Science.”

“Poor kid…” said the woman who was physically half his age.

“I am no longer a child, Mother.”

“Six or sixty, you’d always be my son.”

The strange surge of warmth rose from his gut was not a result of the hot soup he had consumed, but from his mother’s words. And Shaun had found that he’d grown to like the soothing sensation.

Still, receiving affection was definitely not something Dr. Taylor was used to. Shaun quickly changed the subject, “If your recipes require ingredients that are not available in BioScience, you can submit an inquiry to Dr. Holdren. I’m sure Clayton and his team would be intrigued by the challenge of replicating extinct plants or animals.”

“All these trouble for some old world comfort food?”

“It’s nothing. Once you’ve become the director, there will be more privileges.”

And just like that, the warmth in his mother's face was gone. “I really don’t think this is a job for me, Shaun. It’s not my place to lead, and--”

Shaun quickly rose a hand to stop her. “My apologies, Mother. I don’t mean to rush your decision. I simply want to make you feel at home.”

There was a slight hesitation, Shaun noticed. A split of a second before his mother responded. “My home is where you are, son.”

And when I’m not here?
She was uncomfortable, that much was apparent. But why? Shaun wondered. The living condition here was far superior to the dumpster that was the surface world. And, even though he never had a chance to experience it himself, Shaun was certain what they could offer here in the Institute was much more advanced than the old world his mother was used to.

So, why could she not make this her new home?

That was a problem Dr. Shaun Taylor intended to solve.

Quietly, Shaun finished his bowl. “...That was… delicious, Mother. Thank you.”

A gentle smile returned to his mother’s face. “If your father was here, he would have insisted that you drink his concoction.”

“What would it be?”

“Hot Nuka-Cola with ginger. He used to tell me that it’s the cure for everything.”

*Including cancers?* “Nuka-Cola? It's a… drink or some sort, isn't it?”

“The most popular soft drink in the entire country. Your father loved it.”

“What did it taste like?”

“It's sweet, a bit sour, tingy. Hard to describe.”

The topic had ignited his curiosity. Shaun made a quick check on the terminal and read the ingredient list from the database, “Carbonated water, caramel color, aspartame, phosphoric acid, potassium benzoate, natural flavors, citric acid, and caffeine.” Then, frowning, he asked, “Was it truly safe to consume?”

His mother laughed. “You know, I did wonder from time to time. I asked your dad, but he said anything could kill you. He'd rather die from diabetes or heart attack. Did I tell you he also loved pizza? Double pepperoni, extra cheese...”

Shaking his head, Shaun concluded, “Father was not what I expected.”

Arching an eyebrow, her blue eyes shone curiously at him. “Oh? What did you expect?”

“I… had never given much thought. For years, I simply accepted the way things were. When I found out about you and Father, I began to wondered. You, as a lawyer... I pictured you to be sharp-tongued, aggressive, almost unforgiving. I never expected you to be so… kind. As for Father, I imagined him to be nothing but a soldier. A brute, if you'd forgive my honesty.”

His mother didn’t seem offended at all. Instead, the smile she gave him was warm, gentle, and comforting, like the soup she’d prepared for him. “You can always speak your mind in front of me, son. That's what families are for. We love each other despite our flaws.”

“Despite the flaws? Is it even possible?”

To that, she nodded, seemingly wise beyond her years. “Our flaws make us human, Shaun. When you love someone, when you truly love someone, you accept everything about that person. The good, the bad, the ugly. Your father was far from the dashing war hero many might think he was, but I loved him even more because of that.”

“Because of his flaws?” For a moment, the old man thought he’d misheard.
“Your dad… He was a very interesting man. What I will always remember about him… are the things he used to do to make me laugh.”

Curious, Shaun then asked, “Tell me more about my father.”

“Here. I’ve always wanted to show you this.” From the pocket of her coat, his mother pulled out a holotape and handed it to him. “See for yourself… Or in this case, listen.”

“... But everything we do, no matter how hard, we do it for our family,” said the man on the holotape. “Now say goodbye, Shaun. Bye bye, say bye bye.” A babble and a giggle from an infant was clearly heard. “Bye honey. We love you.”

The tape stopped.

Then, there was nothing but silence.

For the fifth time, Shaun reached out and pressed play, then sat back as the voices from the past echoed through his living quarters once again.

“Oops, haha! Keep those little fingers away...”

The old man glanced at his own hands. Long fingers that had typed so many lines of codes are now wrinkled. Had they ever been that little? Shaun couldn’t recall. The broken crib in his old house was the only proof that he had once been small.

“Ah, there we go. Just say it, right there. Right there, go ahead.” Then, there was a clean voice of a baby giggling. The old man’s own voice, once upon a time.

Shaun had no recollection of this taping session, nor could he recall his own father. Yet, there he was, Nathaniel Taylor. His words, his voice, his laughter, all were preserved on an ancient holotape that had survived for more than two centuries and a nuclear war.

“Ah, yay!” The man celebrated as his infant son had made a sound on his cue. If that had called for a celebration, would his father be proud of his lifetime accomplishment?

It was a question Shaun would never get an answer.

“Hi honey, listen... I don't think Shaun and I need to tell you how great of a mother you are. But, we're going to anyway. You are kind, and loving...” His recordings was interrupted by the baby’s laughter. “And funny, that's right! And patient. So patient, patience of a saint as your mother used to say.”

The old man agreed with his father and grandmother’s assessment.

“Look, with Shaun and us all being home together, it's been an amazing year. But even so I know our best days are yet to come. There will be changes, sure. Things we'll need to adjust to. I'll rejoin the civilian workforce, you'll shake the dust off your law degree. But everything we do, no matter how hard, we do it for our family. Now say goodbye Shaun. Bye bye, say bye bye. Bye honey, we love you.”

Again, the tape stopped, and silence returned to the room.
For the longest moment, the old Shaun Taylor sat quietly in his living quarters, thinking, contemplating on a life that could have been, should have been. A life where he’d grow up in a suburban neighborhood with both a mother and a father. A life with birthday cakes, Halloween costumes, and Christmas trees. A life without needles, painful experiments, and cold hard lab tables.

Of course, it was not possible. Even if he had a time machine, he could not stop a nuclear war. History, simply, could not be changed. It’s a fact.

Shaun played the tape once more. In the spotless, comfortably furnished living room, he sat on the couch and listened to his father’s message from a lifetime ago.

“…But everything we do, no matter how hard, we do it for our family.”

For the family...

For the family.

No matter how hard, his father would do it.

And Shaun knew, so would his mother.

He knew what he had to do.

The lab at Advanced Systems was empty except for a silver haired man sitting in front of a workstation. But he was not alone. Next to his workstation, a figure sat. A boy in white jumpsuit.

Had the man been decades younger, he would be staring at his own mirror image.

“Bring yourself online,” said the old man.

The boy opened his eyes.

“Hello, Shaun,” said the old man to his younger synthetic self.

Big brown eyes blinked and looked blankly into the same ones on the wrinkled face. “…Hello,” the boy replied.

“Do you know who I am?” the old man asked.

“Who are you?”

You. “People here called me… Father.”

“Are you my father?”

“No. Who is your father?”

The boy blinked as he recalled the information that had been programmed into him. “Nathaniel Taylor.”

“Good. Who is your mother?”
“Nora Bennett.”

“Good. And you are?”

“Shaun Taylor.”

“Do you remember what happened to your father?”

The boy blinked again, then again. “...No.”

“What about your mother?”

“No.”

“Do you know where you are?”

The boy slowly looked around the lab. “No.”

“We have a lot of work to do, Shaun. Let’s begin with—” The old man heard footsteps. “It appears we have company. S9-23 Recall Code Cirrus.”

And immediately, the boy shut his eyes. His head dropped slightly as if he had fallen asleep on the chair.

A man in black leather coat stepped in. “Father.”

“Ah, there you are,” said Shaun to the courser. “You’ve given your daily report to Dr. Ayo, I supposed.”

“As you’ve instructed,” X6-88 replied. The courser paid little to no attention to the child synth by the workstation. “There is a development on the investigation on the leak.”

“Go on.”

“Dr. Ayo is closing in on one suspect.”

“Who?”

“Dr. Binet.”

“Alan…”

It was not exactly a surprise, given how outspoken Binet was on some controversial topics. Yet, something didn’t feel right.

Shaun knew the man well. Unlike some others, Alan Binet had been nothing but genuine in his kindness to all. Professionally, Binet’s role in synth’s advancement had been invaluable throughout all these years. So why would Alan Binet release the synths, which he had been programming himself, to the place where he knew would only bring nothing but sufferings?

There was definitely a bug in this equation. It simply didn’t add up.

“Dr. Ayo brought a team to search Dr. Binet’s office earlier today,” X6-88 reported. “But he came back empty-handed.”

Because you have the wrong man, Ayo. “Doesn’t mean he’s giving up, does it?”
“Dr. Ayo is certain.”

*Of course he is.* “What’s his next step?”

“To bring Dr. Binet in for interrogation.”

“But, to do that, he needs my approval…” Shaun could already see Ayo charging into his office in the morning. He had exactly one night to plan his next move. “Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. And, where is my mother?”

“In her quarters.”

“You will keep an eye on her for me, won’t you?”

“Of course, Father.”

Just when he thought he could have a quiet night working on his pet project... The old man let out a tired breath. “When your enemies have discovered your weakness, they will inevitably use it against you.”

“Don’t let them.”

Shaun arched an eyebrow at the courser.

X6-88 continued, “Turn our weakness into our strength. When our enemies hit, what awaits them is a counter attack that will disable them, maybe even kill them.”

Killer instincts. “Perhaps you’re right.” Shaun opened one of the drawers and retrieved a small box from within. “Here. You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the courser, as emotionless as always.

Although his sunglasses had blocked his eyes, Shaun knew they were widened at the sight of the snack. Fancy Lads Snack Cakes -- the synths’ favorite food. Researchers had noticed this phenomena for a long time, yet no one knew why the synths loved it to an extend that they were almost addicted to it.

Shaun knew the reason. After all, he was the one who had buried one specific line of code among millions, a simple modification that had caused this behavior. Decades ago, one night in the lab.

“Should I stand guard?” asked X6-88.

“That won’t be necessary,” said the director. “My battles are not fought with guns, but with wits…”

“Then I feel sorry for your opponents.”

“Thank you, X6-88. That will be all.”

The dull footsteps of the courser faded into distance, then once again everything returned to silence.

The old man turned back to child he once was. “Now, where were we?”
When the knock came in the morning and the door opened, the person charging in wasn’t the head of SRB, but the head of Advanced Systems.

“Do you mind telling me what you were doing in my lab last night, Director?” The woman who marched through his doorstep might sound polite on paper, but her tone and the scowl on her face were anything but pleasant.

Shaun tried not to let his weariness show. “Good morning to you, too, Dr. Li.”

As always, Madison Li cut to the chase. “If you are planning to modify my project, I’d appreciate it if you could at least give me a heads up.”

“Your project?” No, it’s mine.

“S9-23,” Li clarified without picked up his subtle jab. “The logs are deleted, of course, but there’s only one person that has the clearance to access my station and erase all the tracks.” The woman put her hands on her hips and stared down at her superior with a glare of disapproval. “You’ve made changes to the codes.”

“Yes, I have.”

“With all due respect, sir,” said Dr. Li, who could make the word ‘sir’ sounded exactly like what she really meant: Asshole. “I am the leader of the project. If you have any request, all you need to do is ask.”

“Inspiration comes and goes whenever it pleases. An idea came to me at night, and I thought it was best not to bother you off-hour. Don’t worry, Madison, I am very familiar with your lab.”

“Guess you know where the snacks are.” Li snorted. Her scowl softened a bit as she continued, “I’ve looked through your handiwork. The changes you made, they’re... quite elegant, I admit.”

Shaun merely nodded at the compliment.

Dr. Li then asked, “Are you planning to bring him back online soon?”

Him, Shaun noticed. Even Li was treating the synth more and more like a real boy.

“Not yet,” Shaun replied. “He's not ready.”

“Well, next time you’re itching to write some codes, don’t bother to cover your tracks. I don’t like to take credits for works I didn’t do.”

“I will tell you next time.” Shaun paused before he asked, “There’s something else I wanted to ask you. Have you ever tried Nuka-Cola?”

“Have I?” The woman made a noise that was a mix between a snort and a quick chuckle. “Back in the days before Project Purity went online, it was far safer to drink centuries old soda than the so-called water.”

“But the ingredients,” Shaun pointed out, “the mixture of potassium benzoate and citric acid, with heat and light, could be formed benzene.”

“Carcinogen or radiation. Choose your poison. If you ask me, better die from cancers than turning into a ghoul.” Li shook her head. “Up there, anything could kill you.”
“Yes, I've noticed…”

“How was your trip to the surface?”

“Hell.”

“See? What did I tell you? We are living in paradise.” She studied him like she was observing one of her projects. “Why did you ask about Nuka-Cola?”

“Curious. I saw one on the surface. Wondered how a two hundred year old soft drink would taste like.” The lie came as easy as breathing. And lately, sometimes breathing was more difficult than lying...

“Not fine wine, I can tell you that,” said Li. “Ask one of those surface teams to bring you a bottle. My advice: Ice it before you drink it. Makes all the difference in the world.”

A knock on the door interrupted the discussion of the century-old drink. Stepping in was a skinny bald man with sharp eyes, the man Shaun had been expecting.

“Great,” mumbled Li under her breath. “My day is getting worse, and it’s not even lunchtime…”

Finally. Shaun subtly shifted in his chair to sit up straight. “Dr. Ayo. I don’t suppose we have meeting this morning, do we?”

“Good morning, sir. And no, we don’t.” The head of SRB then glanced over to the head of Advanced Systems as if he’d just noticed her. “Oh, and Dr. Li.”

Li didn’t even bother with any pleasantries. “I’ll be in my lab, Director.”

“How are you feeling, sir?” asked Ayo with a smile that was so fake even a mask would have looked more sincere. “I’ve heard you didn’t feel too well after your trip to the surface.”

“I’m fine,” Shaun replied smoothly. “The smell on the surface was pungent. If you had taken the trip with me, you’d understand.”

“A trip to the surface? I’ll pass. We build synths to do the dirty jobs.”

No. We build synths for a better future for mankind! I didn’t suffer all the injections and experimentations just for you to be a lazy imbecile, you moron!

Neither his thoughts nor his dismay was shown on the old man’s stoic face. “You are not here to talk about my trip, are you?”

“I have something to report, sir.” Ayo took a few steps further and stopped right in front of the director’s desk. “About the leak. We’ve narrowed down to one suspect.”

“Who is it?”

Ayo looked over his shoulder as if to check if anyone was eavesdropping. Perhaps it was an act, or perhaps it was a habit of his. “...Alan Binet.”

“Dr. Binet?” Shaun frowned at the news. His expression was the right mix of surprise and dismay, which was exactly what Ayo would be expecting. “Are you certain?”

“Someone in Robotics has been changing my work crew assignments, replacing synths I approved for surface duty with high flight risks.”
“Someone in Robotics? That’s all you have?”

“We don’t have solid evidence yet,” Ayo admitted. “I’m thinking of inviting Dr. Binet down to my office for a… chat.”

“Dr. Binet has been a valuable member of Robotics for decades. I will not have you accuse him without any proof.”

“Sir, you know as well as I do that Binet thinks synths are people. He even lives with one. It’s disturbing!”

“If he thinks synths are people, why would he banish them to the surface?”

To that, Ayo had no answer.

Shaun launched his counterattack. “Your recent trip to Robotics has caused quite a stir. Frankly, Dr. Ayo, I’m tired of hearing complaints from every department about you and your coursers. I want you to stop your investigations.”

“But we're getting close! The trail leads to Robotics. You can’t ignore this problem!”

“I’m not.” Shaun leaned back on his chair and continued, “Your… aggressive methods work well in some cases. But it’s proven to be ineffective in a delicate situation like this. Perhaps it’s time for a change. Let’s try a more subtle approach.”

Frowning, Ayo asked, “…What do you propose?”

“We need to investigate without causing a stir. We need someone with… finesse. I have just the person in mind to do the job.”

“Who?”

“My mother.”

The skinny bald man looked as though he’d heard the most ridiculous joke in the world. “…Mrs. Taylor? She’s an outsider—” That earned Ayo a death glare. “Pardon, she is new to the Institute. She doesn’t know anything about us!”

“That’s precisely why she is in an unique position to do what you can’t,” Shaun countered calmly. “She can go about the Institute and learn the ins and outs of every department. People will welcome her with open arms, and most importantly, without any suspicion.”

Ayo looked every bit like he was about to explode. But Shaun’s logic was sound, both men knew it.

“Mrs. Taylor lacks the skills for investigative works,” Ayo argued.

Shaun had anticipated this particular argument. “Ah. Perhaps you are not familiar with the work lawyers used to do. She is exactly what we need. I know you have your doubts about my mother. And it’s not just about her ability as an investigator. It’s about her loyalty.”

Ayo didn’t bother to deny the claim. “Her potential ties with the Railroad disturbs me. That man in sunglasses… Montague. We still can't find a clear shot of him from the surveillance. It’s like he's knows about the Watchers.”

“My mother has told you all she knows about this Montague, hasn't she?”
“Yes, but--”

“Then don't blame your incompetence on her,” Shaun snapped. He was not about to overlook the insubordination. Still, he had a plan to sell. “Perhaps we can put your mind at ease by giving her a chance to prove her loyalty.”

“...By letting her investigate the missing synths.”

Shaun nodded. “If she fails, you can continue with the investigation.”

“...Very well, sir. I will assist Mrs. Taylor with the investigation.”

“You will not.”

“What?”

“It’s best if she does it without you looming in the shadows, so to speak. In order for our plan to succeed, her investigation has to be highly classified. Only the three of us know the truth.”

“You mean a covert mission.”

“Yes, indeed. Officially, your investigation has come to a dead end. The SRB will focus on other assignments for now. My mother will report directly to me if she has any findings, and I will inform you when it comes to a time for an official arrest.”

Still, Ayo looked skeptical. Of course, the easy way to solve this problem was to issue an official order for Ayo to back off. But, Shaun wished to maintain the appearance of unity, at least for now.

It’s time for a final push. “I want to get this over with, too, Justin,” said Shaun, watching as a subtle shock flashed across Ayo’s face when he used the man’s name. “We can't condone the loss of properties any further.”

“Absolutely. I agree.”

“Good. Now, the first step is to grant her a security clearance.”

“...I see. I will issue level three clearance for Mrs. Taylor. That should be enough.”

“Four.”

“Four? But that's the executive level--”

“I know what it is.” It’s the exact same level as yours, Ayo. “Four. We both want to put this matter to rest as soon as possible. After all, we have more than enough problems on our plates...”

It was a risk Shaun had to take, giving his mother as much clearance as he could, only a level below the directorial access. Sooner or later, she would find out everything. Better sooner when he was still around to guide her through her transition.

“...Four it is,” Ayo grudgingly agreed.

“Good. Let's do some house cleaning.”
A/N: Took a short break during the holidays. And now Project Wanderer is back.

Made a big mistake for not putting it in the at the end of last chapter, but that was the end of Part Two. This is the beginning of Part Three. Like I said before, no big deal, just narrative wise the tone might shift a bit from now on. It goes like this:


Part Two: Nora found Shaun. Deacon searched for Nora. Deacon found Nora and the truth, lost her again. Project Wanderer ended.

Part Three: ??

Some of you might be wondering: Where is Deacon? He’ll be back next chapter. Will Deacon and Nora meet again? Someday.

“Bring yourself online” was a nod to Westworld. Hot coke with ginger is a real thing, I didn’t make that up.

Title: “There'll Be Some Changes Made” - Benny Goodman, 1941.

Thanks for reading! And happy new year!

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“She won’t testify,” said a young lawyer to her companion at a corner table in Joe’s Spuckies. The sandwich restaurant at Postal Square was packed as usual during lunch hours. At one particular table sat a woman and an older man. The woman’s dark hair was tied up in a neat ponytail. Her suit jacket and skirt were tailor-fitted, her shirt was pressed. The man’s hair was turning grey, more salt than pepper. The wrinkles on his face showed his age, but his eyes were as sharp as they had been since his youth.

The lawyer took a long drink to wash down her meatball sandwich. Her drink of choice: club soda with ice. She was not a fan of Nuka-Cola, and she’d already had too much coffee this morning.

“Of course she won’t,” said the older man. He was a retired detective, and the woman’s father. His plate was already empty, and his cup of black coffee was half-full. “The poor woman is terrified, Nora.”

“But her testimony is all that’s missing to put him behind bars for years,” said Nora Bennett. “She’ll be safe when he’s gone for good. All she needs to do is to tell her story.”

“She’s an abused victim,” Henry Bennett pointed out. “She’s learned not to trust anyone. Not the cops, not the lawyers… Hell, she probably doesn’t even trust herself.”

“If she doesn’t testify, that bastard is going to walk free!” Frustrated, Nora grabbed her sandwich and finished it with one huge bite.

For a moment, her father studied her with a bemused half smile. He had the solution, Nora knew. He always had.

“Earn her trust,” the retired detective suggested.

“I’m trying to help her,” said the young lawyer after swallowing her food, “but she won’t even let me.”

“Because you’ve been doing the talking.”

“It’s my job, Dad.”

“Yes, and you’re good at it. But when you’re talking, you’re not listening.” Her father took a sip of his coffee then continued, “Remember that poem? A Wise Old Owl?”

“What? Oh, that one…”

‘A wise old owl lived in an oak
The more he saw the less he spoke
The less he spoke the more he heard
Why can’t we all be like that wise old bird?

“Be the Wise Old Owl,” said Henry. “Listen to her. Really listen.”

And suddenly, Nora understood her father’s hint. “To the words she can’t say…”

Her father nodded. “Victims want our help, but most of them are too scared to even ask. Use your eyes and your ears. You’ll find an opening to earn her trust.”

Nora checked her watch. Break time was over.

“I have to run. Thanks, Dad!” She grabbed the check on the table but her father stopped her.

“I’ll take care of it. Go save the world, kiddo.”

“Save the world?”

“That’s right,” said the old detective with a slight grin. “Saving the world, one victim at a time.”

The chrysanthemum in her hand was a light shade of lavender.

“We’re distributing fresh cut flowers this morning,” said the gardener. “I saved the best one for you, Mrs. Taylor.”

“It’s lovely,” said Nora with a warm smile. “Thank you, Z1-14.”

“You’ve been kind to me, ma’am. And from what I’ve heard, to other synths as well. I just... want to show you our appreciation.”

“I’ve done nothing.” Not yet...

“You have,” said Z1-14. “We don’t get to speak to anyone, unless it’s about the tasks we have to perform. But you… You take the time to talk to us, to get to know us. It… it means a lot.”

It was then Nora saw an opening, an opening she had been waiting for.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” asked Nora in a hushed voice.

The synth’s posture suddenly turned rigid.

“I want to help you,” Nora made a push. “But to do that, I need to know what--”

The gardener cut her off with quick announcement, “I’d better get back to work, ma’am.”

Nora knew what brought the sudden change. There were eyes and ears everywhere. They were being watched.

She carefully masked a frown of dismay with a grateful smile. “Thank you for the flower, Z1-14.”
“Good day to you, Mrs. Taylor.”

When Nora turned around, she spotted a dark shadow dressed in all black standing at a corner afar.

“Good morning, X6-88,” said Nora when she was near the courser. “You’re late today.”

“No,” the courser replied. “I was there when you stepped out of your quarters. You told me to stay out of sight, and I did.”

“If I didn’t know about your assignment, I would have called you a stalker.”

Just as she’d expected, the courser wasn’t at all bothered by her remark.

She studied the tall man for a second. An extremely intimidating figure, a head taller than she was. He could kill her with his bare hands if he wanted to. She should be scared of him; in fact, she was. But fear would be the last thing she was willing to show in front of the courser.

“Surely you’ve better things to do than to follow me around everyday,” said Nora, staring straight into the eyes that were hidden behind the sunglasses.

Again, the courser didn’t reply.

“Right… It’s your assignment.” She shrugged and started to head down the spotless hallway. The courser would follow, she knew he would.

And he did.

Nora brought the flower to her face and took a gentle sniff before she began, “Tell Ayo I had breakfast with Allie and we talked about an upcoming dinner plan. Then, I’m going to BioScience to request supplies for my pre-war recipes.”

“I have a question, ma’am.”

“About my schedule?”

“No.” The courser looked at the flower for a second, then asked, “I don’t understand why you would waste your time on the workers.”

“Why not? It’s not a waste of time. I’m getting to know them.”

“What for? They could be reassigned, and you’d never see them again.”

“That’s life, isn’t it?” said Nora. “Our paths may cross, and we may not see each other again. But that doesn’t mean we can’t learn from each other. Or, at least, enjoy our time together.”

Walking beside her was a man in sunglasses, but not the same one who was currently occupying her thoughts. The man in sunglasses who had been sneaking into her mind lately was one who always had an easy grin and a light-hearted joke ready at his disposal.

Someone who could make her smile. Someone who could make her forget how terrible things were, if only for a moment.

“Your previous encounters were with humans,” her current companion pointed out. “These are synths.”

“Who are perfectly capable of thinking, learning, and feeling.”
“Because of the programs installed inside our head.”

Nora slowed her pace to a pause and studied the courser. “You really think so?”

“We are what we are, ma’am,” X6-88 stated without a hint of emotions. “We are not humans. We are machines. And machines are meant to be disposable and replaceable.”

His chilling words sparked an anger inside her. Was this what he had been told by the Institute?

“I disagree.” Her reply was calm but firm. “Every one of you is unique. Just like humans. Perhaps you’re made in the lab, not born in a hospital, but that doesn’t mean you are worth less.”

For a fraction of a second, Nora noticed a very faint flinch flashed across the stoic man’s face. “That is a dangerous way of thinking, ma’am.”

“Why?”

“Because most of the humans would disagree with you. Whether they’re here in the Institute, or up on the surface.”

*That’s not true,* she wanted to say. *There’s the Railroad, and Deacon…*

But, Nora couldn’t say a single word. Not about the Railroad, and definitely not about her partner.

She could only resume her path. “We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

“What?”

“Shakespeare. It means we don’t know what we will become in the future. People change. We learn from our experiences, our mistakes. Some of us become better. Some… worse.”

“Humans. But not synths.”

“Tell me, did you walk out of Robotics one day and know every skill you have now?”

“Of course not,” said X6-88 with a huff that wasn’t there.

His pride as a courser was X6-88’s weakness, the only one Nora could spot so far.

“No, of course not,” Nora echoed. “In order to become the Institute’s finest, the trainings you had to go through must have been strenuous. And without the trainings, you’d be just another synth. So, it’s fair to say that you’ve changed. Or evolved.”

The expressionless courser scowled at the last word.

“Evolution is a good thing, X6-88,” the former lawyer concluded her argument. “If we’d never learned from our mistakes, we would still be drawing on stone walls inside some caves…”

The courser offered no reply, although the slightest thoughtful tilt of his head was telling. Humans or synths, their micro expressions often betrayed their thoughts. The devil, as her father had taught her years ago, is always in the details.

A man approached from afar. Nora honestly couldn’t tell if he was a synth or a human.

“Mrs. Taylor,” said the man politely, “Father wants to see you.”
In an underground catacomb, a man in sunglasses sat in front of a messy desk with a gas lamp as his only source of illumination. His full attention was occupied by a piece of crumpled paper, written on it was nothing but gibberish.

Word by word, the man deciphered the secret code. He could already guess the rest of the message when he was halfway done.

Bad news. There seemed to be no other kind these days.

But still, the man finished his work to make sure nothing was missing. The final decrypted message was exactly what he had thought.

Frowning at the paper for a second, the man in sunglasses debated on how he should break this news to the boss.

Well, there's no better way to rip off a bandage...

The private office of the Railroad headquarter was a cove within the catacomb. This final resting place was probably reserved for some sort of prominent family in Boston centuries ago, a place where family members could be together even after death.

Hope these poor bastards didn’t hate each other.

“Words just came in,” said Deacon as he entered the makeshift office. “The escape route has been blocked. Malden Center is crawling with chrome domes.”

“P.A.M, how bad is it?” Desdemona asked the resident robot.

“Calculating,” P.A.M announced. “Institute presence increases odds of detection of all northern routes by 52%”

“52%?” Carrington frowned. “That’s prohibitively dangerous.”

Desdemona then asked, “P.A.M, what if we re-route through Lexington?”

“The Switchboard is a nexus of Institute activity,” the robot answered. “Odds of detection increase exponentially with proximity to the nexus.”

“In English, P.A.M,” the boss snapped.

“She means,” Carrington translated, “we can’t run ops anywhere remotely near Switchboard. The Gen 1s blocking the original route have to go.”

“Assaulting an entrenched Institute position is too much of a risk,” said Desdemona. “We’ll secure a new route.”

“It’ll take time,” Deacon pointed out. “Patriot must have been working overtime. Ticonderoga is packed. So is Randolph. Griswold and Bunker Hills are the only places left.”

“We can’t afford to waste the time to search for a new route,” said Carrington. “I say we should clear the place, move the packages out, then find a new route.”
“We’re shorthanded, Doc,” said Desdemona. “The only one available now is Glory, and it’s too big of a job even for her.”

“I’ll go,” said Deacon.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said his boss. “I’m not tossing you back into the fire when the Institute is looking for you.”

“Hey, I’m on the hit list of every criminal organization out there.” Deacon shrugged off his boss’ sharp glare. “I’ll be fine, Dez. Give me fifteen minutes to do my magic, and I guarantee even you won’t recognize me.”

“Deacon has a point.” For once, the doctor agreed. “He should go with Glory. I don’t trust her to finish this job on her own.”

“Because of the synths…” Desdemona sighed. “All right, Deacon. Do what you have to. And be careful.”

“On it.”

“Are you going to tell Glory?” asked Carrington.

Deacon thought for a short second. Should he? “Nah. She’ll find out once we’re being shot at.”

The doctor frowned, but nodded. “Just make sure she shoots back.”

“Oh she will,” said Deacon, grabbing a Stealth Boy and some ammo from the rack. “She won’t like it. But she will.”

---

“Mother,” said Shaun, “I need your help on one particular matter.”

“What is it?” asked Nora.

“You have heard about our missing properties.”

“Yes.” Nora was careful to mask her expression. Even the tiniest link that connected her to the Railroad would put Deacon in imminent danger.

“I’d like you to take over the investigation.”

However good her poker face was, Nora couldn’t suppress her surprise at this request. “That’s Dr. Ayo’s case, isn’t it?”

“Not anymore,” Shaun replied. “I have given him enough time to resolve this particular problem, but so far, all I have received are complaints from every departments. I believe it’s time to try a different approach. One that requires a certain degree of finesse.”

“...You want me to play detective?”

Nodding, her son leaned back on his chair and said, “Your father-- My grandfather used to be one, if I’m not mistaken. Detective Henry Bennett?”
Dad… “Yes, he was. Boston Police Department.”

“I’ve read some of his case profiles, whatever that’s left in the database. Impressive, indeed. I have faith in you, Mother. I’m sure you are suitable for this assignment. After all, your old job required quite a bit of detective work as well.”

The leak. The person who was responsible for smuggling synths out of the Institute. The inside man or woman for the Railroad. She had been handed a sledgehammer to bring down the operation by killing the supply chain.

Something didn’t feel right.

“Why did you pick me?” asked Nora. “Ayo is okay with this?”

Shaun paused for a bit before he continued, “I have to admit, there are a few who have lingering doubts on your… loyalty. One person in particular. I’m sure you know who I’m talking about.”

“Justin Ayo.”

Shaun nodded. “His suspicious nature is a useful tool for someone in his position. But it could also be a hindrance. To put an end to his doubts, I think you should take over the investigation on the missing synths. To prove to everyone where your loyalty lies.”

Everyone? Including you? Nora held back a frown.

“Ayo has a lead and a suspect,” Shaun continued. “But I want you to form your own opinion based on the facts and the evidence.”

“You have doubts.”

Her son’s response was a quiet sip of his hot tea. It was as good as a ‘yes.’

“Where does his trail end?” Nora asked.

“Robotics. His only evidence is that someone at Robotics has been tampering with his work crew assignments.”

“Work crew assignment?”

Shaun explained, “When a department needs to send a team to the surface, the SRB has to vet each and every worker in the team. It’s a standard procedure to keep our loss to a minimum. Without Ayo signing off on the crew assignment, no one gets to go to the teleporter.”

“And someone has been changing the names on the crew,” Nora deduced.

“Obviously that’s how it’s been done to steal our synths,” Shaun snorted with thinly veiled contempt. “Wonder why it took Ayo so long to notice a flaw in his system…”

“How did he find the tampered list?”

“Through sheer luck, I suppose. He located the file in one of the terminals within Robotics.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” muttered Nora to herself. “Why would anyone leave evidence at their own workstation where it could be traced back to them?”

“Precisely.” Shaun nodded. “Ayo… He is focused, but incredibly stubborn. Once he has his eyes
on a target, he would not let it go. He might even choose to ignore the facts that didn’t comply with his assumption. Eventually, it’d lead to a wrong conclusion. ...And I truly believe he has the wrong target this time.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I know the Institute, Mother. More importantly, I know the people. You can learn a lot by observing a person. And I have decades to observe.”

“You sound a lot like your grandpa.”

“Do I?” said her son quietly. “I do regret that I never had a chance to meet him. A remarkable detective. At any rate, I want you to get the bottom of this once and for all.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“You have all the resources and clearance. And you have my full authorization to do what is necessary. However, I’d prefer if you could keep a relatively low profile. Ayo and his coursers have stirred up enough troubles already. Frankly, people are sick of this investigation, and I can’t say I blame them.”

“Don’t worry, Shaun. I prefer discretion as well.”

“Good. When you find the leak, come to me directly.”

_and leave Ayo out of this._ Nora heard the words he didn’t say. “There is one problem.”

“Yes?”

“Ayo has sent a courser to keep an eye on me.”

“Don’t worry about X6-88. His loyalty lies with the Institute, not with Ayo. He will assist you if you wish, I’m sure.”

She didn’t mentioned which courser. “You knew.”

“Yes,” her son admitted. “And I know... you will do the right thing, Mother.”

_Do the right thing..._

When the door closed behind her, Nora released a subtle breath.

The sledgehammer was in her hands. It’s up to her to kill the operation, or to protect it.

---

“When was the last time we run a mission together?” Glory asked.

“Was it last year?” Deacon replied. “Or the year before that?”

“Or the year before _that_.”

His new partner was the poster child of intimidation. With her over-sized gun and her padded armor, Glory, aka the Angel of Death, attracted attentions like flies to dead bodies.
She was the worst example of subtleties, the polar opposition of Deacon. While he preferred discretion and zero collateral damage, Glory always opted for frontal assaults and maximum fire powers.

Their weapons of choice said it all. Both his rifle and pistol were equipped with suppressors for long range stealth snipe and short range silent kill. Her minigun was anything but mini, with the size and weight of a young child, and a clip size of 500.

His targets never saw him coming, whereas hers often died shitting their pants.

In other words, their styles, their modi operandi, their philosophies, everything crashed.

His former partner, on the other hand, was his perfect fit…

“So…” said Glory after a long comfortable silence on the road.

“So?”

“You wanna talk about that?”

“About what?” Deacon knew exactly what she was referring to, of course.

“You mean my new pal Dogmeat? You’ve met him. Cute as a pie, but don’t let him fool you. The mutt could give you a run for the money. Too bad, he loves his independence too much. We parted ways, for now. No hard feelings.”

The tall woman rolled her eyes and pushed the topic back on track, “I mean your other partner. The human one. The Wanderer.”

Nora Bennett. Deacon refused to disclose her name. Not that it mattered anymore, he supposed.

“Oh, that one.” Something within began to sting a little, like picking at an old wound that had never healed properly. Deacon ignored it. “Heard she’s found her son. Good for her. Nothing beats a heartwarming family reunion. Bet there’s a giant cake involved. Wonder if it’s a chocolate cake…”

As expected, Glory’s response was a heavy, exasperated sigh. Deacon couldn’t blame her. Not everyone could put up with his bullshits, and he had a shit ton of them. It was his defense mechanism, his unique way of communication. It was who he was -- a liar who had lied so much that he couldn’t tell the truth like a normal person even if he wanted to.

The only way he could squeeze out the truth was to wrap it within multiple layers of lies. Good luck finding someone who had the patience and the skills to decipher him. Almost no one could, except, well, there was this person from a bygone world two centuries ago...

“So, you’ve been played.” It was Glory’s conclusion. Straight-forward, in-your-face. Very Glory-ish.

“ ‘We ’ve been played,” Deacon corrected her. “Big difference. No way she’d know about her son being the big bad boss.”

The tall woman arched one silver-white eyebrow. “You sure?”

“Positive.”
He could have stopped there. He could have ended this conversation just like that. He could have easily jumped into a new topic -- he had at least twenty to choose from. But something inside Deacon urged him to go on, to protect his partner’s name, even though he’d probably never going to see her again.

“Look,” Deacon started, his voice took a serious turn, “I was there from day one. I watched her stumbling out of her crypt, half frozen, half dead. Heard every conversation she had. Hell, I saw her risked her life saving a bunch of people from raiders, when she was barely able to hold a pistol and shoot straight. Think about it, G, if she knew her son’s the big boss, why would she bother? All she needed to do was to snap her fingers and an army of chrome domes would come to the rescue.”

“Hm…”

“And speaking of chrome domes, they certainly didn’t hesitate to attack her when we were at the Switchboard. Now, tell me, would you dare to kill your boss’ mom?”

Glory was quiet for a moment. “So, she didn’t know.”

“Like I said, we’ve been played.”

“By her own kid…” the tall woman shook her head. “Damn. What kind monster does that?”

For once, the man who could talk himself out of any trouble had no words.

“Whoever is sending the synths to the surface,” said X6-88 as he followed Nora to Robotics, “is not only a thief, but an idiot.”

“I wouldn’t call them an idiot,” said Nora. “They are smart enough to bypass security.”

“But not smart enough to know that they’re sending the synths to a death sentence,” the courser countered. “A painful and slow death sentence.”

“What do you mean?”

“We both have been to the surface, ma’am. We know what it’s like to live up there. The smell, the filth, the lack of edible food and clean water. Who in their right mind would want to life in a place like that?”

“It’s not always like that,” said Nora wistfully. “It was once a beautiful place.”

“Once.”

Nora couldn’t argue with the truth, however harsh it was. “Give them a chance, X6-88. Perhaps one day, it’d be better.”

“You can’t seriously believe that, ma’am. They have two hundred years.”

“Humans are resilient. They will find a way to survive. They always have.”

“Surviving in a living condition like the surface world. They are hopeless.”
Were they really hopeless? Part of her wanted to disagree, but she had no solid evidence to support her statement. Not with the chaos and mayhem on the surface world.

Silently conceded, Nora then asked, “What do you know about the investigation?”

“Dr. Ayo has searched every corner of the Institute,” X6-88 told her. “So far, his only evidence is the altered crew assignment in Robotics. He has one suspect.”

“Who is it?”

“Dr. Binet.”

Alan? No… “Any other solid evidence?”

“None.”

“So it could be anyone with access to Robotics.”

“Binet is the prime suspect. And it makes sense.”

“No, it doesn't.”

“Binet is known to be outspoken about his radical view on the synths.”

“That’s precisely why it doesn’t make sense,” Nora countered without missing a beat. “You’ve said it yourself, the synths are sent to their death sentence. Why would Dr. Binet do it? He knows the living conditions on the surface world.”

The courser’s expression was as stone-faced as always, but there was a slight raise of an eyebrow as he began to see the light. “Fair point.” He then added, “The number of missing synths has increased lately. Whoever did this has been very busy, which means, sooner or later, he's bound to slip and make a mistake.”

Could the Railroad handle all the synths?

They stopped in front of the entrance to Robotics department.

“I'll go in there alone,” said Nora. “People would clam up when they see a courser.”

“With all due respect, ma'am, you are hardly an intimidating figure.”

Nora glanced up at the courser who was a head taller than her. “If intimidation worked, Dr. Ayo would have already closed the case. There are other ways to make people talk. Let's try a more subtle approach.”

“I will wait here, then.”

No, she had to get rid of this walking spy cam to buy her some space to maneuver. “It might take some time. Take the day off,” she told the courser. “I'll meet you tonight and give you something to report to your boss.”

Although reluctant, X6-88 complied, “As you wish, ma'am.”
“Once we clear Malden Center,” said Glory, “we can ship out the packages, right?”

“For a run or two,” said Deacon. “It’s been compromised. Sooner or later, we need to secure a new route.”

“Then we’d better stock up on ammo. Lots of it.”

Deacon swallowed a sigh. “These violent delights have violent ends.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Shakespeare.”

“Who?”

A lie was ready to fire without even thinking. “Someone I grew up with him,” Deacon told her. “Billy. Weird kid. He used to dream about being a writer.”

“Writer, huh?” Glory shot him a weird look. “In a place where most of the folks can’t even write their names.”

“Sad, isn’t it?”

Somehow, his thoughts wandered on their own and arrived at the doorstep of someone with the brightest blue eyes and the softest hair he’d ever seen. His former partner would get the joke, Deacon knew.

Yes. Yes, she would...

His current partner paused at the staircase leading down to the metro station. “You still haven’t given me the details on the mission.”

“Because it’s simple,” said Deacon, pushing a certain face off his mind to focus on the job ahead. “Go in, clean house, and be home by eight for dinner. You’ve done this so many times, you can probably do it in your sleep.”

Her keen sharp eyes narrowed suspiciously at him. “It’s Gen 1s, isn’t it?”

He let his silence do the talking.

“I knew it!”

“Hey, if you want to sit this one out…” Deacon offered an exit, knowing fully she would never back down on a mission.

The tall woman sighed. “…Man, if it’s got to be done.”

Deacon let her take a moment to prepare herself mentally. When the opponents were humans, Glory was the best agent for the job. But if the enemies were synths…

“We’ve got packages waiting to be transferred,” said Deacon, dangling the incentive in front of her face. “Let’s send them off to their new lives so they can screw up like the rest of us.”

“Right,” said the Angel of Death with steel back in her eyes. “C’mon D-man, let’s cause some
mayhem.”

“Mayhem and chaos, my favorites,” said the liar. “Right behind you, G.”

“Alan, I need your help,” said Nora to Dr. Binet.

“Of course,” the scientist replied without hesitation. “What is it?”

“I need access to Robotics terminals.”

“What? ...Oh, don’t tell me... Did Justin ask you to do his dirty work?”

“Shaun has his doubts about Ayo’s report,” Nora told him. “That’s why he’s sending me.”

“He should have his doubts!” The mild-mannered man looked understandably annoyed. “Justin Ayo and his goonies searched my lab from top to bottom and couldn't find anything. Because it's not me!”

Nora remained quiet to allow the man to continue.

“I’ve known Shaun for decades,” said Alan Binet. “For god’s sake, I started working in Robotics because of Shaun’s recommendation. He knows me, he knew my father, and he knows how much the synths mean to us all. Why would I banish the synths to the surface?”

His gaze and voice were both steady, his arms were loosely by his sides, his posture was not a defensive one.

The man wasn't lying.

“I don’t think it’s you, either,” said Nora honestly. “You’ve been to the surface. You would never send your creations to suffer in the world above.”

“Exactly! Whoever did this did a cruel thing to the synths out of ignorance,” Binet huffed. “Look, Nora, I’m glad Shaun send you to look into this matter. If there’s anything I can help, I will. But I really don't know what else to tell you. You're free to search my lab again. And you have access to all the terminals, including mine.” He motioned Nora to follow. “We’ll start from my office. The lab on the floor is currently occupied.”

“I appreciate it, Alan.”

“Anything to get Ayo off my back. The man is like a bloodhound… He’s always been like this since we were kids.”

“You’ve known each other your whole life, huh?”

“We’re about the same age,” said Binet. “I’ve had the… pleasure to sit in classes with him for years. Well, like my mother always said, if you don’t have something nice to say…”

“I see.” Nora nodded understandingly. “You have any idea who might be behind this?”

“Can’t be from Robotics,” said Binet as he unlocked the door to his lab. “We love what we do
here. The synths, they are our work, our labor of love. It’s more than what you saw in the initial creation demonstration. We spend hours programming them, debugging them. Heck, sometimes I even have to sleep in my office.” He gestured at the makeshift bedroll at the corner of the room.

The office was small and packed, but neatly organized. Nothing seemed out of place.

“Feel free to take a look,” said Binet as he inputted his password in his terminal. “I didn’t let Justin touch this last time. But I trust you, Nora-- Wait a minute…”

“What?”

Dr. Binet stared at the screen and mumbled to himself, “…That’s strange…”

“What is it?” Nora joined him at the desk. And then, she saw it. A deleted entry.

“How? I didn't do this.” Dr. Binet stepped back, confused and horrified. “Look at the date! I wasn't even in the lab. That was my day off. You can check with the log.”

Frowning, Nora asked, “Who else has access to your terminal?”

“No one! I wouldn't let anyone come in and mess with my work when I’m not around!”

There was a quick knock before Nora could speak.

“Found some the bugs in the program, Dad,” said Liam Binet as he entered the office. “I fixed them. Oh, hi Mrs. Taylor.”

Alan Binet’s pale face turned as white as a ghost.

And Nora knew who else had access to Dr. Binet’s terminal.

Oh god…

A/N: Both Deacon and Nora were quoting Shakespeare. They really need to partner up again. The conversations they will have!

Project Wanderer is now one year old. Thank you for reading all along. It's been quite a ride. I've made a good friend because of this story, so typing all 100,000+ words is totally worth it. Hope this story bring a smile to you, too. And hope you'll continue to join me in this tale -- a romance where two leads spend most of the time apart. Deacon and Nora will meet again, I promise.

“A Wise Old Owl” is an old nursery rhyme first published in 1875.

“We know what we are, but know not what we may be.” Shakespeare, Hamlet.

“These violent delights have violent ends.” Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet.

Title: “Changing Partners” - Patti Page, 1953.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
“What’s wrong?” asked Liam Binet. “You guys look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Nothing!” His father snapped. “Go-- go check on the… the synth in lab four.”

“Okay…” Confused, the young man lingered for a moment. “You okay, Dad?”

“Yes. Go!” Dr. Binet urged. “Go.”

Although the younger Binet looked concern, he didn’t question further. “Lab four. On it. See you around, Mrs. T.”

The sunny grin disappeared behind the closed door. For the longest moment, there was nothing but icy silence in the Robotics office.

Alan Binet slumped down onto his chair. “I… I’m sure there’s an explanation for this,” Dr. Binet convinced Nora. Or perhaps he was convincing himself. “It’s not Liam! It can’t be!”

The boy seemed so innocent. Could he be the one behind the leak? Nora had once suspected he might possibly know something about the person or persons helping the synths, but the kid himself as the suspect? She wasn’t entirely sure.

But the evidence was mounting against Liam Binet. From his view on the synths to his interests in the Commonwealth, everything marked him as a person of interest. And then, there was the most damning evidence that he could have the access to the terminal with a deleted file.

Still, everything was circumstantial at best. Liam Binet might have the motive and the opportunity, but did he has the means? Could a young intern pull off an operation like this by himself?

There might be more to this case, and if Nora drew a conclusion now, she might accuse an innocent of a crime he didn’t commit.

The former lawyer took a long breath to clear her mind. If the Binets were her clients, what would she do?

“Can you reconstruct the file that’s been deleted?” Nora asked.

Dr. Binet stared at her, half confused, half horrified.

“The only way to prove it’s not Liam is to look into the evidence,” said Nora. “I need you to focus, Alan. Do it for your son.”

“…Right. Right. You’re right. Let’s see.” Binet immediately went to work. “…No good. Whoever
“Did this knows what he’s doing. The file is gone!”

“Is there anyone else who could potential get inside your office?”

“No,” said Dr. Binet. “Unless… Yes! That must be it! The file must have been remotely planted in this terminal!”

“Can you trace it back to the source?” asked Nora.

“Give me a moment. ...Yes, here’s the point of origin--” Alan Binet froze in front of his terminal. “Oh dear god…”

“What?”

“...This…This can’t be… No, no… No, this is…”

“What is it?”

Dr. Binet stared blankly at Nora, his face was white as a sheet. “...It... came from our home.”

**Goddamnit!**

“You’re home early, Alan,” Eve greeted with a smile. “Oh, Nora, it’s so nice to see you. You should stop by for dinner again. I’ve tried the recipe you showed me last time. Liam loved it!”

Neither found it in themselves to return the warm greetings.

“What’s going on?” Eve asked.

For once, Nora was lost for words.

“Oh god,” Binet muttered, staring at the screen of the family private terminal.

Nora knew what it was. “Trace it, Alan. See if the file was downloaded somewhere!”

“R-right. Right.”

Nora held her breath.

“Nora,” said Eve quietly, “What’s wrong?”

“Listen, Eve,” Nora started, “it’s about the--”

“Yes!” A sudden shout from Binet startled both women. “Yes! It’s from the SRB!” The worried father jumped from his chair and explained, “I don’t have the clearance to access files from the SRB. No one in my family has! So this could only mean one thing: Our terminal was just a springboard! Someone could be bouncing the files around random terminals few times to throw the investigators off their tracks. If their goal was to load a file to Robotics, it would make sense to route the file to the personal terminal before it hit the department terminal. That way, it’d make it look like the person in Robotics was responsible!”

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Nora. “I’ll go to the SRB.”
“I’ll go with you,” said Binet.

“No,” said Nora. “If you’re framed, whoever is behind this will know we’re onto them the moment they see you investigating.”

“You’re right… Is there anything I can do?”

“Head back to your office and pretend nothing happened,” Nora instructed him. “But before that, teach me how to trace a file.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on an assignment?” asked Dr. Justin Ayo.

“I was,” X6-88 replied.

The acting director of the SRB scanned the hallway then motioned the courser to follow him into his office. “Where is she?” Dr. Ayo asked once the door was closed.

“Mrs. Taylor is off to investigate Robotics,” X6-88 reported.

“So Shaun has sent her off to her wild goose chase already?” Dr. Ayo snorted. “It’s a waste of time. Let her play the detective for now. Sooner or later she’ll have no choice but to give up. Then the case will come back to the proper department.”

“You don’t think she will succeed, sir?”

“Of course she won’t! If I couldn’t dig up anything on Binet, what could an amateur possibly find?”

“She doesn’t think it’s Alan Binet.”

“She’s wrong!” Dr. Ayo insisted. “It’s Binet, I’m sure of it. If Taylor wants to play one of his little games, I’ll play with him. His mother will end up embarrassing them both, which is not a bad thing…”

“Sir!” One of the members of the SRB rushed in.

“Don’t you know how to knock?” Dr. Ayo snapped.

“Sorry, sir! We have a situation. Feedbacks from one of the posts have been disconnected.”

Their team was attacked, X6-88 knew it immediately.

“Which one?” Dr. Ayo asked, scowling.

“Malden Center, sir. The team have gone silent since their last report 12 hours ago. I checked the live surveillance videos, everything is cut off.”

Dr. Ayo slammed his fist on his desk. “Damn it! Must be those rats!”

Those rats, aka the Railroad. “It could be raiders,” X6-88 pointed out, “or Gunners.”

“Rats are rats no matter what they call themselves,” the head of the SRB huffed then barked an
order, “Show me the videos!”

“This is a restricted area!” A man stopped Nora before she could make a few steps into the most guarded division of the Institute: The SRB.

It was time to use her ultimate weapon; it’s time to pull rank.

With her apprehension carefully masked behind a steel expression, Nora faced the guard directly. One eyebrow deliberately arched ever-so slightly, a silent question was asked through her expressive eyes: Do you know who I am?

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Taylor.” The guard stepped aside immediately when he realized who he was talking to. “I wasn’t told to expect you.”

“No, you weren’t,” said Nora coolly. “I am here for an investigation.”

“An investigation? About what, ma’am?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. It’s a direct order from Father. I need access to your terminals.”

Of course she didn’t expect him to let her waltz in and do as she pleased. He did, however, do what she expected.

“I’ll ask Dr. Secord,” said the guard. “Please follow me.”

When in doubt, toss it to the higher-ups. It’d seem some things never changed.

The SRB was as cold as it had been last time Nora’d had the honor to be invited here by Justin Ayo.

“Please wait here.” The guard disappeared into one of the offices for a short moment, then came out with a slender woman in her late forties with short dark blonde hair.

Alana Secord, the second in command of the SRB.

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” Nora extended a hand. “Nora Bennett.”

“Alana Secord.” The woman took Nora’s hand for a shake.

Although Secord’s hand was as cold as the SRB, her grip was firm. Her gaze was steady, yet piercing. Nora had no doubt that the older woman was studying her every move.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Taylor,” said Dr. Secord, “only SRB personnels can access our terminals.”

“I believe I have the clearance,” said Nora.

“Let me verify.” She invited Nora into her office, then headed straight to the terminal without wasting a second on any unnecessary pleasantries. “You do have the proper clearance,” Secord confirmed after a quick check. “My apologies, ma’am.”

“You’re just doing your job.”
“Thank you for understanding,” said the blonde woman with a curt nod. “Now, how may I help you?”

“The director asked me to investigate the missing synths.”

A tiny raise of one fine brow was all Secord showed when she heard the news. “Do you require our assistance?”

“There’s a tampered crew assignment file found in Robotics,” Nora told her. “It was originated here in the SRB.”

Frowning, Secord reasoned, “Someone from Robotics could have hacked into the SRB and downloaded the file. It’s a disturbing thought, but we shouldn’t rule out its possibility.”

“The file had been bounced around a few times before it was uploaded to Robotics.” A little lie mixed with the truth. “I want to see if the trail stops here.”

“I see...”

“Could you check your system for me? The file appears as a deleted entry in all the other terminals.”

“Of course.” Alana Secord shifted her full attention to the terminal in front of her. A short moment later, a deep frown appeared on her stoic face. “...Found it. Both user login and the content have been deleted. Our system has been hacked.”

“Someone could have loaded this file in person.”

“Negative,” said Secord. “As you can see, this is a highly restricted area. We have at least two guards on duty at all time. We have surveillance cameras and motion sensors in every room. Anyone who touches any terminal will be recorded. This had to be remotely planted. We need to trace the package. One moment.”

Without wasting another second, Dr. Secord headed out of her office and issued an order.

Silently, Nora thanked her lucky star that she wasn’t dealing with Justin Ayo.

Just then, through the doorway of Alana Secord’s office, Nora spotted a man storming across the hallway.

Speak of the devil...

“I want the rest surveillance footages!” Ayo’s voice boomed all across the hall. “Everything. Now!”

“My team is on it,” said Secord when she returned. “We’ll find out shortly.”

“What’s going on out there?” Nora asked, gesturing at the hallway outside.

“One of our posts has been invaded,” Secord told her. “Total loss.”

“Where?”

“Malden Center.”

“The subway station north of Cambridge?”
The blonde woman studied her curiously. “It must be weird, hearing all the familiar place, only now they’re either battlezones or ruins.”

“You could say that.”

“Do you miss the surface?” asked Secord.

Very much. But Nora had to be mindful of what she said. “I miss what it used to be. It was beautiful.” The older woman seemed friendly enough behind her professional front, Nora decided to push her luck. “Why did we occupy that station?”

Secord paused as if to consider whether she was allowed to share the info. Eventually, she replied, “It’s the major route for the Railroad to transfer the stolen synths.”

“The Railroad was behind this attack?” asked Nora with her expression meticulously masked.

“It’s not raiders or Gunners, for sure,” said Alana Secord. “From what we know so far, it’s a small team. And only one person was identified on the surveillance footages.”

Deacon? Nora’s heart almost skipped a beat. “...One person could take down a station full of synths?”

“Someone with a minigun could, potentially.”

“Minigun?”

“Multi-barrel machine gun,” Secord explained. “Despite its name, the weapon is huge, and it weighs about thirty pounds.”

No, it’s not Decon. Nora had to be careful not to show any sign of relief. But it lasted for only a second, until she recalled seeing this particular weapon before. In a dark church, held by a tall woman with striking white hair.

“You’re familiar with the area, yes?” Secord asked. “Malden Center is a very good strategic location. It connects several paths up north to the roads down south. Say what you want about the Railroad, they are anything but dumb. That’s why they’ve survived for as long as they have.”

“How long have you been dealing with them?” Nora asked, swallowing hard to maintain a steady voice.

“We’ve been playing this cat-and-mouse game for years. Just when we think we get rid of them, they’ll pop up somewhere else. A ragtag group of naive people and their misguided ideology of freeing synths. But, make no mistake, they’re smart. Absolutely brilliant. I’d love to have a chat with the brains behind their operations.”

“...You don’t hate them?”

“We are our enemies, of course, but it doesn’t mean I can’t recognize their ingenuity.” The second-in-command of the SRB shrugged. “It takes energy to hate someone, and I don’t have extra to spare.” Secord’s sharp eyes unconsciously glanced over at the hallway outside her office. “We have enough hate in this department as it is.”

Nora sensed there was something undercurrent. “What do you mean?”

“It’s no secret, really. Thanks to our acting director Ayo, most of the Institute hate us. Makes our
job so much harder.”

So there was a hidden tale. “It wasn't always like this?” she prompted.

“No. When Dr. Zimmer was running the SRB, we hardly ever received any complaints from other departments. Now?” Secord trailed off with a hint of a self-deprecating smirk.

“Fear as a tool is never a permanent solution,” Nora commented. “History tells us it’ll only lead to revolution.”

To that, Secord nodded. “And only a fool ignores history. Humans love to repeat their mistakes. I only wish others would see that.”

‘Others’. Or the man named Justin Ayo.

A knock interrupted the conversation.

“Found it, ma’am,” the staff reported. “The trail ends at maintenance terminal 6.”

“Send a team in,” Secord ordered. “Lock down the area--”

_No!_ “Wait,” Nora quickly interjected. “The director wants this to be handled with discretion. I'll go there myself.”

“It could be dangerous,” warned Secord.

“If I see anything, I'll request backup immediately,” Nora insisted. “The director explicitly stated that he didn’t want to hear anymore complaints regarding the investigation.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” said Alana Secord. “Do be careful, ma’am. If you require any assistance, my door is always open.”

---

The SRB was alerted. Nora knew her time was ticking. If this was Liam, she had to…

She had to…

What? Destroyed the evidence? Or secured the evidence and reported the truth to Shaun?

Either way, she had to get her hands on the solid evidence first.

Nora rushed a certain part of the Institute she had never been to. She followed Dr. Secord’s clear instruction and found the specific room terminal 6 was located.

Several rolls of tall racks filled the entire storage area. Even though her view was blocked by the boxes and containers, Nora could hear a distinctive sound of clicking coming from the opposite end of the room. The sound of keystrokes.

And Liam, or whoever behind the leak, was already here.

Quickly but quietly, Nora weaved her way through the narrow passage of a maze formed by the storage racks. With each step, she began to wonder if she should have accepted backup. This was
police work, it’s not for lawyers. And definitely not for unarmed lawyers.

It was rash, it was stupid, and it was…

It was to seek the truth, to protect innocents.

It was what her father would have done.

Nora exited the maze and found what she had been searching for. In front of the terminal stood a slim figure in white jumpsuit. It wasn’t a young man with short blond hair. In fact, it wasn’t even a man.

Nora couldn’t believe her eyes. “Eve?”

“Don’t come any closer!” The synth raised a pistol. Her usual friendly demeanor was all but gone. “When I saw you came in with Alan, I knew you’re closing in, figuring things out.”

Staring down the barrel of the laser handgun, Nora swallowed hard. All the self-defense lessons her father had made her take years ago rushed to her in a blur. Somewhere in her memory was a course on how to disarm a weapon.

But Nora wasn’t about bet her life on a forgotten lesson. Instead, she counted on what she knew, what she was good at.

“We can talk about this, Eve,” coaxed Nora as calmly as she possibly could when her heart was about to burst out of her chest. “I’m unarmed. Put down your gun, and let’s talk…”

“No.” The synth shook her head and steadied her shaky grip with both hands. “I’m sorry that you had to find me here, Nora. I am… I don’t want to hurt you, but I have no choice--”

“Drop your weapon!” a voice suddenly yelled.

X6?

X6-88 emerged from behind the racks with his laser rifle aimed directly at the synth’s head. “Drop your weapon, Unit! I won’t say it again.” With his eyes and his gun locked onto his target, the courser told Nora, “Mrs. Taylor, stand behind me.”

An odd relief washed over Eve’s tired face when she raised her hands up in defeat.

When he was certain Nora was out of harm’s way, X6-88 snatched the pistol away at once, then slammed his target face-first against the wall to search for concealed weapons.

Although still shaken from the encounter, Nora winced at the treatment.

The courser stepped back after he was satisfied with the result. “One wrong move, Unit,” warned X6-88, “and I will turn you into ashes. I don’t miss.” He then turned to Nora. “Are you okay, ma’am?”

“Yes… yes, I’m fine,” said Nora, both happy and dismay to see her tall, dark shadow returned to her side. “Why are you here?”

“I followed you,” the courser stated as if it’s the most obvious thing. “Dr. Secord ordered to have you protected remotely. I volunteered. She predicted you could be in danger. Apparently, she was right.”
“I will take this traitor back to the SRB,” said X6-88, snapping a pair of handcuffs on the synth’s wrists.

“Wait!” said Nora. “Shaun asked me to go directly to him once I caught the person involved.”

“Should I take her to Father?” X6-88 asked.

“Not yet.” Nora had to think fast. “We need some answers. I want to talk to her alone.”

“It’s not safe, ma’am. You should leave the interrogation to us. We have experts who know how to make people talk.”

“Shaun wanted me to handle this case,” stated Nora with a subtle emphasis of her son’s name.

“No, bring her to my quarters.”

X6-88 stared at her as if she’d grown another head. “...Excuse me?”

“Bring her to my quarters,” Nora repeated, firmer this time. “I’ll question her there. If she has any accomplices, they will find out she’s been taken to the SRB in no time. We can’t afford to make one mistake.”

The courser hesitated.

“She's unarmed and cuffed. I’ll be fine,” Nora assured him. “You guard the door and keep everyone out. The lady and I will have a… nice chat.”

“Very well,” X6-88 agreed, however reluctant he might feel. “You’re lucky, Unit. Mrs. Taylor is a kind woman. If you try to hurt her again, I will personally send you to reclamation chamber.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I told you,” said Eve. “It’s me, Nora. I did it. It’s me.”

Sitting across from each other in the comfortable living quarters, the two women looked every bit like they were having a pleasant social gathering. Apart from the fact that one of them had her hands cuffed.

No, it’s not. The woman was lying. It was plain as day.

“How did you smuggle the synths out of the Institute?” asked former lawyer.

“I...I downloaded a file… from the SRB. Then I remotely sent it off to random locations before it was… uploaded in Robotics.”

“Not just any terminals in Robotics, but Alan Binet’s. Why?”

“What?” the synth gasped, genuinely surprised.
It’d appear Alan Binet didn’t tell Eve the details. Nora used this to her advantage. “Of all people in Robotics, why did you frame Alan?”

For a brief second, panic flashed across the synth’s face. “I—I…”

Without giving the suspect a break to recover, the former lawyer fired another question, “What exactly was the file you downloaded from the SRB?”

The woman shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “T…the file that was deleted. ...It’s a program that will... bypass security…”

“You mean the one that generates daily passcode to the teleporter?”

“Yes! With the passcode, the synths could leave.”

“You’re lying. There’s no such file.” Nora rested her case.

“I’m not lying!” Eve insisted, displaying every physical sign of a liar. A desperate one. “I did this on my own. It’s me! It’s just me, no one else! You see, I don’t want to my fellow synths suffer. I want them to be free, to...to…”

“You’re a terrible liar, Eve,” said Nora with a gentle sigh. “And I say that as a compliment.”

The synth only shook her head in distress. “No… No! Please, hand me over to the SRB.”

“You know what they’ll do to you.”

“I don’t care! Just… just hand me over, please!”

“It’s Liam, isn’t it?”

The pure shock on Eve’s face confirmed Nora’s guess. “…How…”

“You’re protecting someone with your life,” Nora reasoned. “It must be someone important. It’s not Alan Binet, because he knows how hard lives are on the surface. So, it must be Liam.”

“No! No, it’s me! Not Liam!”

“Not so loud.” Nora gestured at the door. Outside stood a courser who had caught Eve with a gun. “Tell me the truth, Eve. Tell me the truth so I can help him.”

For a long moment, the synth only sobbed. The tears in her eyes were as real as any human’s. If anyone ever doubted the legitimacy of synth’s emotions, all they needed to do was to take a look at this heartbroken woman.

“You know Liam,” said Eve eventually after she’d calmed down. “He’s so smart, so kind-hearted. All he wants is for synths to have a better life, to be free! Please, Nora, let me take the blame. I have already threatened to kill you, I know I won’t get away with this. They can wipe my memory or do whatever they want with me. I don’t care! Just… just not Liam.”

Her cry, her plead, her willing sacrifice, all shook Nora to the core. “You’re willing to give your own life to protect Liam?”

A strangely serene smile appeared on the Eve’s face. “I know I am a synth. I know Liam isn’t really my son, but I’ve come to love him as if he were my own. I’d give my life to protect Liam, and if necessary, take someone else’s.” Her red-rimmed, tearful eyes glanced up and looked into
“You’re a mother, too, Nora. What would you do to protect your son?”

Interrogation should be left to the experts.

At least in X6-88’s opinion.

Mrs. Taylor was obviously smart and determined, but was she intimidating enough to squeeze information out of the suspect? X6-88 highly doubted it.

The door behind him opened sooner than the courser had expected. Was the interrogation unsuccessful?

Mrs. Taylor led the way out, behind her the traitor followed. The unit kept her head down, but X6-88 noticed her eyes were red. Eve, the only synth with a name, who turned out to be a traitor. Synths should never pretend to be humans to start with. Eve, or whatever her original designation was, was obviously a mistake.

“I’m going to search Binet’s quarters,” Mrs. Taylor announced.

“That won’t be necessary, ma’am,” said X6-88. “The SRB will take care of it. You have already apprehended the culprit, Father will be pleased.”

“There’s a kid in the family. I don’t want scare him by having a bunch SRB personnels raiding his home.”

“Liam Binet is hardly a child, ma’am,” X6-88 pointed out. “His dossier states that he is eighteen.”

“Exactly,” said Mrs. Taylor. “He’s a teenager. And teenage humans are most sensitive, emotional, and irrational. Let me break the news to him gently.”

X6-88 fought back the urge to raise an eyebrow at her logic. “Is that necessary?”

“Necessary? No. But it’s courtesy. It’s the decent thing to do, X6-88.”

This woman was more than strange, but who was X6-88 to argue? He was just a courser. If Father trusted her, so should he. “What do you want to do with the unit, ma’am?”

“Take her back to the SRB,” said Mrs. Taylor after a thoughtful pause. “Uncuff her, and don’t draw any attention. Put her behind bars for now, but do not mistreat her.”

Strange, yet kind. X6-88 nodded. “Understood.”

“So, you figured it out. Nice work,” said Liam Binet with an unexpected calm smile.

His demeanor had shifted so dramatically, it’s as if he’d aged a decade. Was this the real Liam Binet? Was the cheerful, boyish front just an act?
“I knew you’re onto me when I saw you in my dad’s office earlier.”

“And yet you didn’t even try to run.”

“Run? Where to?” The blond-haired young man shrugged with a tiny chuckle.

Indeed. They were all trapped in this underground paradise...

“Did you tell my dad?” asked Liam.

“Not yet,” Nora told him. “He thinks someone bounced the file around, going through the terminal in your house to his office. He doesn’t want to believe it’s you.”

“That’s my dad. He only wants to see the good in people. Humans or synths. So, where are the guards?”

“Liam, listen,” said Nora carefully. “The SRB is already involved. A courser saw Eve pointing a gun at me. Eve is in custody.”

“What?” Young Binet seemed genuinely shocked by the news. “Why would she do that?”

“She was trying to cover your track. When I found her, she panicked. She claimed it was all her fault.”

“I--I didn’t know she knew… I never meant to get her involved.”

“She loves you, Liam. Like a mother loves her son.”

“She’s family, no matter what people say. …I’m sorry it has come to that.”

Collateral damage. Nora absolutely hated it.

“Are you going to tell the truth,” Liam asked. “That it’s me instead of Eve?”

“If I could tell Eve was lying,” Nora replied, “I doubt she could fool Justin Ayo.”

“Ah. So someone’s head has to roll.” Binet nodded. “Eve has absolutely nothing to do with this, Mrs. Taylor. You can arrest me if you want, but make sure she’s okay. …My dad would go crazy if he lost us both.”

Another collateral damage. Nora swallowed a sigh. “You’re smart, Liam. What you did, you must have known you couldn’t get away with it forever.”

The young man merely shrugged. “I’ve been doing this for four years. No one down here could catch me. I’m not surprised it took someone from outside.”

“Why did you do it?”

“I was bored. At first, I just wanted to see if I could get away with it. It was a challenge, you know? But then I realized the synths are really just like us, except without any freedom. I decided to help the ones that wanted to escape, so they can have a better life.”

“Better life?” said Nora. “It’s hell up there on the surface.”

“At least they have a choice,” Liam countered. “If they want to take their chances, I’m there to help. And the more I helped, the more I learned about their lives. About the truth that no one talks
“That they are sentient beings. But everyone turns a blind eye to the plain fact because it's easier to see them as tools,” the young man sneered. “As… things. They’re slaves, Mrs. Taylor. Some of the synths spend their whole lives doing one single task. Everyday. They don’t have anyone to talk to, they can’t have any thoughts of their own. Can you imagine living a life like that?”

Nora could only grimace at that disturbing mental image.

“You asked me about the synths,” Liam continued, “about their lives. And I’ve heard you’ve been talking to them. You care about the synths, too, don’t you? You’re different from the rest of the people here. I’m glad it’s you who caught me. At least you listen, you care.”

“Four years, huh?” said Nora, recalling a name Deacon had once told her. A codename the Railroad had given to the unknown savior: Patriot.

“Four years. Forty-three synths,” said Liam Binet proudly, looking every bit like the codename he didn't even know he had.

If only Nora could tell Deacon that the Patriot was a teenage genius. If only she could talk to her partner again…

“This is not the end, you know?” Liam told her. “Synths have found ways of escaping for years, even before I was born. And I’m sure they’ll find a way to get out without my help. So, are you going to arrest me?”

Nora hesitated. This was the question she’d been asking herself.

*Don’t do this*, a voice whispered inside her mind. A voice that belonged to a man in sunglasses.

*Don’t do this.* ..

*Do the right thing*, her father had always told her.

It’s easier when things were black and white. When there were laws she could follow, rules she could go by. But everything went out of the windows when the bomb dropped. No laws, no rules. The only thing that could guide her was her moral compass, which was now spinning like a compass in the middle of the Bermuda Triangle.

“You can either turn me in,” said Liam Binet, aka Patriot, “Or... I have a proposal for you.”

*Do the right thing.*

“Eve?” Father arched one brow at the name.

“Dr. Binet's personal synth,” X6-88 clarified.

“...That’s surprising.” Father leaned back from the workstation in his private quarters.
It was a honor to be invited to the director’s exclusive apartment. As far as X6-88 knew, he was the first courser who had the privilege to be here.

Father was not alone. Sitting by the workstation was a boy with jet-black hair and standard white jumpsuit. If X6-88 didn’t know better, he would assume it was one of the younger members of the Institute. But the blank face on the boy was a dead giveaway. The boy was, in fact, a synth. A synth that was made in the image of Father himself.

“What is my mother's next step?” asked Father after a thoughtful pause.

“She is searching the Binet’s residence to gather evidence,” the courser reported.

“Interesting…” The director then looked at him. “What do you think, X6-88?”

“I think the unit is defective and needs to go through proclamation,” X6-88 replied. “The unit was armed and threatened to kill Mrs. Taylor. That alone is unforgivable. She even confessed her crime.”

“Eve certainly has the motive,” said Father. “But I think she’s just a pawn.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

Patiently, Father explained, “She was built to be a domestic synth, wasn’t she? Do you think she possesses the skills to accomplish her crime?”

X6-88 pondered for a second. “No.”

“And how long have the synths been escaping?”

“Years.” The courser began to see the light.

The director nodded. “Before Eve was built.”

“Which means it’s not the unit. But why did she confess?”

“Why indeed?” said Father, “The case is not over, and my mother knows it.”

“Do you want me to assist Mrs. Taylor in her search?”

“No. I want to see what she will do…”

“Understood.”

No, he didn’t. Whatever Father’s plan was, X6-88 didn’t fully comprehend. Yet, his unwavering trust in the director was something the courser could count on. Father would always do the right thing for the Institute.

“There is another matter, sir,” the courser continued with his report. “Malden Center was under attacked. It’s not the raiders or the Gunners.”

“…Railroad.” The slight clench of his jaw was the only sign of dismay the stoic director showed.

“Dr. Ayo thinks so,” said X6-88. “He has been going through all the surveillance videos. It’d seem there’re only two assailants. One with a minigun, and another person who managed to avoid all the cameras.”
“Even the cameras on the synths?”

“Yes. Stealth kill, every one of them. That person knows how to use the environment to conceal himself. And…” X6-88 paused, unsure if he should report something he had yet to confirm.

“What is it?” Father prompted.

“Sir, I’m not 100% certain if it’s the same man, but I have seen this style of fighting before.”

“Who is it?”

“One of the mercenaries Mrs. Taylor hired. The one who took her to Railroad old headquarters. And the same man who stole our kidnapped unit a while ago.”

Father’s reaction was no more than a nod of silent acknowledgment. “Did you tell Dr. Ayo?” the director asked after taking a quiet sip of his hot tea.

“No, sir.”

“Good. No need to distract him for now.” Father paused for a moment before he continued, “I’m sure you have noticed… Dr. Ayo has doubts about my mother.”

“She was invited to the SRB to answer some questions.”

“Yes, she was. And only once.”

“Which means her answers were satisfactory,” X6-88 reasoned. The head of SRB was nothing if not thorough and persistent.

“Actions, however, speak louder than words,” said Father. “You have observed my mother for a while now. Tell me, X6-88, do you think she is involved with the Railroad?”

The accusation was serious. X6-88 had to consider carefully before he replied, “No.”

“Why?”

“Mrs. Taylor is an intelligent woman, sir. She knows the synths will not survive on the surface. In fact, we had a discussion on synths and their survival aboveground. She agreed it’s a death sentence for those who are stupid enough to even try.”

“Interesting. Go on.”

“Her view on the synths could be somewhat irrational, but I believe it's the result of her unique background. The lack of understanding in the technological advancements the Institute has accomplished in the past two centuries.”

“Hm…” Father nodded and motioned him to carry on.

Encouraged, X6-88 continued with his analysis, “To her, robots should look primitive, like the Mr. Handy she had. When robots look identical to humans, she mistakes them as what they seem, she sees them as humans. However, Mrs. Taylor’s adaptiveness is rather impressive. Given time, I'm sure she will see the truth.”

“And what is the truth?”

“That we are machines, sir. Nothing more.”
“Nothing more…” Father repeated. “Are you certain?”

...No… “Yes.”

The momentary doubt shocked the courser. Was that a glitch in his programming?

Self-doubt would lead to hesitation in battlefield, where even a fraction of a second could mean the difference between life and death. That was a mistake -- a mistake X6-88 would never make again.

“And what if,” Father then asked, “one day she becomes the director of the Institute? Do you think people will follow her?”

“She is well-liked by the members of the Institute.” And among some synths.

“Except for a few,” Father added under his breath.

To that, X6-88 didn't answer. “Sir, if I may ask…”

“Yes?”

“Why would Mrs. Taylor be the director?”

“Unlike synths,” Father explained wistfully as he glanced at the boy sitting motionlessly by the workstation, “we humans can't live forever.”

That was a thought that X6-88 had never bothered to entertain. Mortality. Even someone as great as Father could not overcome.

“That will be all, X6-88. Thank you,” said the leader of the Institute, handing the courser a box of Fancy Lads Snack Cakes.

As much as he tried to maintain a professional front, X6-88 unconsciously swallowed at the sight of the familiar box. “…That won’t be necessary, Father. I’m honored to help.”

“Take it,” Father insisted. “I can’t eat this anymore. Doctor’s order. I trust that our conversation would remain classified, as always?”

“Of course, Father. You can count on me.”

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A/N: 6000+ words. A very long chapter of CSI: Institute. Took all my energy to write and edit this, please forgive the typos.

I want to thank tomberi-no whose doodles regenerated my HP during my three-week battle with this extensive chapter. Thank you, pal! I know you hate the spotlight, but you deserve to be known by the readers as the constant fuel behind the fic they’re reading.

The bomb has now been placed. Wires attached. Timer set. When will someone press the button and start the timer?

Anyway, thanks for reading.
Title: “I’ve Got a Feelin’ You’re Foolin’” - June Knight and Robert Taylor, 1936.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19. tumblr - pinoko-k.
“I’m in.”

“You sure the files can’t be traced back to you?”

“Fingerprints are wiped,” said Liam Binet. “Digital fingerprints, that is.”

“This has to be an airtight case,” Nora couldn’t emphasize enough. “We can’t make one single mistake.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. T, I’ve got it all covered.”

Planting false evidence? Nora’s first thought was disbarment. But then, the bar association was long gone. No more rules, not more laws. All she had left was her moral compass to guide her.

Help the boy, save the synths, a soothing voice once again arose inside her mind. A voice that belonged to her former partner on the surface above.

Handing Liam over to the SRB would be akin to putting a bandage on a gushing wound. The bandage would be soaked with blood within seconds, and the bleeding never stopped.

Do the right thing, her father had always told her.

Was framing an innocent man a right thing? Nora frowned at that thought.

Was Ayo innocent, though? The look of pure satisfaction on Ayo’s face during the horrifying reclamation process had told Nora otherwise. How many synths had died in his hands? And how many were killed by the coursers under his direct order?

She now had a chance to save more lives. All she needed to do was to frame a man…

In a world without black and white, a world full of different shades of gray, Nora picked the lightest shade and made a stand.

It’s now or never.

Liam let out a low whistle as he remotely browsed Justin Ayo’s private terminal. “The personal computer is the window to one’s soul, you know. And I am looking right into Ayo’s…”

“If you gaze long into an abyss,” quoted Nora quietly, “the abyss also gazes into you.”

You are becoming like the criminals you used to fight, Bennett.

“Hm, right. Better hurry,” said Liam, his fingers danced swiftly all over the keyboard. “Let’s create
a new directory. Hide it somewhere easy enough for the SRB to find. ...And transfer the files.”

The former lawyer was acutely aware of a crime in progress. And the fact that she was not a witness, but a willing participant. How many years would she be locked up for this?

None, her former partner’s voice once again whispered inside her head, reminding her the reality. Welcome to the brave new world, pal.

Within seconds, the files were uploaded. “Now we need to lock this pandora box,” Liam announced as he continued his work. “Password strength should be challenging, but not too challenging.”

It was done. Nora swallowed hard and pushed all the doubts aside. It was time to focus on the next crucial step.

“How long will it take the SRB to hack the password?” Nora asked.

“Depends on who’s sitting behind the keyboard,” said Liam. “Me? Probably less than an hour. But the SRB, my guess is somewhere from a few hours to at least a day.”

“Hours?”

“You’d think everyone down here is a computer genius, but it’s actually pretty rare. Those guys at the SRB are decent enough for regular stuff. When I throw them a heavy duty problem like this… Let’s just say they probably won’t get any sleep tonight.”

“We should hear some news by tomorrow, then.” Nora knew the SRB specialists wouldn’t be the only ones who would be sleepless tonight.


“The SRB will come here,” Nora reminded the young man before she headed out of the Binet’s apartment.

“I know how to play the innocent kid, Mrs. T,” said Patriot with a charming boyish grin. “Been doing it for four years.”

Do the right thing.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Mrs. Taylor,” said Alana Secord.

Nora’s head was as calm and clear as though she was back in court. Her clients depended on her -- their future, their lives, all in her hands. In this particular case, her clients were Liam Binet and the synths.

And now it’s time for her performance.

“Thank you, Dr. Secord,” said Nora. “You mentioned before that I could ask for your assistance.”

“Of course. What can I do for you?”
“I’ve searched through Dr. Binet’s residence. There is no physical evidence that will tie Eve to the case. But, there are a few encrypted files in their private terminal that don’t belong to either Liam or Alan Binet.”

“Could be Eve’s,” said Secord.

“Can’t be certain unless we decrypt it. They appear to be downloaded from somewhere. Could you help me with the files?”

“Absolutely. I’ll send a team to Dr. Binet’s home right away.”

“I appreciate it. I’ve told Liam I’m handing the case back to the SRB. The kid is a little shaken up by the news, but he will offer his full cooperation. He’s expecting you.”

“This is the queen.” The old man held a chess piece in his hand. “It’s the strongest piece in the game. It can move freely on the board -- vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. No restrictions in distance.”

Sitting across from him, a boy version of him studied the movements he showed on the chess board.

“The queen is often used in conjunction to with a bishop or a rook.” The old man pointed at the corresponding pieces on the board. “Together they work as a team, guarding each other while threatening the opponent pieces.”

The boy nodded, absorbing every single word like a sponge.

“In addition,” the old man continued, “because of the value of a queen, it could be used in a move called, a queen sacrifice.”

The boy blinked then asked, “A queen sacrifice?”

“It’s a move where we use the queen as a bait to lure our opponent into a trap. You see, sometimes it is necessary to take certain risk--” The old man heard a distant knock coming from the office downstairs. “I have a meeting, Shaun,” he told the boy. “Feel free to study what I’ve taught you so far. The computer will be a decent opponent.”

“Can I work on the radio, Father?” asked the boy.

The old man glanced at the dismantled radio on the coffee table. Wires and screws, speakers and knobs, all scattered across the once pristine surface. This used to be his hobby when he was about the boy’s age. “Of course. I can’t wait to see what you can do with it.”

The old man headed down to his office and saw a woman waiting for him by his desk.

“What have you found?” Shaun asked the second-in-command of the SRB.

“We hit jackpot, sir,” Alana Secord reported. “I believe we’ve found the leak.”

This should be a good news, yet the look on Secord’s usual stoic face was a disturbed one. Something was big enough to unsettle the rock of the SRB.
“And?” Shaun mentally braced himself for a bad news.

“It’s Justin Ayo, sir.”

Shaun almost laughed. Jackpot, indeed.

“You are certain?” he asked, allowing a hint of carefully manufactured dismay to show.

“Unfortunately.” Secord nodded to confirm. “The encrypted files were originated from Ayo’s personal terminal. Without alerting him, our team remotely unlocked his terminal and located the evidence.”

“Justin Ayo…” That wasn’t the name Shaun had expected to hear. It was a surprise, to be sure, and it’s not entirely unpleasant…

“I was shocked, too,” said Secord, “but…”

“But?”

“The more I think about it, it makes sense, in a twisted way.”

“How so?”

“Off the record, sir?”

Shaun nodded.

“I hate to say it, but the only department that benefits from the missing synths is ours.”

“What do you mean?”

“The situation gave Ayo the perfect ammunition to push people around. The SRB has gone to hell ever since Ayo took over, and you know it.”

“We all do.”

“And… there’s something else. I didn’t want to bring this up before, but with this new development, I think you should know.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve overheard, directly from Ayo, that you’re not feeling well.”

“Ah, so the rumor flies.”

“I’ll be blunt, sir, I think Ayo might be aiming for your seat.”

“As much as I want to say this is a shock, it is not,” Shaun told her. “But, thank you for telling me. The list of potential candidates as the next director is very short. As the acting director of the SRB, Justin Ayo is on the list. ...Or, was.”

There was a single off-note in this otherwise perfectly played symphony.

“You said my mother handed this case over to the SRB?” Shaun asked.

“Yes,” Secord confirmed. “She did the right thing, sir. We couldn’t have cracked this case without Mrs. Taylor’s lead. But, when it comes to password hacking, it’s beyond her expertise. Took our
team overnight to get pass all the security. I don't think Mrs. Taylor alone could do it.”

*But what if Ayo wasn't preoccupied with the Malden Center situation? What if he took over instead of you?*

Shaun wasn't about to question his luck. Although, was it truly luck? “No, she certainly couldn't…” he agreed. “Have you informed her?”

“No yet.”

“I will tell her, then.”

“With your permission, sir, I will make an arrest.”

Shaun nodded. “Quietly. Or as quietly as you can. I doubt Ayo would come without putting up a fight -- verbally, if not physically. Be prepared.”

“I know that man,” said Alana Secord with a quiet snort. “I’ve worked with him for years. There’s no insult Ayo could throw at me that I haven’t heard from his mouth at one time or another.”

“I will call for an emergency directorial meeting. Do come and present your findings, Alana. It’s time to put an end to this.”

“Justin Ayo?” Nora made sure her expression was on point with the right amount of shock. Too much, it would be obvious that it’s an act. Too little, it would show that she’s hardly surprised by the result.

Liam’s estimation was correct. It had been fourteen hours since she’d delivered the case on silver platter to the SRB. Fourteen excruciatingly long hours.

“I was just as surprised as you are,” her son told her. “But we have solid evidence found in his private terminal.”

Nora had to be careful next. There’s a glaringly obvious flaw in the plan. If she didn’t point it out, Shaun would be suspicious. If she did, she would shine a spotlight to the one single flaw. Her only hope was that her son was smart enough to work it all out by himself. The less she nudged, the cleaner her hands remained.

“If Ayo is behind this,” Nora said, “wouldn’t it be better if he kept quiet?”

“It would,” Shaun replied almost immediately.

For a second, Nora swore her heart had stopped.

“But it would make him look incompetent,” Shaun continued. “The SRB was formed to combat this specific problem: Missing synths. If Ayo ignored the problem, the board would replace him with a more competent leader. And if he didn't lead the investigation himself, Alana Secord would have taken over the case. Under these circumstances, the best thing Ayo could do was to carry on an investigation, buy himself enough time until it's absolutely necessary to deliver results. Then he would frame the most obvious target.”
“Alan Binet.” Nora released a breath she’d been holding. Her son might look like his father, but he certainly had her brain.

“Ayo knows I’m sick, Mother.”

Nora frowned at the news. “What? Who told him?”

“No one. Say what you will about Justin Ayo, but he’s a very good detective. He has his suspicions after what happened to me on the surface. Of course, he doesn’t know the extend of my illness. But Ayo is smart enough to figure out that, sooner or later, my position will be vacant.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“Ignoring the problem won’t make it go away,” her son told her. “That man is like a vulture, waiting to strike. If he ever sat in this chair, who knows what he would do to the synths. I would not hand my legacy to a man like Ayo who can never truly appreciate the beauty of the marvelous machines we have made. This is why I need to make sure someone I trust will take my place once I’m gone.”

“Shaun…”

“For now, this particular problem is solved. Ayo is finally dealt with, thanks to your effort.”

Somehow, Nora felt a chill. But now was definitely not the time to question to have even a hint of doubt. She had a script to follow, a part to play.

“Will there be a trial?” asked Nora.

“Trial?” Shaun looked at her as if the word was a foreign concept. “No. The board of directors will vote on the issue after reviewing the evidence. If we decide he is guilty, then we will discuss the next course of action.”

The judge, the jury, and the executioner. All played by a small group of people. Perhaps it was slightly better than the Commonwealth style, where one single person could play all three roles -- usually with a gun. Deacon had told her that.

“And what form of punishment?” Nora asked.

“Probation, exile, or execution,” Shaun answered. “Ayo would not be the first to receive whatever form of punishment we decide on. If he’s found guilty, that is.”

“There were others?”

“Yes. There were some… black sheep in the past. And I’m certain there will be more in the future. You see, even though we are men and women of science, we are still humans. As humans, we are not perfect. Those who think otherwise are either ignorant or delusional.”

“What about synths?” asked Nora curiously. “Are they perfect?”

“They are as perfect as we make them,” Shaun replied. “Like any other crafts, given time and patience, through practice, perfection could be achieved. That is my belief.”

This was a surprise. Did Shaun just imply that synths were better than humans?

“There is one other matter, Mother,” said her son before Nora could dive into this subject further. “What do you think we should do with Eve?”
“She’s a pawn in this, Shaun.”

“I agree. However, we can’t let her walk away without any form of punishment. She might be used, but she did threaten to kill you. And we have a witness.”

X6-88. “Don’t send her to the reclamation chamber, son. She loves Alan and Liam.”

“Does she? Are the synths really capable of love?”

“They are,” Nora replied without hesitation. “And she does.”

For a moment, Shaun pondered. “I see.”

“Eve was misguided and she made a mistake,” Nora admitted, “but I think she deserves another chance. If you take her away and wipe her memories, the only ones who will suffer are the ones who will still remember her.”

“...Alan and young Liam.”

“You’re punishing them, not her. The Binets are innocent, son.”

“Ah, the Binets...” To Nora’s surprise, there was the faintest hint of a smile on Shaun's face as her son told her, “I still remember that day a young Mr. Binet walked through the door of Robotics.”

“Liam?”

“Alan.” Shaun recalled, “Back then, he used to look like Liam. And now he looks just like his father. Did I tell you that Alan’s father was my mentor at Robotics? The man was a genius. Both his son and his grandson take after Dr. Binet, it would seem. Talented, kind, yet incredibly naïve in some ways. Genetics... it’s a miraculous thing.”

“It is,” said Nora with a gentle smile. “Even though you don’t look like your grandpa, sometimes I swear you sound just like him. Your grandpa used to tell me to do the right thing. And I’m telling you the same thing, son. Do the right thing. Give Eve a second chance.”

“This is absurd!” yelled Max Loken.

“Now, I know this is a shocking matter,” said Shaun, sitting at the head of the conference table, “but we need to put our feelings aside and consider only the facts. And the fact is that we have solid evidence to prove Justin Ayo is behind the disappearance of the synths. Dr. Secord.”

Alana Secord took over, “Evidence we have so far including: Multiple tampered crew assignment files -- dating back to four years past. The original assignments, all signed and approved by Justin Ayo. A log of all the synths escaped, a total of forty-three. And a list of synths that are considered 'high flight risk’.”

Shaun waved at the folder in front of each member. “Please review the data before we proceed.”

“This is damning evidence, sir,” said Allie Filmore as she read through the pages.

“Is it possible,” asked Clayton Holden, “that someone hacked into Dr. Ayo’s personal terminal and
frame him?"

“Yes!” Loken quickly added his vote on this theory. “Clayton is right! That must be it!”

“Possible, but not probable,” Secord replied. “Why would the culprit frame a high profile member of the Institute? Especially one of the board members?”

“And the head of the SRB, no less,” Madison Li reasoned. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Secord nodded. “It’d bring nothing but intense scrutiny to the case."

Like right now. Shaun said nothing to remain impartial.

“Also,” Secord continued, “consider the fact that all the files were created locally, as our team of experts have confirmed. There’s no trace of any evidence being uploaded from elsewhere. So, either this person is better than all the specialists in the SRB combined, yet he or she is stupid enough to frame the man who is well-known to be in charge of the investigation… Or, Ayo wasn’t framed.”

For a brief moment, the board went quiet to consider. Then, one by one, they all nodded, except for Max Loken.

“If I were to go through this much trouble to frame someone,” said Dr. Dean Volkert, “I would certainly pick anyone but the man who was investigating this case.”

“Justin would never do this,” Loken claimed. “I’ve known him for decades!”

“So have we, Max,” said Filmore. “But the facts are facts.”

“Occam’s razor, Dr. Loken,” Li added. “No wonder the SRB could never find out who’s behind the missing synths. It’s perfect cover. Ayo isn’t going to arrest himself. And he got every excuse to push us around like he owned the Institute, all in the name of his precious investigation.”

“You are all wrong!” Loken snapped, “I demand a reinvestigation!”

“Who will be in charge, then?” asked Li with a snort. “You?”

“Anyone but the SRB!” the head of Robotics insisted.

“If you’re implying the SRB is framing Dr. Ayo,” said Secord with a cold glare that matched her icy tone, “I assure you, Dr. Loken, our investigation was unbiased.”

“Use that grey matter in between your ears, Max,” said Li, “Why would the SRB frame its acting director?”

Max Loken bolted up from his seat. “Why you b--”

“Enough!” Shaun interrupted. “Settle down, all of you.”

“This is wrong!” Loken repeated again and again, but quieter each time.

Shaun gave a subtle nod to the doctor who was sitting at his right.

“You’re in shock, Max,” said Dr. Volkert. “Let me give you something to calm down that blood pressure of yours.”
“It can’t be Justin, Doc,” mumbled Loken. “It can’t be…”

“No wonder Ayo tried so hard to push for Binet as the suspect,” Li commented as the doctor was taking care of his patient.

“What happened?” Holdren asked.

Filmore quietly filled him in, “Justin brought his team to Robotics and turned Alan’s office upside down.”

“Who the hell did he think he was?” Li scowled. “He’s been bossing around in my lab as well.”

“And ours, too,” said Holdred. “I specifically asked Dr. Higgs not to let anyone disturb our experiments. The budding plants are fragile. But he allowed Dr. Ayo to march into the green house with his coursers. We lost a month's worth of work…”

“That’s ridiculous!” Madison Li huffed then jabbed, “Did he expect to find missing synths hiding in the soil? I don’t know about you, but I’m not sorry to see him gone.”

The other two silently agreed.

Sitting at the head of the table, Shaun observed without a word. Apart from the head of Robotics, the members of the board didn’t seem to be upset by the betrayal. In fact, they looked relieved.

This was hardly a surprise, for Shaun felt exactly the same himself.

A nod from Dr. Volkert confirmed Loken had been stabilized, although Shaun predicted that man’s blood pressure would rise again all too soon.

“We should proceed,” Shaun announced after Dr. Volkert took his seat. “We have three particular matters to vote on. First, on the matter of Justin Ayo. Upon reviewing the evidence, those who think he’s guilty, raise your hand.”

All hands were raised, except Max Loken’s. Majority won.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Loken,” said Shaun without meaning a word of it. “The board has decided. Now, we have to decide on an acceptable form of punishment.”

“I want no part of this!” Loken declared and marched right out of the conference room.

“Should I follow?” asked Dr. Volkert quietly.

“No.” Let the man throw his tantrum. We have business to discuss. Paying no mind to the protest, Shaun asked the remaining board members, “Idea?”

“If Ayo likes the surface so much,” Li suggested, “I say we should send him up there like he sent the synths.”

“He won’t survive for long,” said Filmore. “We should take away all his privileges and put him on indefinite probation.”

“That’s hardly a punishment,” said Li. “What are the other options?”

“Exile,” Secord replied, “probation. Or Execution.”

Holdren grimaced. “So… we’re left with execution? That’s too harsh, isn’t it?”
“We should put this matter on hold for now,” Shaun decided. “Justin Ayo will remain in the detention center until further notice. No visitors allowed.”

“Doubt he will have any,” Li commented under her breath.

“Any objections?” Shaun glanced around the table. It was nice to have everyone on the same page for once. “Now, onto the next matter. We need a new acting director for the SRB. I nominate Dr. Alana Secord.”

“Agree,” all the remaining board members said in unison.

“Dr. Loken is absent,” Shaun stated, “Regardless, five votes out of six. Congratulations, Dr. Secord. You are now the acting director of the SRB.”

Allie Filmore was the first to extend a welcoming hand. “Welcome to the board, Alana.”

“Congratulations!” Clayton Holdren followed suit with a warm smile. “It’s good to have you here.”

“Finally,” said Madison Li with not-so subtle sigh.

Indeed...

“It’s over,” said Nora quietly as she sat down on a bench in the atrium.

Standing a step in front of Nora, a young man leaned against the fence and stared at the clear pond below. The gentle sound from the waterfall nearby masked their conversation.

“You did the right thing, Mrs. T,” said Liam Binet. “On behalf of all my friends, I thank you.”

“I'm sorry about Eve.”

“Yeah, me too…” Liam turned to face her. “My dad is blaming himself. He thought there's a glitch in the programming in Eve. But I can't tell him the truth, can I?”

“The less he knows, the better.”

The young man nodded with a solemn yet determined look in his pale blue eyes. “I have already dragged Eve into this, even though I never wanted to. The least I could do right now is to protect my dad.”

“Sometimes we have to lie to the people we love.” Nora suppressed a sigh. “You have to put your project on hold for a while. Maybe think of a new way to solve your problems.”

“I look forward to the challenge. There’s one more batch, though. It’s already been processed. Too late to stop that now.”

Nora had to agree. Any last minute change of assignment would certainly raise suspicion at this sensitive time frame. “When?”

“In about four hours.”
Four hours…

A thought occurred to her. A sudden idea, a bad idea, but it caught on like a wildfire she couldn’t extinguish.

It’s her last chance. Her only chance.

It’s now or never.

Some things in life require a certain amount of bravery, and a giant leap of faith.

“Could you do me a favor?” Nora heard herself ask before she could think it through.

“For you? Anything.” Patriot grinned. “Name it, Mrs. T.”

“Sir, you should leave this to us,” Alana Secord stated for the second time since Shaun had stepped into the SRB. “Ayo is not stable. And the things he’s been saying…”

“My skin is thick enough to withstand a few insults.” Shaun nodded at the guard to open the door to the detention center.

Within one of the cells, the former head of the SRB paced around like a caged animal.

“It’s you…” Justin Ayo hissed.

Shaun responded with a steady, dispassionate gaze.

“It’s you!” Ayo charged and pounded on the clear wall that separated them. “You did this, Taylor! You did this!”

“Stand back!” Secord yelled.

“How dare you locked me up?” barked Ayo. “I’m your director!”

“Not anymore,” said Secord.

“Dr. Secord is now the acting director of the SRB, Dr. Ayo,” Shaun told the man calmly. “The board has already approved.”

“...So, you’re in on this, too, Secord. I see… I see now!” Ayo’s accusing finger swayed between the two persons outside the cell. “You did his dirty work because he promised you MY position!”

“Sir,” said Alana to Shaun, “you don’t have to be here to hear this.”

“Let him,” said Shaun.

“You set me up, Taylor!!” Ayo yelled. “You, son of a bitch!! You planted the files! You and your bitch of a mother!!”

“That’s enough!” warned Secord.

“I did no such thing,” said Shaun as cool as ever without raising his voice. “And neither did my
mother. If you think she’s capable of planting evidence in your terminal, I think you overestimate her technical skills.”

“But YOU can!” Ayo punched on the clear wall. “It’s you, isn’t it? You used that bitch to distract me!! You filthy surface dweller! You’re never one of us!”

With a mere flicker of one finger, Shaun silently ordered the guard to press a button. A carefully measured shock of electricity was sent to the wall within the cell. Screaming, Justin Ayo jolted then stumbled back and fell onto the floor.

“I am here to inform you that the board has decided,” Shaun told the fallen man within the cell. “The decision to find you guilty was unanimous. However, we have yet to pick a suitable form of punishment. Some prefer execution, other exile. Of course, you will be informed once a decision is made. That will be all.” Shaun studied the former head of the SRB who was trying to get back on his feet. A smile threatened to crack the old man’s stoic face. “Good day, Dr. Ayo.”

*Checkmate.*

---

A/N: Please hold onto your rotten tomatoes. The show is not over.

Deacon will return soon. Promise.

As always, thank you for reading. And a special thanks to those who leave a review, in public or in private. Thank you for your support! (If, for whatever reasons, I cannot reply to your message here, I'll try to post a reply on my blog.)

Title: “It’s Now or Never” -- Elvis Presley, 1960.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19. tumblr - pinoko-k.
A song echoed through the ancient stone walls of the underground catacomb.

“I see trees of green, red roses too.
I see them bloom for me and you.
And I think to myself;
What a wonderful world.”

Wonderful world? Deacon snorted.

Two centuries ago, maybe. Now? This world had been anything but wonderful.

Deacon mentally blocked it out as he continued to encrypt the last message on the pile.

Lately, the spy had spent most of his days in the catacomb with a bunch of dead bastards who had actually lived their lives as the song had told him again and again. A wonderful world with green trees and red roses.

This was not where he was supposed to be.

A man whose job was intel was supposed to be out there, watching, listening, and watching some more. His finger was supposed to be on the pulse of the Commonwealth and beyond. He was not supposed to be sitting behind a desk, decrypting and encrypting messages. Or staring at the map on the wall,figuring a new route to ship the synths out of the Commonwealth. Or searching through the database for a potential new HQ that would not require him to be roommates with skeletons.

Deacon felt as though someone had put a blindfold on him and plugged both his ears. The easy-going man let out a rare, impatient sigh as he finished encrypting an outgoing message to Mercer.

He was restless. Too restless. He was sick and tired of waiting.

Waiting for what, though?

For a chance to be out sneaking around the dark alleys that smelled like piss? Perhaps.

To get in contact with his eyes and ears that were scattered all across the Commonwealth? Possibly.

If the liar could be blatantly honest with himself for a brief moment, he would realize the void he had been feeling looked oddly like the shape of a person. And the painful truth was that no amount of piss-filled fresh air or thrill from adrenaline rush could truly fill that shapely hole.

Of course, a smart man like him knew that.
Within the liar hid a conscience. It was a little part where he could never truly bring himself to extinguish. It was a teeny tiny part that always yelled at him for the lies he had told. That part knew the truth. That part always knew, despite the lies the liar had weaved and surrounded himself like a warm cocoon.

And that hidden part also knew that the chances of filling that particular void was less than one in a million. For the sanity of the man as a whole, it was better to continue with the lie. A lie that said Project Wanderer was a failure, and that everything was back to the way it was before a certain woman in blue had crawled out of her frozen catacomb and stumbled into his life.

The Ice Queen. The Mistress of Frost. Frozen Banana…

A quiet chuckle escaped as Deacon recalled the indignant look on his partner’s face when he randomly blurted out the last nickname.

If he had time to think it through, he’d come up with better code-names, one she might actually like. Something like... Manette. Lucie Manette.

Yes, that would fit her nicely.

From a hidden pocket in his jacket, Deacon fished out two neatly folded notes and carefully opened one. He’d read it so many times that he could recite the names on the list in reverse. There was a message hidden in the list, a warning to keep him safe.

His Lucie Manette would make a surprisingly good agent.

The door to the catacomb creaked open and close. Deacon put the two notes back inside his pocket and sealed his last message.

Drummer Boy put down a stack of envelopes on Deacon’s desk. “For you.”

“Aw, you shouldn’t have,” said the man in sunglasses with a grin that looked real enough to fool anyone. Anyone but himself.

Taking off his cap to fan himself, Drummer Boy grabbed a bottle of Nuka-Cola. Sweating in middle of December? The life of a messenger was a tough one.

“To Bunker Hill and Mercer.” Deacon handed two seal letters to the kid. “No hurry. Deliver them by tomorrow.”

The man in sunglasses stared at the new incoming notes on the desk. More messages waiting to be decrypted. More time spent sitting behind this desk. He felt suffocated.

“You know,” Deacon changed his mind, “on second thought, maybe I should drop them off myself.”

“Nah. Dez would kill me.” Drummer Boy snatched the letters then drained the remaining Nuka-Cola in one long gulp. “Hey, Deacon,” said the kid after an inevitable burp, “you know most of the agents, right?”

“It’s my job to know.”

“You know one goes by the name of Carton?”

Deacon almost leaped out of his chair. “…What did you say?”
“A synth was asking to see someone named Carton. He wouldn’t say why. Not even High Rise could get a word from him.”

Sydney Carton. Deacon had only used this alias once.

“He’s in Ticonderoga now?” Deacon asked, his heart raced. He could feel life starting to come back to his idle body.

“Yeah. High Rise picked him up last night--”

Deacon jumped to the shelf and grabbed a Stealth Boy and his weapons.

“Hey, where are you goin’?” Drummer Boy asked.

“Find Carton.” Deacon rushed to the door. “Tell Dez I’m off to take a nap or something.”

The two-centuries old pages felt fragile between her gentle fingers. Nora had read through the booklet from cover to cover again and again.


A book that had been handed to her by her partner.

Nora retrieved a note that was hidden inside this ancient booklet. On it, only four words.

“You can’t trust everyone.”

The lesson was as memorable as the message itself. A warm smile found its way to her face as Nora recalled a particular conversation at an abandon Slocum Joe’s.

Light coming from the balcony told her it was morning. Well, the artificial light. If Nora had bothered to step outside the balcony and glance up, she would not find the sun or the sky. All she would see was levels upon levels of buildings, windows, and structures.

No blue sky, no white clouds, no sunshine. Not even rain or storms. It was almost Christmas, but the temperature was at a constant 21 degree Celsius, 70 degree Fahrenheit. A perfect indoor temperature inside a perfectly sealed underground world.

This was her life.

Nora unconsciously looked up to the ceiling, to where the surface world was many, many miles above.

What was Deacon doing right now? Again, she caught her thoughts randomly wandered to the man in sunglasses.

Lately, she couldn’t seem to be able to chase her partner out of her mind. It didn’t matter, though. Her life was here, his was aboveground. With Ayo out of the picture, Deacon should be safe, at least for a while. It was all she could do to protect him.
Carefully, Nora put the note inside the booklet then hid it behind the wall mirror. The woman in the reflection was not one Nora recognized. Same face, same eyes, yet the smile was gone.

No, this wouldn’t do.

She closed her eyes, took a long breath, then opened her eyes again and curled up the corners of her lips. A faint smile plastered on -- a smile that looked real enough to anyone. Anyone but herself.

Yes, this was the face people out there expected to see.

Nora Bennett put on her tailored jacket and stepped out of her quarters.

It was another day in the Institute, another day of the rest of her life.

The elevator in Ticonderoga moved at a crawling speed today. Deacon briefly regretted not taking the stairs. He’d not stopped moving since he’d bolted from the hole in the ground. Now, standing idly inside a moving metal cage, Deacon finally had a moment to think.

The first thought that came to his head was a simple question: What the hell are you doing here?

The Institute bastards were looking for him, what if this was a trap? What if this synth who had risked his life to escape was in fact an infiltrator whose job was to come looking for the man who had helped their boss’ mom?

By showing up and admitting that he was Sydney Carton, Deacon was handing his own head to them on a silver platter.

Yet… yet he found himself here. Why?

*Trust me*, said a soft voice inside his head. His Lucie Manette’s.

*You can’t trust everyone*, he replied silently.

*But I’m not everyone, am I?* the voice asked in a whisper.

The shaky metal cage stopped. Deacon stared at the familiar setting of the safehouse outside the elevator. Perhaps a message from his partner was waiting for him right here. Or maybe it would turn out to be the mistake that would finally kill him.

He’d never know until he met this synth.

Some things in life require a certain amount of bravery, and a giant leap of faith.

It’s now or never.

Deacon stepped out of the elevator.

Within seconds, he was greeted with warm welcomes from various agents. Those steel blue eyes behind the sunglasses were busy searching for a face he didn’t recognize.

“What’s up, D?” High Rise asked. “If you’re lookin’ for Drummer, the kid’s gone already.”
“Yeah, I know,” said Deacon, skipping all the pleasantries. “Heard a new friend is looking for someone.”

“Oh, H2-22? Yeah. He said he would only talk to someone named Carton. Wouldn’t tell me anything beside the name. Hell, I don’t even know if it’s a man or a woman.”

“Where is he?”

“Upstairs. Last room on the left.” High Rise gave Deacon a knowing look. “I shouldn’t ask, should I?”

“Best not to.”

High Rise merely gave him a nod and walked away without any question. Some information was better left undisclosed, for the safety of everyone. Both agents had been in the business long enough to live by that rule.

Deacon charged up the stairs and found the small room that had once been someone’s office two centuries ago. The current occupant was a scrawny man with a mop of dark brown hair.

“H2-22?” asked Deacon.

The man gasped and scooted away on couch, keeping as much distance between himself and his visitor as possible. “...W...W-who are...you?”

“ Heard you’re looking for someone named Carton,” said Deacon calmly despite the anticipation that was killing him. “Well, you found him.”

The synth’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “...I...I was told not to say anything... until you tell me your name.”

*Clever*. “Sydney,” Deacon replied as if it was a passcode. “Sydney Carton.”

Almost immediately, H2-22 let out a heavy breath. “I...It’s you! I--I’m so glad... I found you!”

Deacon quickly peeked outside the short hallway before he closed the door behind him. The cynical part of him was still expecting a stab from the seemingly harmless man. Yet, the long forgotten, hidden romantic part could hardly contain the excitement. “...Did she send you?”

The synth nodded. “I...I have a message... A letter. From our friend. The lady...”

The lady. Nora Bennett.

Within the depth of his pocket, the synth pulled out a wrinkled envelope. On the front of the envelope were two words: ‘To Carton’. On the back, a name was signed at the lower right corner: C. Julius.

*C. Julius?*

Deacon quickly but carefully opened the envelope. The note inside was long, but it was all gibberish.

The spy knew a code when he saw one. And he recognized the handwriting; this was his partner’s handiwork, no doubt. Deacon couldn’t wait to decipher it.

“Did you see our friend?” asked Deacon as he pocketed the letter.

“N-no… I didn’t get to talk to anyone. Any humans... Before I left, someone gave me this message to deliver. Said it’s very important. He told me... the lady has just saved us all. That we owe it to her… to help her.”

“Saved you all? What happened?”

H2-22 swallowed hard. “The SRB almost caught the... the friend who has been helping us. The lady helped him, and they got rid of the bad guy. Our friend can continue to...to help us. The lady saved him... and all of us.”

The friend who had been helping the synths? Patriot.

His Lucie Manette had made contact with Patriot, and they were working together? Deacon almost clapped and cheered.

“How is the lady doing?”

“I… never saw her,” said H2-22. “But the other synths… they told me she’s nice to them. She… she talks to them. Unlike the other humans, she cares...”

“She does, doesn’t she?” said Deacon almost too proudly.

“She’s… Father’s mother. She’s special… just like Father.”

**Father**? That had to be Shaun.

“This Father,” Deacon asked, “what can you tell me about him?”

“He is the… father of all synths,” said H2-22. “We exist because of him. I...I have never met Father. Those who met him said… they said Father never mistreated them… Father is not like the rest of the Institute. He is like the lady, his mother.”

The old man Deacon had met in Diamond City created all Gen-3 synths?

“I-I’m sorry,” said H2-22. “I… don’t know anything else.”

“You’ve been very helpful, my friend. Thank you for delivering this message.”

“...Friend?” the synth chewed on that particular word.

“Yes. We’re all your friends here.” Deacon flashed a genuine grin. “Welcome to the new world, pal.”

A familiar tune came softly through the ancient speakers of the antique radio. Chopin’s Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2. The piano music from two centuries ago echoed through the smooth, cool gray walls of the living quarters.
“Good job, Shaun,” said the old man. “The radio is working perfectly even though we are underground.”

“Underground?” asked the boy.

“Yes.” The older Shaun Taylor reached for the globe on the table and rotated the blue orb until he located the east coast of a country that used to called United States of America. “We are here.”

The boy studied the name on the globe. “Mas-sa-chu-sett…”

“Massachusett,” said the old man. “The city above was once called Boston, in the state called Massachusett, which was a part of the New England Commonwealth. Now, it’s generally referred to as the Commonwealth Wasteland. And the Institute is located underneath the surface of the earth.”

Nodding, the boy committed every word to his memory. “We are inside the globe.”

“Yes.”

“Why are we underground?”

“There was a war, you see,” the old man explained patiently. “In October 23, 2077, a nuclear war began, killing almost everything from here through there…” The old man pointed at the corresponding areas on the map.

The boy’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Killing?”

“Destroy. Nonfunctional,” the old man clarified in terms the boy would understand.

“This is the year 2287,” stated the boy. “The war was two-hundred and ten years ago.”

“Correct.”

The boy pondered. “...But, Father, there are people here.” His smaller finger pointed at the city that was named Boston on the globe. “They are not destroyed.”

The old man hid a smile. “Why would you say that?”

The boy looked at the radio he had been working on. “The voice in the radio. A funny man talks about things. And he plays music, too. He said things about a place called Diamond City.”

Well done, boy. “That is correct. It’s a settlement aboveground. However, it’s a dangerous place up there. Radiation from the nuclear bomb is still affecting the surface.”

“Radiation.” The boy tilted his head a little as he recalled this term. It was the same unconscious habit the old man had. “The emission or transmission of energy in the form of waves or particles through space or through a material medium.”

“Yes.” The old man further explained, “When a human body is contaminated with radiation, externally or internally, it could that person sick in lower dosage. Or even kill him when the dosage is high.”

“The person is destroyed.”

Like me. “Indeed. Human bodies are fragile. Unlike the synths.”
“Synths will not be destroyed?”

“Synths are designed specifically to combat this problem. Do you know why?”

For a brief second, the boy’s head tilted again as he considered the question. Then his round brown eyes lit up as if he’d just solved a complex equation. “So that they can go to the surface?”

The old man nodded. “You are going to keep that as our secret, aren’t you?”

“Secret.” The boy took a fraction of a second to recall this particular term. “Things that are kept unknown or unseen.”

“Correct.”

“Yes, Father,” said the boy. “It’s a secret.”

The old man was proud of the boy’s inquisitive mind, for it was the quintessential basis for scientific improvement. Yet, there were many things the boy could not comprehend. The boy needed to learn, and the old man was running out of time.

The boy looked at the radio again, then asked, “May I turn the dial?”

“Of course. This is yours, Shaun.”

Debussy’s La Mer faded into statics, then a song came through the speaker.

“I see skies of blue, and clouds of white.
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night.
And I think to myself;
What a wonderful world.”

“You like this station,” the old man observed.

The boy nodded. “I like the music.”

“The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky.
And so are all the faces of the people passing by...”

“Have you seen the sky, Father?” the boy suddenly asked.

“Once.”

Warm brown eyes widened, full of wonder. “How did it look like?”

“It was…” Beautiful. Bright. “Blue.”

“Did you see rainbow?”

“No.”

The boy paused with a pensive look on his young face. “I want to see the sky, too.”

You have already seen it. “Some day, Shaun. Some day.”

A quick knock came from the door to the director’s private quarters. The youngest member of the directorate marched in with a frown on his mild-mannered face.
“I’m sorry to intrude, sir,” said Clayton Holden. “We have a problem.”

It was not particularly hard to locate his target. X6-88 had been observing her for quite some time now. His target had a pattern, which the courser had committed to memory.

X6-88 spotted his target from afar. Although the woman was not particularly tall in stature, her white long coat made her stand out from a sea of white jumpsuits.

“There’s an emergency situation, Mrs. Taylor,” said X6-88. “Please come with me.”

The woman in white followed the man in black without hesitation. Was this… trust?

“What is it?” Mrs. Taylor asked as they hurried down the hall.

“Dr. Loken and Dr. Higgs have locked themselves inside BioScience,” X6-88 informed her. “They have taken control of the security systems and cut off the Institute’s food supply in protest of Dr. Ayo’s arrest."

“What?!”

She’d heard him, X6-88 was sure. So why would she want him to repeat the information? Was she hoping that it would change the second time he said it?

This was a common human behavior, X6-88 had noticed. One of the many strange behaviors he had yet to comprehend.

And so, Unit X6-88 remained silent until they reached the director’s office. Even during crisis, Father remained as cool as always while he quietly discussed the matter with the new acting director of the SRB.

“Ah, there you are,” said Father.

“X6-88 has filled me in,” said Mrs. Taylor. “Can we talk them out?”

“No,” said Dr. Secord, “they refuse to negotiate.”

“What are their demands?” asked Mrs. Taylor.

Father and Dr. Secord shared a look before the director replied, “They want to talk to you.”

Mrs. Taylor frowned. “Me? Why?”

“It’s obviously a trap, ma’am,” X6-88 spoke up. “They will use you as a hostage to negotiate terms with Father.”

Dr. Secord nodded. “X6-88 is right. We’re discussing alternative solutions.”

“Simple,” said the courser. “Kill them.”

“You can’t just kill them,” Mrs. Taylor argued.

Humans. Even the intelligent ones could be irrational when they allowed emotions to control their
thoughts.

X6-88 stared flatly at the woman in white coat. “They are threatening the survival of the entire Institute by cutting the supply of food, ma’am,” he pointed out the obvious. “For that reason alone, they deserve to be eliminated.”

“There has to be another way,” said Mrs. Taylor. “Sometimes, violence is not the answer.”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” X6-88 countered, “it is the only answer in this situation.”

“Go talk to them, Mother,” Father decided. “See what they want.”

Not you too, Father.

“Sir, I cannot recommend that,” X6-88 insisted. For once, the courser felt the need to speak up against Father’s decision. “Once Mrs. Taylor gets inside, those two traitors will use her against you, Father. You are handing our enemies your ultimate weapon. Please reconsider.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.” The leader of the Institute then turned to the woman in white coat and said, “You have my full authorization to do what is necessary, Mother.”

“We should head to BioScience immediately, ma’am,” said Dr. Secord.

“Sir,” said X6-88 once the door was closed. “...I have a question, if I may.”

“About my decision?” The director didn’t seem to be offended at all.

“I trust your judgement, Father,” said the courser. “But, I’m afraid I do not understand the reason behind your decision.”

“If I gave you a prototype weapon, would you bring it to battle immediately?”

“No,” X6-88 replied without hesitation. “The protocol states very clearly that every weapon has to be tested in a controlled environment. And the user has to be trained to handle such weapon. Afterwards, we are to field test the new weapon with at least one backup weapon.”

“Ah, the importance of field testing.” Father nodded. “And I am testing mine. Speaking of which, I have a task for you.”

The usual quiet hallways were filled with random groups of people, all whispering to one and other. Even though the conversations died when Nora and Secord passed by, the concerned looks on people’s faces spoke volumes.

“They must have heard the news,” said Nora as she hurried down down the hall.

“One thing I know for sure, panic spreads like diseases,” said Alana Secord. “We need to get the situation under control asap.”

It was her fault. It was all her fault. In order to save a young man, in order to save the synths, Nora had framed an innocent man. And this was the result of her actions.
Was that really the right thing to do?

At the foot of the spotless stairs that led to the BioScience department, a small group of four men and women standing gathered.

Clayton Holdren rushed to her the second he saw Nora. “Thank god you’re here.”

“Just you two?” Madison Li frowned. “I thought Father would send an army of coursers to settle this.”

“And risk losing all the crops?” Allie Filmore shook her head. “Father would never take that risk.”

“What’s the latest situation?” Dr. Secord asked.

“Max has taken over the synths inside BioScience,” said Alan Binet. “I’ve the code to override his command, but I need to get close.”

“If we try to go in,” Clayton added, “they’ll burn the crops.”

“How close do you have to be to override the command?” asked Nora.

“It’s verbal,” Alan told her. “They only need to hear it.”

“They’re monitoring through the security cameras,” said Clayton, “If anyone other you walk through the door, they will burn the crops and activate the turrets.”

“Give me the code,” said Nora. “I’ll do it.”

“Unless all the synths are within hearing range,” said Alan Binet, “you can’t override them all at once. The remaining synths who are still under Max’s control will turn hostile.”

Alana Secord then asked, “What if we broadcast the code through the speakers inside BioScience?”

“If I could get to the control room,” said Clayton. “But the problem is that we have to get in through the door first.”

“And we’re back to square one,” said Dr. Binet with a dejected sigh.

“What is Father’s order?” asked Allie Filmore.

“We’ll meet their demands, for now,” Nora told them. “If they want to talk to me, I’ll go in there alone.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Madison Li. “We have two crazy men throwing tantrums like some annoying brats. And they have an army of guards inside.”

“If I don’t,” said Nora, “we’ll all starve.”

Dr. Li merely snorted. “I’d rather eat irradiated rations from the surface for months than to let those two idiots win.”

“We cannot condone this type of behavior,” said Dr. Secord. “I have two detention cells waiting for them the moment they step through the door.”

“We all agree,” said Dr. Filmore. “But we have to get them out of the door first.”
"Think, Bennett, think!"

"Dr. Secord," said Nora, "can we get some Stealth Boys from the SRB?"

The head of the SRB seemed surprised by the sudden request, yet she quickly agreed, "Yes. How many?"

"Dr. Holdren," Nora asked, "How long would it take you to get to the control room from here?"

"It’s not far," Clayton Holdren replied. "I can get to it through maintenance tunnel right next to the main entrance. If I run, 15… 20 seconds, tops."

"Four, Dr. Secord," said Nora. "That should be enough for two people in one minute. I’ll go in and distract them. Once I’m in, Dr. Binet, you go with Dr. Holdren to the control room. Reset the synths through the speakers, and deactivate all the turrets. Each Stealth Boy will buy you thirty seconds. You can’t be seen, but you can heard. So be careful."

"You’re quite familiar with Stealth Boy, ma’am," commented the head of the SRB.

Thanks to my partner.

Alana Secord didn’t press the issue. "I’ll get the supply right away."

"Be careful, Nora," said Allie Filmore. "I don’t think Max would harm you, but then… I’ve never thought he would do this to us either."

The door to BioScience opened. Immediately, Nora was greeted by the business ends of two laser rifles.

"Scanning," announced one of the Gen 2 synths. "Target recognized. We have been waiting for you, ma’am. Come with us."

Although her heart was about to leap out of her chest, Nora approached to the main facility with her chin up, her shoulders square, and her poker face firmly intact.

The two guards escorted her into the once peaceful hydroponics garden where two men were pacing. She wasn’t the only one who was nervous, Nora noticed.

"She’s here," said Lawrence Higgs to Loken. "It works."

"I told you Father would have no choice but to hear us," Max Loken replied.

Nora did a subtle count: Two men and ten guards. "Tell your synths to lower their weapons, Dr. Loken. I am unarmed."

"Synths, stand down," the head of Robotics ordered. "So good you could join us, Mrs. Taylor."

"There’s no need to hold the food supply hostage," Nora started as calmly as she possibly could. "If you want to be heard, all you need to do is to speak your mind."

"Is that what you think?" said Higgs with a snort. "You don’t know anything about the Institute, do
“You have everyone’s attention,” Nora admitted. “If there is anything you want to say, we are listening.”

“You are,” said Loken, “but not them.”

“Them?”

“The directorate,” said Higgs. “Every major decision has ever been made was decided by the selected few on the board. It’s been like this for… hell, since the beginning, as far as I know.”

“I told them, Mrs. Taylor,” said Loken, “they wouldn’t listen. Justin could not have been behind the leak! They voted, all five of them. Five against one! They all decided Justin was guilty because they never like him! Justin Ayo is not guilty. I know he is not!”

She had already started this path, it was too late to back down now. The future of the synths and the life of a young man were all in her hands. Nora was their lawyer; it’s her duty to defend them.

Nora Bennett took a breath and steeled herself. The hydroponics garden was the courtroom. And the court was now in session.

“Was there any evidence?” the former lawyer asked, knowing full well the answer to her question.

“…Yes,” Loken admitted. “There were files found in Justin’s terminal. But those could be planted!”

“By whom?” asked Nora, her face did not betray a hint of her thoughts.

“Who else?” Loken snapped. “The person who was behind all these!”

“If what you said was true, why would this person planted the evidence in Dr. Ayo’s terminal? Why not someone else’s?”

“Justin… He has a lot of enemies. Even the board was happy to see him go.”

“You think it’s a conspiracy to bring down Justin Ayo?”

“I know it is!”

Nora approached from a different angle. “Is it true that Dr. Ayo had been investigating the leak on and off for a long time?”

“Yes!” said Loken. “Why would he take on a case if he’s the culprit? Think about it!”

The lawyer deliberately ignored the question. “Shaun told me Dr. Ayo is an exceptional investigator.”

“Father’s right,” Loken replied. “Justin might be harsh, but he’s very good with his job.”

And there was her opening. “So why would it take him so long to investigate this case?”

“I…” Loken couldn’t answer.

Nora pushed, “And why would Dr. Secord crack the case as soon as Shaun took it off Ayo’s hands?”
“Huh, now that you put it this way…” Lawrence Higgs mumbled to himself.

“No, it couldn’t be Justin,” Loken insisted. “Justin Ayo is careful. He’d never leave evidence in his private terminal.”

A crack was forming. Reasonable doubt was already planted in Higgs’ mind. Now Nora had to work on the other man.

“Where else could he put? The SRB?” asked Nora Bennett. “The safest place to store them was his own home, in his own private computer, where only he had access to.”

Frowning, Dr. Loken shook his head as doubts began to form in his mind. Nora released a quiet sigh of relief.

“Why would Justin free the synths?” asked Max Loken. “They’re nothing to him! They are tools! Machines that clean our toilets, mop the floor, and do all the mundane chores so we can focus on our studies!”

That description sickened her. But the former lawyer focused on her case. To sway the mind of a stubborn jury, sometimes it was necessary to shine a different spot light on the same object. Repackaging and reselling an established narrative was not an easy task, especially when one had to make everything up on the fly. But Nora had to take a risk to buy her some more time.

The former lawyer began, “Maybe Dr. Ayo wasn’t freeing the synths, as we have been assuming.”

Max Loken’s eyes lit right up. “See? You agree as well!”

“What I meant was…” Nora started carefully, “What if it was Dr. Ayo, but, he wasn’t freeing them out of sympathy. What if he was treating the surface as a dumpster. He’s getting rid of the synths that were somehow not up to his standard.”

“Huh…” Higgs mumbled as he stroke his own chin.

“Why would he do that?” asked Loken, scowling.

Nora had to think quick. Nick Valentine. “It’s not the first time the Institute had dumped their failure projects on the surface world.”

“She has a point,” said Higgs to Loken. “I’ve seen enough here in BioScience. You know… back in the days with Syverson…”

Syverson?

“Impossible!” Loken argued. “Why would anyone have problem with our synths? We at Robotics make sure each and every one of them are up to standard.”

“They’re machines, Max,” said Higgs. “And those goddamned machines malfunctions all the time. Didn’t one dislocate your shoulder when you shook its hand?”

“That was a software problem from Advanced Systems,” said Loken. “Our hardwares are flawless!”

“I wouldn’t call them flawless,” Higgs countered. “Some of them can’t even mop the floor properly. Maybe Justin did dump the failures up to the surface.”

“It’s hell up there, Dr. Loken,” Nora added her voice to the ongoing argument. “If you think the
synths are free on the surface world, you’re wrong. Even if they could survive the radiation, they’d be torn apart by the mutated bugs and animals, or robbed and killed by the raiders. Surely you know how bad is it up there. I’m sure Dr. Ayo knew as well.”

“It… it can’t be,” Loken mumbled quietly almost to himself. “Did he…?”

Reasonable doubts had been firmly planted in both men’s minds. It was time for her closing statement.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Loken. The result might not be what you want to hear because Dr. Ayo is a friend of yours. But this is an open-and-shut case. Dr. Ayo has the means, the motive, and the opportunity. He has the ability to commit the crime, the reason to commit it, and the chance to do so. And, as you pointed out, we have evidence as well.”

Max Loken could only shake his head. “Justin… why?”

“Code Gamma Alpha Delta,” Alan Binet’s voice broadcasted through the speakers. “Abort command override and resume normal functions.”

“What the--” Loken gasped.

All the synth guards froze at once, then a heartbeat later, they filed out of the facility.

“It’s over, Max!” Alana Secord charged in with the SRB guards. “You two are in a lot of trouble.”

“No need for the guards, Alana,” said Max Loken. “We will come with you. We can at least face the consequences with our dignity intact.”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” said Higgs to Loken as both men were escorted out of the facility.

It was over. All the strength in her body was drained along with the breath Nora released.

“Well done, ma’am,” said a monotonous voice behind her.

Startled, Nora jumped in surprised. “X6?”

“Designation is X6-88,” the courser corrected her. “X6 is imprecise, ...but sufficient.”

“How did you get in?”

“The same way you did,” the man in black replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Know that you were never in any real danger, ma’am. I have been monitoring you from the start.”

“...Shaun sent you? Why didn’t he tell me earlier?”

“What Father does, he always does it for the good of the Institute, ma’am. Never doubt that.”

“The threat is eliminated, sir,” X6-88 reported.

The result was expected. Shaun, however, was more interested in the method. “Did you…?”
“No,” said the courser. “She talked them down. Loken and Higgs are taken to the SRB. No casualty.”

“She did it…” Shaun nodded, pleased with the outcome. It was a success.

“You knew this would happen, sir?” the courser asked.

“No,” the old man replied. “No one can’t predict the future. All we can do is to be prepared. You were my Plan B in case she failed. Either way, the outcome is the same.”

“Sir, there is something I still don’t understand,” said X6-88. “Why would Loken and Higgs betray us? What did they hope to accomplish?”

“Humans are often illogical, irrational, and irresponsible,” Shaun told the courser. “I wish we could program us as easily as we program the synths. But… thankfully, they can be swayed.”

“I don’t understand humans, Father.”

“Neither do I,” the old man admitted. “Thank you, X6-88. Oh, and please bring the unit to my office.”

“Right away, sir.”

Very soon, the acting director of the SRB would come in for her official report. Until then, Shaun allowed himself a brief moment to savor the victory. The weary old man leaned back onto his chair and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. A rare smile broke through and slowly spread on his exhausted face.

Another piece was now removed from the board.

The house was cleaned.

Ever-so faintly, a song was heard from the radio in the living quarters upstairs.

“And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world...”

“...Yes, I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.”

Some old song was playing from the radio on Drummer Boy’s desk. But Deacon ignored it. In fact, he was paying little attention to anything else but the letter in front of him.

There were two versions. One was written in a dedicate handwriting, encrypted. One was scribbled hastily in his own, already decrypted.

“There is a change in weather. Patriot is safe, but the shipment is on hold. It will be back when the storm settles. Be warned, Angel of Death was spotted. Please stay safe. Our deal is still on, no matter where I am. Hope you are doing well.”

Deacon grinned at the message. The name on the envelope was all he needed to decipher the letter. C. Julius. Julius Caesar. Caesar cipher. A classic in cryptography.
He couldn’t have found a better partner.

If only he could see her again.

A/N: Nora passed persuasion check. Success!

I wrote three different versions of the BioScience confrontation. One is what you see here. The other two are when she fails.

Another long chapter. Hope you don’t mind. Nora is probably suffering from Vitamin D deficiency and Winter Blues (Seasonal Affective Disorder) from the lack of sunlight. Or, she just simply misses the compulsive liar. Deacon will slowly nudge his way back to the spotlight soon, in case you miss him too.

Lucie Manette, a character from A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens. The same book where Deacon had taken the name Sydney Carton from. Why did he pick Lucie Manette, though…?

That’s all for now. I’m too tired to type. Thanks for reading!


Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
Shaun snapped the faceplate back on and secured with screws at the bottom. It was finally done. Now was the moment of truth.

He turned the left dial and powered up the device. The front panel lit up as the radio came to life. The boy released a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding.

Smiling faintly to himself, the boy turned the other switch and watched as the red needle on the tiny window began to move slowly in an arch, from the left to the right. Yet, there was nothing. Not a single sound.

Did he connect all the wires properly? Did he miss anything?

Frowning, Shaun continued to scan all the channels in hope of finding something out there. Anything.

“Wow, you got it up and running,” said a voice from behind.

“Not yet, Dean,” Shaun replied without needing to see the face.

“Did you stay up late to fix it?” asked Dean Volkert.

The boy didn’t answer. He didn’t want to lie to his best friend.

“You did, didn’t ya?” said Dean. “It’s not good for you, kiddo!”

The sandy-haired boy was older than Shaun by only a few months, but he had been acting like the big brother ever since they’d met five years ago.

Five years. That was a long, long time to a boy of ten.

“I want to fix this,” said Shaun. “I promised Dr. Volkert I would.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to fix it in one day,” said Dean Volkert with an air of wisdom that made him seem more mature than his age. “C’mon, Shaun, it’s Christmas! Let’s sneak into Robotics and check out the tree!”

“Hold on…” Shaun persistently checked all channel back and forth. Still nothing. Tilting his head to one side, the boy pondered, “What did I miss?”

The sandy-haired boy sat down beside the black-haired one. “Doctor Dean is in the house. Lemme take a look.”
Shaun scooted back and let his friend examine the radio.

“Hey, you got it powered up,” said Dean. “That’s better than what my dad could do, and he had this for ages.”

“Dr. Volkert fixes people, not machines.”

“Sure, that’s what he always says… Oh yeah, I forgot! Dad wants me to tell you it’s time for your checkup.”

Shaun winced. He hated needles.

His best friend read his mind. “No shots this time.”

“...Really?”

“Have I ever lied to you?” The young Volkert flashed a grin as he randomly turned both dials. “Remember to ask for extra juice when you’re done--”

All of a sudden, there came a noise loud enough to startle both kids. It was statics. Nothing but statics. But it was solid proof that the radio was successfully revived.

“You did it, Dean!” Shaun gasped. “What did you do?”

“I DUNNO!” Dean yelled back over the noise.

Shaun reached over to turn off the power. It was then he realized the volume decreased as he twisted the dial counter-clockwise. “...Ooh! I see!”

“What did you-- ...What did you say? What did I do?”

“The power switch controls the volume too! You found it, Dean!”

“Cool!” His best friend beamed. “Let’s see what music we can find!”

Shaun continued to scan. Both kids held their breaths as their eyes glued to the tiny window on the front of the radio. The red needle moved from right to left, sweeping across all possible channels.

And then, statics started to fade into a faint melody.

“Found it! Found it!” yelled Dean.

Carefully, Shaun gave the dial just another gentle nudge as the melody became the only thing that came through the speakers. It was some music the boy had never heard of. A very soft tune played with some unknown instrument.

Shaun Taylor didn’t know why, but he liked the song. He liked it a lot.

“You did it, kiddo!” said Dean, grinning ear to ear. “Can’t wait to see my dad’s face when we tell him!”

It was a success! Dr. Volkert would be pleased to know his old radio was finally working. Yet the boy couldn’t help but wonder if there was anything more he could improve on. Perhaps a better way to capture the signal for a clear sound, or...

“C’mon, Shaun,” Dean Volkert beckoned as he bounced back on his feet. “Can we go to Robotics
Shaun twisted the dial to turn the radio off. Dean was right. The project could wait.

Shaun turned the dial on the radio the boy had fixed. Through the speaker, a dear old friend came to visit. Chopin’s Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2. It was the very first song he’d ever heard from an old radio he had once restored five decades ago.

There was something about this particular piece of music. It was soothing to the boy who had never heard of the name Chopin. And fifty years later, the old man could still find comfort in every note in this four-minute masterpiece.

The sound of solid knock interrupted the music before it reached the climax.

The old man turned off the radio. One old friend faded away into silence as another walked into his office.

“There you are, Alan.” Shaun waved at the chair across his desk. “Have a seat.”

Shaun quickly scanned the man in white and Robotics red. He, too, had once worn the same uniform.

Small talk was never Dr. Taylor’s strong suit, but he had to start somewhere. “So many things have happened.”

“When it rains, it pours,” said Alan Binet as he was obviously trying hard to sound like his old cheerful self. “At least that’s what I’ve heard. We never have rain here.”

“Lucky, aren’t we?” Shaun studied the blond-haired man in front. Since when had young Binet started to turn gray? “How long have we known each other, Alan?”

“Decades, Shaun… Sir.”

“‘Shaun’ is perfectly fine.” The old man waved away the unnecessary concern. “The first time I met you, you were a child. You came to the lab with your father.”

“Time flies…”

Shaun leaned back on his chair and began the real reason of this meeting, “I know you, Alan. And I know it’s not your fault.”

“Eve was my synth, Shaun. I was the one who programmed her. I must have made a mistake in my codes--”

“No, you didn’t,” Shaun claimed with no uncertainty.

“That’s kind of you to say, but--”

“I checked the codes.”
“...What?”

The old man gestured at something behind Binet. And from the staircase that led to the private quarters, a woman in white jumpsuit descended into the office.

Alan Binet’s eyes couldn’t be wider. “...Eve? How? I thought she was...”

“Reclaimed? No, I couldn’t do that to my student’s fine project.” Shaun allowed a thin smile to show through. It was more satisfying than he’d thought. “I hope you don’t mind, Alan, I reset her myself. I didn’t touch the core codes, of course -- those were beautifully written. Out of absolute necessity, some memories were wiped, but she remembers you and Liam. As far as she knows, there’s a minor incident caused by a bug that has been fixed. And she is free to return home where she belongs.”

“...But...” Binet shook his head in disbelief. “But what she did--”

“--was enlightening.”

“Pardon?”

“Your project has proven a point I have always wanted to explore. We need to study further, of course. But, if Eve is not an isolated case, then it’s safe to assume that synths could be more than what we created them to be.”

Binet’s pale eyes lit up. “You mean...”

The old man nodded. “What if they can dream? And if they can, does it mean they have a soul?”

“Shaun, it’s... it’s...”

“Controversial, I know. I overheard your observation during my trip to Robotics. Max might think it’s nonsense, but I agree with you. It’s definitely worth looking into. You and I both know, as men of science, we have to keep an open mind to all possibilities, or else there would be little room for scientific breakthroughs. You have done good work, Dr. Binet. Your father would be proud.”

Shaun turned to the synth woman. “Eve, you can go home now.”

“Thank you, Father,” said the synth woman. “I will see you soon, Alan.”

The grin that started to spread on Binet’s face reminded Shaun of the young man who had joined Robotics three decades ago.

“Shaun, I...I don’t know how to thank you!”

“Thank me by working hard,” said the old man as he leaned back onto his chair. “Robotics is shorthanded.”

“Yes, of course. Now that Max is gone... What is going to happen to him?”

“We haven’t decided yet.”

“I’ve worked with him for years, Shaun,” said Alan. “Max could be blunt, sure, but he’s a good man.”

“Probation is the likely outcome. We cannot let him go without any form of punishment, or it’ll only encourage the next discontent to follow his poor example.”
“I understand…” Binet nodded slowly. “I still can’t believe he did that to us. Thanks to Nora, we were able to avoid a catastrophe without anyone harm.”

“I’m afraid this incident has unsettled my mother.”

“Ah, yes, I can’t blame her. It took a lot of guts to walk into BioScience by herself, let alone to do what she did. She’s one brave woman, Shaun. When I was sneaking in there with Clayton, I thought I’d die from heart attack.”

Good old Alan Binet. Always kind-hearted, always naive.

Then, with a warm smile, Binet suggested, “Maybe I should invite Nora over for dinner to cheer her up. Why don’t you come over as well, Shaun? I programmed Eve with all my mother’s famous recipes. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“I do miss Mrs. Binet’s cooking,” Shaun admitted.

“Splendid!” Alan Binet beamed. “What about tomorrow? If you don’t have any plan. It’s Christmas Eve.”

“Is it?”

Binet chuckled quietly. “Ah, you forgot again? I’ll invite Nora. It’s her first Christmas in the Institute. We can celebrate together. Just like old times.”

“…Just like old times.” That thought warmed the old man’s dying heart. “That’d be… wonderful. I should get going, the board is waiting. Would you kindly walk with me?”

“Certainly!”

Shaun stopped in front of the door to the meeting room. “Why don’t you join us, Alan?”

Alan Binet hesitated. “But… I thought it’s a board meeting.”

“It is.”

The door to the meeting room opened. All five of members of the directorate were already engaging in friendly conversations when the director arrived with his guest. For once, there was no argument, no bitter remark, and no resentment within this group of leaders. This was the way the directorate was supposed to be.

“Have a seat, Dr. Binet,” said the leader of the Institute as he took his seat at the head of the table. “Let us begin. I will make this brief. Today we will vote on one particular matter in regard to the recent event. Max Loken and Lawrence Higgs have been suspended from their positions, which are yet to be filled by proper candidates. As the acting director of BioScience, Dr. Holdren will decide on Higgs’ replacement. As for Dr. Loken’s, the board will vote for the next acting director of Robotics. Now, any nomination?”

Dr. Filmore was the first to speak up, “I nominate Dr. Alan Binet, sir.”

Dr. Binet blinked in confusion at the mention of his name. “...What?”
“I agree,” said Dr. Li.

Dr. Secord added her voice to the mix. “So do I.”

“Me too,” said Dr. Holdren.

“If there is no more nomination,” said the director, “we will move onto the voting process. Those who agree, please raise your hand.”

It came as no surprise that all hands were raised. After all, this was merely a formality. The topic had already been discussed within the directorate in private. An unanimous decision had already been made long before Alan Binet had stepped into the meeting room.

“Congratulations, Dr. Binet,” Shaun Taylor announced, “you are the new acting director of Robotics.”

“Welcome aboard, Alan!” Clayton Holdren took the dumbfound man’s hand for hearty shake. “Couldn’t think of a better man for the job.”

Smiling to himself, Dr. Volkert leaned closer and asked the director quietly, “He didn’t see it coming, did he?”

Shaun shook his head as he watched the members of the board took turns to welcome the new head of Robotics.

“That’s Alan…” The doctor chuckled under his breath. “Congratulations, sir. You’ve got what you wanted.”

“Not yet, Doctor,” said the director to his best friend. “Not yet.”

The path to the future was paved. There’s only one last person Shaun Taylor needed to replace. Himself.

“This.” Deacon tapped on map on the wall. His long finger followed one of the thinner lines that represented a smaller road. “This would get the packages out to the north. Then it's business as usual.”

Desdemona nodded.

“We need to clean up this building,” Deacon continued, pointing at a corresponding area. “Use it for a safehouse. The road is long, and most of our friends are not in tiptop shape.”

“Good idea,” said Desdemona. “I'll tell Glory.”

“She should lay low for a bit,” said Deacon. “She's been spotted when we had our party at Malden.”

“How did you know?”

*My partner told me*. “Our Angel of Death is anything but subtle, Dez. I’d be surprise if the
Institute didn't have a wanted poster her on their wall. If the Watchers see her sweeping the area, we might as well put a neon sign out there that says ‘Railroad Safehouse’.

The Railroad alpha took a long drag of her cigarette as she considered. “We'll ask Ticonderoga and see if they can spare a man or two.”

Deacon nodded. “I’ll send a message to High Rise. We’re not on a tight schedule, I’m sure we can work something out.”

“What do you mean?”

If he told her, Dez would no doubt ask a followup question. But if he didn’t… No, this was something the boss should know. “There won’t be another shipment for a while.”

As expected, his boss studied him with her shape eyes narrowed. She was going to ask that question. Deacon could smell it coming.

“And how did you know about that?” asked Desdemona, right on cue.

“I have my sources.” It was all he was willing to say.

Deacon remained unfazed under the alpha’s intense scrutiny. Desdemona trusted him, he knew, for he had been with the Railroad for more than two decades. Hell, he was the one who had established the current compartmentalized systems. His tenure was one of the longest, if not the longest, among this ragtag underground faction, at least in the Commonwealth division. Profession life in their line of business was notorious short. People either retired early and cut all ties, or, more often than now, they were simply killed.

Yet, the man who should have been murdered twenty-some years ago was still standing, still breathing, and still fighting. Why, though? Why was he spared every time? Deacon had no answer. All he knew was if he could save one more life, human or synth, then perhaps… perhaps he would be forgiven for the things he had done…

“If you say so,” his boss finally conceded. “How long until we can expect another shipment?”

“Who knows?” said Deacon. “We finally have some room to breath, and I suggest we take it. It’s been crazy since the Switchboard.”

Desdemona took a final drag of her cigarette as she looked around the catacomb. “Perhaps it’s a good time to move. We need to find a place.”

“I have a few places in mind, but first I need to check them out.”

“I can’t keep you down here forever, can I?”

“Not if you want me to do my job, Dez.”

To do his job, to save as many as he possibly could before he kicked the bucket. Then, hopefully, the man who perpetually hid behind his sunglasses could finally find what he had been searching for.

Peace.
“Your father told me you’re interested in chess,” said Shaun to the young man with short blond hair.

Nora’s smile was plastered on, but within she was trembling. Her son was talking to Patriot -- the brain behind the leak, the kid she had protected. For the greater good, she had lied to her son, she had incriminated an innocent man, and her actions had subsequently almost brought a disaster in this isolated paradise. All because she did not want to enslave sentient beings.

“Still learning, sir,” Liam Binet replied with his boyish grin. “The computer always beats me.”

“Your father is very good in chess,” Shaun told the boy. “Perhaps he could teach you.”

“I offered to help,” said Alan Binet. “But the kid would rather figure it out himself.”

“Sounds familiar,” Shaun commented. “I remember, many years ago a young intern in Robotics told me the exact same thing. He’d rather figure things out by himself than to ask his own father, who was a genius in programming.”

“Was that you, Dad?” asked Liam.

“Well…” The older Binet grinned. “I was a dumb kid.”

“Your father,” said Shaun to young Liam, “is one of the most talented programmers I’ve ever worked with. So was your grandfather. And… I have a feeling you would be better than both of them.”

Behind her serene mask, Nora froze.

“That’s what every parent hopes for,” said Alan wistfully, “that the next generation is better than this one.”

“Mrs. T,” said Liam to Nora, “have you seen the Christmas tree?”

“What Christmas tree?” Nora asked, silently thanking the young man for shifting the topic.

“Oh, we have a traditional at Robotics, Nora,” said Dr. Binet. “Every year, we’ll put up a Christmas tree in the main lab. The only Christmas tree in the Institute. No one knows who started it, or why, but it’s a tradition in Robotics for decades. Right, Shaun?”

“It was already there when I was a child,” Shaun told them. “I remember it was Dean who first showed me the tree.”

“Dr. Volkert?” asked Liam.

“Yes,” Shaun replied. “The two of us would sneak in just to look at the tree. One time, your father caught us, Alan. We thought we were in trouble, but…” A faint smile appeared on Shaun’s face as he reminisced. “...But, instead, Dr. Binet gave us a tour to the facility. He showed us how the synths were made, and told us why they were important. Third-generation synth development was still at its infancy, of course, but it was like magic to us. It’s the most amazing thing I’d seen in my young life.”

“Dad never told me,” said Alan as he took a sip of his wine.

“That was decades ago. No doubt it was just a minor encounter for Dr. Binet, but it’s one that
dictated the direction of my life.”

“You should go see the Christmas tree, Nora,” Alan Binet suggested. “It’s really something!”

With a gentle smile planted firmly on, Nora replied, “I’d love that.”

The lights blinked red, blue, then yellow. Red, blue, then yellow. When Nora focused on nothing but the green needles of tree and the colorful glass orbs on it, it was almost like she had traveled through time, back to her childhood home where the Christmas tree would stand near her mother’s piano.

If Nora really tried, she could almost hear a few simple bars playing from the piano. E E E, E E E, E G C D E.

“What’s that?” asked her son, breaking the silence.

“What?”

“The song.”

Did she hum a tune aloud? “Oh. Jingle Bells. One of the first songs I learned how to play on a piano. Your grandma taught me.”

To her surprise, Shaun continued to ask, “How old were you?”

“Three, or maybe four? I had to sit on her lap to reach the keyboard. Every year around Christmas, your grandma would bake gingerbread men.”

“Gingerbread men?” Her son raised an eyebrow at that.

“It’s just the name, Shaun,” Nora explained with a warm smile. “It’s a cookie in the shape of a person. When I was old enough, your grandma would let me draw a happy face on the head with some icing, and put some buttons and perhaps a bowtie on the body. And every year, the first week of December, your grandpa would bring home a Christmas tree, and we would decorate it together. And then on Christmas day, I’d find a gift underneath the tree. From Santa.”

Shaun frowned in mild confusion. “Santa? I have heard of that myth.”

“Yes. Santa Claus. The big old man in red. The one who travels across the Earth on Christmas Eve, and leaves presents for all the nice kids at night.”

“It’s physically impossible unless that man has access to some sort of teleportation device. Even so, there is the issue of time constraint. If he took two seconds to drop off one gift and teleport away, he could only deliver 43200 gifts within 24 hours. He couldn’t possibly cover every child on Earth. Not to mention the weight and sheer mass of 43200 gifts in total.”

Nora could only laugh softly.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Shaun.

“No, you are absolutely correct, son. There is no Santa. The gifts were left there by your grandma
and grandpa. I found out later on, of course. But the tradition never stopped. There’s always a gift for me under their Christmas tree. And I’d like to pass down our family tradition...” From her coat pocket, Nora retrieved a small box and handed it to her son. “Merry Christmas, Shaun.”

For once, Nora spotted genuine surprise on her son’s usual stoic face.

“I… didn’t prepare anything for you,” said Shaun almost apologetically.

“Being able to spend our Christmas together is more than enough.”

He studied the size of the thin box and its weight before he opened it. Within lied an old photograph, and two rings that were strung together by a leather cord.

“This is…” Shaun held the photo and studied it.

“Our wedding picture and our rings. It’s the only picture of your father that’s left. Codsworth found it and kept it all these time.” Nora unconsciously touched her ring finger. She would get used to not having a ring there, just as she had gotten used to the new world around her.

“These must be invaluable to you.”

“They are,” Nora admitted. “I want you to have these, as a reminder that you’re born because of love, son. You're never meant to be anyone's experiment. You were very much loved by both of us. You still are… and will always be.”

For the longest time, her son stared at the picture and the rings without saying one word.

Nate would want her to do this, Nora knew. It was hard to part with the last memorabilia of her late husband, but she had memories of him. Her son did not.

“I... Thank you, Mother.”

Smiling, Nora tentatively put a hand on Shaun’s arm. The infant she had once held in her arms was taller than her by more than half a head, his dark wisps of baby hair was now all gray. Yet, this was her first Christmas with her son, two hundred and ten years overdue.

Shaun carefully put the small box into his pocket. “Do you miss the surface world?”

“I do miss the sun,” Nora admitted. “And the sky, whether it’s blue or all black with stars on it. I miss the rain. And the smell of the air after the rain.”

“I have never experienced that.”

“Flowers blooming in spring, summer days at the beach, piling leaves in fall, building snowman in winter. That was the world I grew up in. It’s the world I wanted to show you.” And then, the bomb dropped.

“I… do regret not having the chance to see the world as you described. It is my dream to bring forth the world you once lived in.”

“What do you mean?”

“My predecessors wanted to create the perfect machines for scientific challenge. But I want to put our creations to good use, for a greater cause. You see, with synths, we have created the perfect species. They do not require sleep or sustenance, they are resistant to diseases, and, most impressive of all, they do not age. Imagine a world with synths on the ground above, rebuilding the
civilization from the scorched ground. Radiation would have no effect on them, neither would the lack of food or clean water.”

“You are manufacturing an army of slaves, son.”

“No, not slaves,” Shaun corrected her quickly. “They will be the explorer, the pioneers to help terraforming the Earth back to its pre-war stage. They are the future of mankind.”

“But what about the people up there?”

“They already have two hundred years, Mothers. There is little to no improvement for the past two centuries, and I sincerely doubt there will be any in the next two hundred years. They are merely surviving and procreating because their instincts guide them to, but are they different than the any other mutated animals up there?”

Nora frowned. “Please don’t say that.”

“You may not want to hear it, but it is the truth, based on facts and data gathered from our operatives on the surface. You are too kind, Mother. Perhaps you see the good in people even when there is none. But the truth remains the same -- they are hopeless.”

“What if… What if both synths and humans work together?”

“Do you think we haven’t tried?” Shaun snorted and shook his head. “It was a disaster.”

“What happened?”

“It was decades ago. The data on the incident has either been misplaced or deleted. From what little details I could gather, one representative from each major settlement above and one from the Institute gathered to for a government. Distrust on all involving parties eventually led to infighting and violence, as it was human nature. The Institute has remained isolated since then. It’s a mistake none of my predecessors wished to repeat. And neither do I.”

“You can’t give up because of one fail experiment.”

“I agree. If we have reasons to believe the experiment would succeed. In this case, however, the sheer chasm between the Institute and the surface world is a gap no one could possibly bridge. And therefore, it is simply not worth our effort.”

Nora wanted to argue, but she couldn’t. She simply did not have enough data to prove otherwise.

“The synths are the only hope for mankind future,” Shaun concluded. “My unique position gives me a perspective that no one can truly understand. Not everyone shares my view, of course. There are those like Justin Ayo and Max Loken. To them, the synths are mere tools, nothing more. And then there are those like Alan Binet and Madison Li. They see the potential in our creations, they are not afraid to push the boundaries. The Institute is evolving. Soon, there will be more Binets than Lokens. The synths… they are my legacy. Literally, physically. And it is my wish that, when I am no longer here, my legacy will be protected… and thrive. I want you to understand that, Mother. It is important that you do.”

Nora finally had a clear glimpse inside her son’s mind. The synths, they were his children, his family. As a parent, it was in his instinct to want his creations to succeed, to live in a world better than his own. Could his vision, as ambitious as it was, be realized someday?

The lights on the Christmas tree blinked red, blue, then yellow. Red, blue, then yellow. It was
hypnotic. Somewhere, in an unguarded part of her mind, the mother wanted to weep, for she knew all too well that her son would not live long enough to see his dream with his own eyes. And perhaps, neither would she.

“Am I trippin’,” Tinker Tom asked, “or is this the same goddamn song again?”

No, he wasn’t tripping.

The same Christmas song had been repeated on Diamond City Radio at least four times in the past hour. Apparently, Travis had put what few Christmas songs he could gather in rotation. Deacon silently applauded the man for trying, for at least giving a shit about making the Commonwealth a happier place.

Glory looked up from giant gun she had been cleaning. “If you don’t like it, turn that damn thing off.”

“No!” said Drummer Boy. “It’s Christmas.”

“Don’t tell me you believe in that bullshit, kid,” said their resident ass-kicking machine. “What’s that old man called? The one in red?”

“Santa Claus,” Deacon replied.

“No, of course not!” The kid’s face turned as red as the fat man’s suit. “I… like the music, that’s all! It’s festive.”

“Don’t be so sure, G,” Deacon goaded simply because he was bored. “Maybe there is a Santa Claus.”

“Yeah,” Tinker Tom chimed in. “And y’know what? I bet Santa is an alien.”

“Not again…” Glory huffed.

The man in sunglasses decided to keep the fun rolling. “Tom’s onto something,” said the liar without meaning a word. “Think about it: A mysterious man with unlimited resources and the ability to zip in and out of people’s house undetected. Not to mention he knows what everyone’s been up to the entire year. And…” He paused to add to the drama. “…He can be in multiple places at once.”

“See?!” The skinny man with his homemade anti-surveillance helmet jumped as someone finally agreed with his theory. “Ain’t nobody can pull off shit like that!”

“I disagree,” said a steady voice from the backroom. From the depth of his tomb, Dr. Stanley Carrington emerged with a stack of files and his customary condescending stare. “Atoms can be in two places at the same time.”

“Don’t start, Doc,” said the alpha who was following the doctor out of the backroom.

It was too late. Tinker Tom quickly countered, “Atoms, but not a big fat man who’s an alien in a meatsuit. And how d’ya explain him carryin’ all his shit in one sack? I’ll tell ya how. Interdimensional bag of holding!”
“That’s preposterous!” Carrington snorted then launched into another lecture on physics.

An argument ensured. Soon, everyone would forget how it started, they would even forget what they were arguing. Such was the way their little dysfunctional family had always been.

Deacon leaned back on his chair and stared at the map on the wall. Somewhere out there was a new home for this ragtag group of people, and Deacon would find it. And their mission would continue -- to guide every synth to their freedom, to give them a second chance in life. A chance to seek happiness, an opportunity to screw up, just like everyone else in this shithole.

“You sure that’s what you want to do?” asked Dean Volkert. “As a doctor, I do not recommend it.”

Shaun knew that all too well. “It’s the only way to be sure.”

“It’s a little too extreme, Shaun. The potential dangers...”

“The future of the Institute is on the line here. I need to make sure she's ready. I don’t have much time left, Dean. You and I both know that.”

“I won’t say that for certain. The latest test results show an improvement, Shaun. A slight improvement from previous test, but it’s an improvement nonetheless.”

“What? I’m going to have an extra half a year? Or a year?”

“Since when have you become such a pessimist?”

“A realist, Dean. I know my body.”

“So do I. I’m your doctor, Shaun. You can’t give up just yet. I wouldn’t let you. And neither would your mother.”

A quick knock on the door interrupted the conversation. A tall man in black walked into the director’s private quarters.

“What can I do for you, Father?” asked X6-88.

It’s a calculated risk. And it’s a risk he had to take. For the Institute. For the future of humanity.

The director of the Institute then ordered, “I want you to go to Diamond City.”

A/N: A chapter that was three months too late. Have a merry little Christmas with the Institute and the Railroad.

I’d like to address one point that Mandor made in the review (sorry, I can’t reply to a guest review in private, but thank you for your constant support). Nora was able to resolve BioScience siege with just talk, it’s one of the rare instances. The stage is much better than one character, and Nora
won’t be able to do everything by herself (unlike her in-game counterpart). Violence might be inevitable at some point. But, like Nick Valentine says, battles are won with fists, wars with wits. Miss Bennett lacks the former, but she has the latter.

As always, thanks for reading. And a special thanks to tomberi-no for constantly inspiring me to come up with post-Project Wanderer crazy short stories. It’s good to know where this story will end, and have good things waiting at the end of the line where chaos and mayhem ensure.

Title: “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” -- Frank Sinatra, 1948.

Contact Info: gmail - pinoko19. tumblr - pinoko-k.
It was a cool sunny day in late October. The sky was blue, the clouds were white. A man and a woman travelled down the empty road, heading north towards a suburb that had once been a busy town two hundred and ten years ago.

The pair were both in leather jackets and sunglasses. Not just any normal jackets, but ballistic weaved. The man had made sure of that.

The sunglasses, though, those were not bulletproof. The man wished they were.

The woman’s face was mostly hidden behind a pair of sunglasses and a scarf around her neck. Her long hair was in a loose bun to hide its healthy sheen that was a rare find in this Wasteland; a brown cap covered the rest. Her partner had made sure of that as well.

Such precaution was necessary for someone with a pretty face like hers. Wouldn’t want to attract any unwanted attentions now, would they?

Her partner didn’t single her out, though. The man’s sunglasses covered his own eyes and obscured part of his face. With his constant costume change, sometimes with hair, sometimes without, even the best facial recognition system would have a hard time pinpointing the man. But, for safety purpose, the man had his face swapped every few years through surgeries more painful than he’d ever admit.

Was he too paranoid? Perhaps. But his paranoia had kept him alive when he should have been dead ten times over. In his line of business, one could never be too careful, for those goddamn synthetic birds never needed a day off. The Watchers were always watching.

“I still can’t get used to the idea of walking in the middle of the highway,” said Nora Bennett, aka the frozen woman who had slept for two centuries.

“Don’t worry,” said Deacon, aka the liar who never took off his sunglasses. “The cops aren’t going give us a ticket for jaywalking.”

“I used to drive on this road almost every day,” the two-hundred-some year old woman told her partner.

And now you have to walk. “How fast did you drive?” the master of bullshits asked. “Ever got a speeding ticket?”

“I’ll take the Fifth.”

Deacon laughed. “Lawyers.”
For once, having a partner was enjoyable for the man who preferred to fly solo. It was like he’d finally met someone who actually spoke his language, someone who understood everything he said, missing piece he didn’t even know he needed.

“You know a lot about the pre-war culture,” said Nora.

“Well… Since we’re partners now, I guess I should tell you the truth.” The liar paused for dramatic effect then flashed a sly grin. “…I’m a time traveller.”

His bullshit earned him a snort. It was worth it though, for he spotted a fleeting smile on that pretty face of hers.

“I am the real time traveller here, Mister,” said the walking pre-war relic. “…If only we could travel back in time.”

...If only.

The man in sunglasses didn’t let his thoughts show. He never did. “You know what they say: When life gives you lemons…”

“Make lemonade?”

“Make the best sales pitch and sell it as the most precious commodity on earth, and makes lots of money and ride into the great sunset, etc. etc…”

“I like your version better,” Nora commented. “Making lemonade would require some sugar, too, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe whoever came up with this saying,” said Deacon, “his kitchen was already stocked with sugar. Lucky bastard.”

“And one day,” his partner continued with his random bullshit effortlessly, “a lemon dropped from the tree when he walked by, and he came up with this words of wisdom.”

“That’s right! Oh, did I tell you one time he also sat underneath a tree, and an apple fell on top of his head…”

Another snort, but this time it almost sounded like a gentle laugh. “And he discovered gravity?”

“Nah,” the liar replied, flashing an easy grin. “He invented apple pie.”

“Turning lemons into lemonade…” His partner turned to face him as they walked down the road side by side. “Thank you.”

Anytime. Deacon replied with nothing but a faint nod. Anything more would be redundant. The man understood. He understood all too well what it felt like to have everything torn away overnight. He understood what it felt like to be the only person left standing when he should have been dead.

His partner turned her gaze to the blue sky above. Deacon studied her profile. Despite her soft shell, this woman had a core of steel. She would survive, Deacon had no doubt.

You’ll find your son, I promise.
Nora watched as her son finished the soup she’d cooked for two hours.

A hint of color had returned to Shaun’s cheeks lately. The results for his latest blood test had shown a slight improvement. The worried mother let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“Thank you, Mother.” Shaun put down his spoon. “It was… delicious.”

“I’m glad to see your appetite return,” said Nora with gentle smile.

The frightening amount of pills on the tray waiting for her son made the mother queasy. Each pill had its laundry list of side effects, yet each one was needed to keep her son alive.

Shaun took every last one of them without ever uttering a complaint.

“You have been with us for quite some time now,” said her son after taking his medications. “And you have shown nothing but kindness. For that… I thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Shaun. I’m your mother.”

“I would like to show my appreciation for all you have done for us… for me.”

From one of the drawers in the nearby cabinet, Shaun retrieved a device and put it on his desk. It was something Nora had not seen in two months.

“That’s…”

“Pip-Boy, I believe it’s called,” Shaun replied. “Personal Information Processor. It’s the one you had with you when you first came here.”

Nora had never given it a second thought, for it had never really been hers to begin with. “I found it in the vault and used it to power up the elevator.”

Shaun nodded. “It’s a primitive device. The design is far from elegant, but I guess it was state-of-the-art two hundred years ago.”

“It felt heavy on the wrist.”

“Yes, I’ve tried. Most uncomfortable. Yet, useful in the world above. I have make some improvements on the device… I’d like to give this back to you.”

“I don’t need it, son.”

“You do.” Shaun retrieved something from his pocket and put it next to the Pip-Boy. “I realize it's a week late, but… this is my Christmas present for you.”

It wasn’t until he had removed his hand then Nora saw it was. “A key?”

“It’s the key to a house in Diamond City.”

House? Diamond City? All she could do was to stare at her son, confused. “Why?”

His expression was unreasonable. “You told me you miss the sun and the sky. I don’t blame you. All your life, you’ve lived in an open world. It is something I can never fully comprehend, but I think it would be unreasonable to expect you be confined in an underground facility, however safe
and comfortable it might be.” Her son pushed the key closer to her. “This is for you, should you ever wish to… get some fresh air -- although the air above is anything but fresh.”

Nora, for once, was speechless.

Shaun then quickly added, “Please do not mistake this as a gesture to force you out of the Institute. That could not be any further from my intention. I simply want you to have the freedom to visit the world you once lived in, and perhaps even stay for a while if that is what you wish. Diamond City is the safest place up there, and the house is already furnished for your comfort -- as much as we possibly could given the limited resources exist in the Wasteland.”

“I… thank you, Shaun,” said Nora, finally found her voice. “This is very thoughtful of you.”

Her son nodded. “I have to admit, this freedom is unprecedented, but so is your unique situation. You deserve this. Although I do have to ask you to oblige to one rule, and that is not to disclose any information about the Institute to anyone aboveground. I trust you, Mother. I trust you would protect my legacy.”

“Of course. I understand. Thank you for putting your trust in me. This is the best gift you could have given me.”

“Your freedom?”

“No. Your trust, son.”

When the blinding flash was gone and her vision was readjusted, Nora found herself standing in the middle of an old office. The first breath of air she took was no longer scentless, but it smelled of dust and mold.

“Mrs. Taylor!” A fat middle-aged man waddled into Nora's view. His grin was wide, but there was a tab of fear in his eyes.

“Mayor McDonough,” Nora greeted.

She had replaced the pristine white coat with the leather jacket, pressed tailored pants with worn cargo pants -- the very same outfit that had been handpicked by her former partner.

A tall man in black stepped in front of Nora to shield her before the mayor could take her hand for a shake.

“That’s close enough, Unit,” warned x6-88.

“Welcome! Welcome!” McDonough peeked over the courser’s shoulder to grin at Nora. “It is such an honor to have you here with us. I’ll be sure to do everything I can to make your stay as comfortable as possible. Your safety is my utmost concern.”

The courser was quick to issue yet another warning, “You’d better keep your words. Or else.”

“Relax, X6-88.” Nora gently nudged her synthetic human shield aside. “No one knows who I am.”

“And that is precisely why we should be concerned, ma’am,” said X6-88. “The surface dwellers
will take you for another one of them, and treat you with disrespect, possibly even harm you.”

“No one will touch a hair on your head, ma’am!” McDonough vowed. “Not on my watch! Er, if it’s not too much trouble, Mrs. Taylor, could you ask Father when I could be transferred back to the Institute? You see, this is a temporary position. Dr. Ayo promised I’d be a courser…”

X6-88 snorted. “Courser? You?”

“Yes! That was part of the deal.” The mayor did his best to straighten up to appear taller, but the courser still towered over him. “Dr. Ayo said–”

“Dr. Ayo is currently in detention center,” X6-88 interjected with his usual monotone. “Are you sure you want to associate with him, Unit?”

“What?” McDonough gasped. “I...I didn’t know... I…”

Pointedly ignoring the horrified synth, X6-88 turned to Nora and asked, “Are you certain you wish to stay here, ma’am?”

“Yes. I’d like to stay for a bit.”

The courser grimaced at her decision, yet he did not voice his opinion. “As you wish. The device on your wrist will take your back to the Institute no matter where you are. It could also be used to summon a team of synth troopers at your disposal. If you wish to step outside these walls, I strongly recommend you to inform me. I will accompany you.”

“And be seen walking around with a courser?”

Nora swore she spotted a ghost of a smirk on the emotionless man's face. “All coursers have gone through extensive trainings in infiltration and disguise, ma’am. You’d be surprised who is actually one of ours.”

Although she felt a chill, Nora kept her calm facade intact. “I see. Thank you, X6-88.”

McDonough coughed. A sheen of sweat had formed on his forehead despite the winter air. “Allow me to escort you to the elevator, Mrs. Taylor,” said the mayor with utmost respect and fear. “I believe it’s in our best interests not to be seen together. But not to worry, I’ll keep eye on everything! You’re safe here, ma’am. Enjoy your stay!”

The scaffold elevator rattled as it descended from the VIP box of the former Fenway Park. The winter air was chilly. The sun was hidden behind layers of clouds, and there was an unmistakable stench in the air, yet Nora felt free for the first time in the longest while. Her gaze lingered on the overcast sky for a moment longer as a smile spread on its own. It’d been almost two months since she’d seen the sky.

The noise from the marketplace grew louder and louder. The scaffold elevator soon rattled to a stop. Nora climbed out and hopped onto the solid soil of what used to be a baseball field.

A nagging doubt began to take over her thoughts.

Was it a mistake to come back on the surface? Would she be welcomed by those who had helped
her?

No, she shouldn’t stay long. After all, this was not her home. But then, neither was the Institute…

Once again, Nora glanced up at the sky, seeking comfort from the last remaining familiarity left from her former life. The sky looked exactly the same as it had been two centuries ago. Perhaps, even though many things had changed, some things remained the same.

Nora weaved through the metal shacks and found her way into the heart of the settlement. The marketplace looked the same as it’d been since her last trip here, except for one notable difference. Among the crowd, Nora spotted something she didn’t expect to find -- a Christmas tree by food stands.

A familiar robotic voice caught Nora’s full attention. “Here’s your delicious noodle, sir. Enjoy!”

Next to the Christmas tree, two pre-war robots were busy dishing out food at the noodle stand.

“How about some noodle today—” The Mr. Handy gasped as all three of his eyes turned to Nora. “M-M-Miss Nora? Is that really you?”

Nora beamed, her smile returned to her all too naturally. “Hello Codsworth.”

“Miss Nora!! It IS you!”

“It’s so good to see you again, Cods.”

Codsworth quickly abandoned his post and floated to his mistress. His metallic arms flailing excitedly. If Codsworth were a human, Nora would have been crushed by a bear hug by now. “Oh, I knew you’d come back, Miss Nora! There was never a doubt in my mind! And this time, I only had to wait for two months! Where is Shaun, by the way? Is he with you?”

“Shaun… can’t come this time.”

“Ah, I’m sure the lad is busy… I shouldn’t call him a lad anymore, eh? He is taller than both of us now! Oh, I remember the time he was tiny baby, waking you up in the middle of the night. And all those stinkies he'd make…” The robot chuckled at the distant memories. “Ah, look to me, babbling like an old robot. Mum, we should go see Mr. Valentine. You didn’t get a chance to meet him last time.”

Nick... Nora felt a knot in her stomach.

Codsworth turned to the proprietor of Power Noodles. “Takahashi, my good man, I will tend to my mistress. I’m sure you’ll understand.”

The chef’s hat wearing Protecton responded with the only one line that had survived two centuries. “Nani ni shimasu ka?”

“Yes, I’ll be sure to stop and give you a hand or three later this evening.” Codsworth waved all three of his metallic arms with a chuckle. “Come, Miss Nora, do you still remember the way to the detective's office? Nothing has changed around here. You look lovely, by the way, a little pale, perhaps. But nothing a little bit of sun won’t fix! So, how have you been? Have you been eating well?”
Valentine’s Detective Agency. Tiny, windowless office with too many file cabinets, more desks than people, and folders and boxes took over most of the flat surfaces.

Two lamps hanging from the ceiling lit up the room. A man in fedora hat and trenchcoat stood in front of a cabinet, digging through the files stuffed inside one of the drawers.

“Sorry, we’re clos--” The synth detective froze in the middle of his words as he saw his visitor.

“Mr. Valentine,” Nora greeted, uncertain if she would be kicked out of the office, or captured for what the Institute had done to Nick.

“...Now here’s a face I didn’t think I’d see again,” said Nick Valentine once he’d recovered from his initial shock. “But I guess it’s not the first time I feel this way, is it? The difference is, last time we’d not seen each other for more than two hundred years.”

So far, she had not been kicked out of the premise, Nora took it as a good sign. “I’ll be sure to make an appointment next time I drop by.”

“You do that.” The synth detective studied her for a moment longer. His yellow eyes shone brighter than usual. “So what brings you here, Miss Bennett? Did the Institute want this old broken synth back for recycling?”

Nora deflected the biting remark with a gentle tone. “I don’t work for them, Nick.”

“That is certainly good to hear, if true.” Valentine waved at the chair across from his desk, then settled down on his own. “I’ve heard you have found your son.”

“...Not what I expected.”

The detective nodded. “Fate is a cruel mistress.”

“Tell me about it…”

“You caused quite a commotion last time you were here. A courser showed up out of nowhere, and then all three of your disappeared in thin air within seconds. Rumor has it that two visitors were kidnapped by the Institute in the middle of broad day light.”

Goddammit.

“Lucky for you,” Valentine continued, “people have fuzzy memories. All they could remember were a woman and an old man wearing white. No one recognized you. No one, except for one guard, and… a friend.”

A friend? Nora recalled spotting a familiar face in the crowd. “Deacon.”

The synth detective did not answer.

“Can you find him for me?” Nora asked. “I need to speak to him.”

Valentine hesitated.

Nora couldn’t blame Nick for his distrust. She was painfully aware of the fact that her solid ties with the Institute would put her in the worst possible light. If she were Nick, Nora would not have trusted herself.
“I haven’t said a word about Deacon or the Railroad to anyone,” Nora told the detective. “They asked, but I lied.”

“And they bought it?”

“I’m a lawyer, Nick. Reshaping the truth is a required skill. I gave them enough to cover my story, but nothing concrete to pinpoint anyone. Deacon is my client; I’m contractually bound to protect my client’s interests.”

The yellow eyes glowed as Valentine studied her intently. “...Your client, huh?”

“And a friend. I don’t have many left...”

Eventually, the detective decided, “I’ll pass along a message. Whether he will come or not, it’s up to him”

“Thank you, Nick, for trusting me.”

“Call it a hunch, but I’d like to think that good ol’ Henry’s little girl would do the right thing.”

“It’s so nice of Shaun to prepare a home for his mother,” said Codsworth as he followed Nora into their new house.

From the outside, it looked similar to other metal shacks in Diamond City, albeit bigger. But the inside was a surprise.

“Oh, look at this place. It’s spacious, wouldn’t you say, mum? Oh, and it’s nicely furnished. Here’s a kitchen where I could cook some of your favorite meals, a proper dining area, a desk, and...” The Mr. Handy zoomed to the kitchen stove. “Everything is in perfect working condition! How wonderful!”

Nora glanced around. The furniture style might be old, but everything seemed strangely new and clean.

Codsworth floated up the stairs. “There is a nice bed on the upper level. If this isn’t the cleanest bedding I have seen in centuries. These pillows and blankets... Where did Shaun find all these?”

From the Institute, no doubt. Her son was unexpectedly thoughtful.

“All we need is a little dusting and polishing,” the Mr. Handy declared, “perhaps a few paintings on the wall, and we will have a comfortable castle of our own! Oh, I can’t wait to test out our new kitchen. ...Miss Nora?”

“Yes, Cods?”

“You are awfully quiet, mum. Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine... Just a little tired.” For the first time in two months, the perpetual mask on her face could finally be taken off.

“Oh poor dear,” the robot mumbled. “You must be exhausted. Why don’t you get some rest while I
tidy up our new home? I certainly hope my cleaning subroutine is still up to the standard. After all, it’s been more two centuries, and I am a little… rusty.”

The Mr. Handy chuckled quietly at his own joke as he floated away to begin his work.

Nora headed up the stairs then collapsed onto the bed. The mattress, the blanket, the pillows, all were from the Institute. The pre-war style bed frame might be able fool the eyes, but her body could tell the difference.

She stripped off the Pip-Boy and put the bulky device on the bedside table. Tensions on her body started to melt away as she closed her eyes, wondering if Deacon would come to see her, if he had received her previous messages, if he still trusted her…

“Hey,” a voice called quietly.

Nora opened her eyes.

The face looked down at hers was covered in shadows, but the pair of sunglasses perched on the straight nose was unmistakable.

Deacon?

How did he get in? And when? None of those questions even crossed Nora’s mind. Her partner was here, and that’s all that mattered. There was so much she wanted to say, yet words seemed to stick in her throat.

I’m sorry. I didn’t know Shaun was…

Guilt she didn’t realized she had been carrying now broke through the emotional floodgates she had unconsciously constructed around herself.

I’m really, really sorry, Deacon. I didn’t know.

It was almost as if the man could hear her unspoken plea. Without a single word, he leaned closer and pressed his lips onto her forehead.

Suffocating guilt was instantly melted away by this single gesture. All was forgiven.

Overwhelming dose of liberating relief tore down her final barrier. Tears fell from the corners of her closed eyes as Nora suppressed a quiet sob.

My son is dying. I don’t know what to do. Help! Please, help me. Help him!

Muted senses began to return to her, starting with the smell of delicious food, and the familiar sounds of pots and pans.

When Nora opened her eyes, the man in sunglasses was gone. So was her dream.

It’s a dream, she told herself. It’s nothing but a dream.

Yet, why did she feel a hint of lingering disappointment?

Nora touched her forehead where her partner had planted a tender peck on. She could still feel a slight tingle on the skin.

Nothing but a dream. Nora wiped the dampness off her cheeks then strengthened the bedding,
taking a precious moment to compose herself before heading down the stairs.

“Ah, Miss Nora,” Codsworth greeted as he was busy floating around the kitchen. “Did you have a good rest?”

“How long was I out?”

“Oh, three hours and twenty seven minutes, give or take a few...:”

Just to be absolutely certain, Nora asked, “Did anyone stop by?”

“Why, no. Are you expecting any guests?”

Yes. “No…”

“Dinner's almost ready, mum. You must be starving!”

“Thank you, Cods,” said Nora sincerely. “It’s nice to be back.”

“And it’s great to have you back, Miss Nora!” The Mr. Handy would be grinning ear to ear if he had a mouth. “Truly, truly great.”

Lights from both the shops and food stands lit up the marketplace. Clouds lingered in the dark sky, covering the stars above. Briefly, Nora wondered if it was a full moon or a half moon tonight.

“The night is still young, eh?” Codsworth commented as he floated by his mistress’ side. “Tonight will be the busiest night of the year at Power Noodles.”

“Hm? Why’s that?”

“Why, it’s New Year’s Eve, of course!” said the Mr. Handy. “We had a celebration just a week ago on Christmas Eve. Oh, you wouldn’t believe the line we had at the noodle stand! Did you see the Christmas tree? I helped putting it up!”

Nora smiled at her robot. “You love your life here, Cods?”

“After being living by myself for two centuries, it certainly feels good to have company,” Codsworth admitted. “Life may hand these people lemons, Miss Nora, but they sure know how to make lemonades.”

Lemon. Lemonade. Nora’s smile faded a tad as her thoughts wandered on its own to her former partner.

She consciously scanned around, looking at every face in the marketplace, searching for a man in sunglasses.

But he was nowhere to be found.

Did Nick find him? Would Deacon trust her enough to come?

Absentmindedly, Nora bumped into someone. “Sorry.”
“Excuse me,” said a sandy-haired girl who was no older than eight.

“You okay, sweetie?” asked Nora with a gentle smile.

“Yeah.” The girl stared at Nora for a second. “You have pretty eyes.”

*What? “Thank you…”*

“Hey Miss, you dropped this.” The girl shoved a piece of paper in Nora’s hand.

“It’s not--” Before Nora could say another word, the young lady had already run away and disappeared into a nearby alley.

Curious, Nora unfolded the tiny note, on it was only one word.

*“Valentine.”*

It was not the name that froze Nora momentarily, but the handwriting. She recognized it.

“Miss Nora?” asked Codsworth. “Something wrong?”

Keeping her composure as much as she could, Nora swallowed hard then quickly replied, “Go help Takahashi, Cods. I’ll go see Nick.”

---

Valentine had sent him an emergency message with only two words.

*“She’s back.”*

Those two words were powerful enough to send Deacon running to Diamond City.

Nick had since told Deacon about the reemergence of his former partner, of what she had said, and where her new home was.

To say he wasn’t tempted to look for her immediately was a blatant lie. Perhaps twenty-some years ago when he was hot-headed stupid kid, Deacon would have run up to her house and pound on door until she opened it, or maybe he would have picked the lock and let himself in.

Now, though, older and much wiser, Deacon knew better than to commit any fatal mistakes. For all he knew, behind the door was a trap, or an ambush, or one of many other possibilities that involved either his capture or his death.

At the very least, her house might be bugged.

And so, the spy patiently waited in the only place he knew for certain that was not bugged -- Valentine’s Detective Agency.

Waiting was part of his job; Deacon was used to it. Although physically idled, his mind was spinning like a mole rat on Jet running on a wheel. Hundreds of potential conversations were running inside his head along with thousands of possible responses.

What should he say to her? Had anyone ever written a guide on How to Talk to Your Ex-Partner
Who is Your Arch-Enemy’s Mother?

No? Perhaps he should write one after today’s encounter.

What could possibly be said? Congratulations! You’ve found your son, who, by the way, is now the boss of the bastards who had kidnapped him at first place!

_No, it wasn’t her fault_, Deacon reminded himself.

A sudden thought jumped out from a sea of many.

What if he kidnapped her and used her as bargaining chip to tear down the Institute once and for all?

The seasoned spy grimaced at this idea.

Even if he could cast away the last shred of decency to pull off this asshole move, would the old man care about his mother (if she was really his mother) enough to sacrifice his empire for her?

Deacon seriously doubted it.

Perhaps he could get the location of the Institute from her. Would she tell him that?

Maybe. If he could work his magic and make the mother of all sales pitches...

The door creaked open and halted another onslaught of thoughts flooded to Deacon’s restless mind. The man in sunglasses unconsciously held his breath as a woman stepped in. Miss Nora Bennett stopped in front of the doorway as the door slammed close behind her. Her eyes widened, her lips parted, as she stared at the only person in the office.

Gone was the tailored white jacket that had made her stand out like a sore thumb. The former woman in blue was smart enough to wear the ballistic weaved jacket Deacon had acquired from Tinker Tom. And he recognized the pants, too. Ballistic cargo pants. The latest Wasteland fashion that mixed comfort, style, and protection all in one.

Deacon inwardly nodded with approval.

For once, though, his mouth and his mind were out of sync. His thoughts had turned into a language that didn’t even existed. When he opened his mouth, not a single word could come out. Not even a simple ‘hey’.

For the longest time, the two former partners merely stood and studied each other in silent.

“So…” Deacon broke the silence after much struggle. “…what’s new?” Goddammit! Was this the best he could come up with?

“Did you get my messages?” asked Nora almost simultaneously as though she, too, had just remembered how to speak.

“Yes. Both.”

His former partner let out a breath, seemingly relieved. Even under the crappy yellow light of Valentine’s Detective Agency, her eyes were stunningly blue.

“You sure you’re just a lawyer back in the days?” Deacon asked, gathering all his wits that had somehow been scattered the moment she’d stepped through the door. “Could have sworn you’re a
spy. Those encryptions? Grade A stuff.”

A quick smile flashed across her face. The crammy office suddenly felt brighter. “I was a big fan of mystery novels.”

“Why am I not surprised?” said Deacon with a grin of his own. “You’re a natural, trust me. I sort of do that for a living.”

Her smile was fleeting. It was gone in the blink of an eye as she glanced around the office cautiously.

“Nick’s out,” Deacon told her, knowing exactly what she was thinking. “Ellie has the day off. You’re stuck with me.”

*We’re safe to talk.*

Nodding, Nora sank down on a chair across him. “Deacon, listen... I’m sorry.”

He knew what she was referring to.

*It’s not your fault, Deacon wanted to say, you could not possibly have known.*

Yet, the words that came from the liar’s heart got stuck at his throat. Instead, he heard himself saying, “You’ve been played.”

The wince that flashed across her eyes made Deacon want to smack himself.

“Are you absolutely certain he is your son?” Deacon asked, clinging onto the last hope that this was a long con.

“Shaun ran a DNA test when I was still unconscious,” Nora told him. “He is my son.”

“The report could be fabricated.”

“He looks just like Nate and Nate’s father.”

The liar pointed at his own face. “Looks can be changed.”

“And mannerisms can be adopted,” his former partner finished his thoughts without missing a beat. “I see what you’re saying, Deacon, and I understand your skepticism. But why would he pretend to be my son?”

“That’s the million-dollar question. Did he ask you to do anything?”

“No.”

Her gaze had dropped ever-so slightly, Deacon noticed. The liar knew a lie when he saw one. His paranoia sounded the alarm. Was this woman really a friend or a foe?

She was the Institute’s Big Boss’ mother, at least she believed she was.

But, she had helped Patriot, and the escaped synths seemed to like her, even calling her “the lady”. So whose side was she on?

Deacon prayed to all Entities above and below that this seemingly harmless woman was truly at his
corner.

*If she wanted you dead, you’d be having this conversation at an undisclosed dungeon by now.*

Deacon tried his luck. “I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me where the Institute is, even if I ask.”

“I don’t know, Deacon.”

The liar almost felt insulted. “Come on, Miss Bennett, you’re a lawyer. You can do better than that.”

Blue eyes looked up, searching for his that were hidden behind his sunglasses. “I honestly don’t know the exact location.”

This time, she wasn’t lying. But there was something about the way she had phrased it. It’s almost like she wanted to tell him, but something -- or someone -- was keeping her from telling him the truth.

Her son. Who else?

Deacon spotted a loophole, though. While her lips might be sealed, but even the Big Boss of the Institute couldn’t stop Deacon from talking.

“I assume it’s big, this Institute,” Deacon started with the obvious. “Huge.”

Nora didn’t answer.

Unfazed, Deacon continued with his guessing game, “A secured compound guided by a bunch of chrome domes? If it’s in the Commonwealth, I would have found it by now.”

Still, not a peep from her.

Was her silence a yes, or a no?

“I’m 99% sure there’s no such building from Boston to D.C.,” Deacon muttered his train of thoughts out loud. “Yet, the radius of the chrome domes activities seem to center around the Commonwealth. This would suggest the Institute is nearby.”

Again, there was no reply. Yet, this time, she avoided his eyes. Deacon knew he was getting warmer.

A mysterious facility hidden in plain sight? Perhaps it’s invisible, constantly cloaked by a never-ending giant Stealth Boy. Could the Institute have such technology? Perhaps. But even if they had, the amount of energy they’d need to power up such cloaking device would be enormous. Not to mention the actual physical space this invisible building would take up. Deacon had walked every inch of this town and areas beyond. So far, he had yet to bump into an invisible wall.

A sudden idea came flashing inside his head. It was absolutely preposterous, yet it was the only possible solution to this insane riddle.

*It can’t be… Can it?* Deacon gasped quietly at the answer he had been seeking for two long decades.

He could hear his own deafening heartbeats. His face, though, was as cool and calm as ever. “A certain detective said,” Deacon tested the water with a quote, “‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’”
To his surprise, a quick smile curled up on her pretty face as Nora broke her silence. “Sherlock Holmes.”

“So, tell me, Sherlock,” said Deacon, “is it… underground?”

Her lovely smile froze as fear flashed across her eyes. Bingo!

So the Institute was under his nose all this time? Son of a bitch!

To her credit, Nora didn’t reaction beyond her momentary slip. “You won’t be able to find it, Deacon. Even if you know the exact location, you can’t walk in. As far as I know, there is only one way in.”

“Teleportation,” said Deacon.

No, not true. Those underground bastards didn't sprout from the earth. Once upon a time their ancestors had walked on the face of the earth like the rest of the population. Somehow, somewhere in history, a group of people had holed themselves underneath the earth and lived the rest of their lives there. And that could only mean that there's an entrance somewhere. It might be sealed, but it had to be there…

“There are good people in the Institute, Deacon,” said Nora. “A lot of them are misguided, but they’re not all evil like people aboveground seem to think.”

People aboveground? Was that what they were called? “Yet they create perfect human copies and treat them like slaves,” Deacon reminded her.

“That’s not Shaun’s intention.”

Are you his spokesperson now? “So what is his intention?”

“Synths…” Nora explained, “the third-generation ones, they are Shaun’s legacy, his only family. Until I arrived.”

“Yes, I’ve heard from one of our friends. They called him… Father?”

Nora nodded. “They were created with his DNA. Back then when the Institute started to make third-generation synths, they found out they needed uncontaminated DNA. And they found my son… So they kidnapped him, experimented on him, and created the new synths.”

Listen to yourself! “They stole your son from you because they wanted to create something better than chrome-domes.” Deacon shook his head with a frown. “Please don’t tell me you’re okay with that!”

“I’m not! I wish I could turn back time and save my son, but I couldn’t. There were times, so many times, I asked myself what I could have done to stop this, to keep my baby from being kidnapped! But we can’t change history. Nothing I could do would ever undo that. Nothing would ever give me back the time I’ve missed. Sixty years, Deacon! I missed sixty years of my son’s life! Right now, all I could do is to salvage whatever time remaining with Shaun before--”

It was not her words that alarmed Deacon, it was her expression. Her eyes. Tears too stubborn to fall welled up in the eyes. Something was wrong. “Before?”

There was a pause, too long for someone like her to come up with a lie. “…He’s not exactly young anymore.”
No, there was something more than that… It was then Deacon recalled. “He fainted when he was here. What happened?”

“The doctor said it’s a mild case of radiation poisoning,” Nora replied after a long breath to compose herself. “He’s not accustomed to the level of radiation on the surface.”

Was that all? His instincts told him there was more to the story. *What aren’t you telling me, partner?*

“Do you trust your son?” Deacon asked quietly. “If he is how he claims he is…”

To that, she didn’t answer directly. “I didn’t raise him. I never had the chance to teach him right from wrong. But, he is still my son, Deacon. I cannot give up on him. I’m not overlooking all the terrible things the Institute has done. But that is the past, and there is nothing anyone can do to change that. What I can do… what I hope to do is to show Shaun things he’s never seen, things he’s never been taught. And to change the Institute from within… Starting from the top.”

That was unexpected, ambitious, and… smart, if she could pull it off.

“Things are changing, slowly,” Nora continued. “There will be more Patriots in the next generation, and the generation to come.”

“Patriot. How many people does he have?”

“He’s the only one.”

“One man pulling this off?”

“He’s a kid, but he’s a genius. Not even twenty.”

“Now that’s a surprise.”

“Patriot and his father recognize synths are more than machines. They may be minority, but ideas are like virus. Soon it will catch on.”

*Unless someone kills all the viruses.* “One of our friends told me you saved Patriot.”

“All I did was a little push,” said Nora. “Patriot did most of the work himself.”

“What happened?”

“The head of the SRB was on an assignment to find out who was helping the escaped synths. He ruffled too many feathers. Shaun handed me the task instead. I followed his trail and found out who Patriot was. I know the kid well, and I still remember everything you told me about the synths… So I decided to help him.”

“What did you do?”

“...Something bad enough to get me disbarred. Long story short, the head of the SRB is now the culprit responsible for releasing the synths. Evidences all point to his crime. He was replaced by a sensible woman, someone who is tough but fair.”

Something didn’t sit right with Deacon. It was like a well-scripted event, everything was neat and tidy.

“Before the head of the SRB was… fired,” Nora continued, “that man was dead set at finding an
invisible invader at Malden Center. Not a single camera managed to catch that person’s face.”

Deacon knew why she had to add this tidbit. This was her peace offering, her olive branch. What she might not realize was, despite his paranoia, despite his cynicism, he trusted her instinctively. His gut told him she would not throw him under the bus; she had plenty of opportunities to do so, and yet he was still breathing.

“That invisible man--” said Deacon, “or woman, owes you a great deal for shaking the head of SRB off his, or her, tail.”

“That invisible man--” Nora replied, “or woman, doesn’t owe me anything. He, or she, is a client… And a friend.”

Deacon flashed a grin. “Best cap I’ve ever spent.”

A knowing smile was exchanged between the two former partners. In this precious peaceful moment, there was nothing else in their world beside the two of them. Deacon wished he could capture it and preserve it forever.

“When are you heading back?” Deacon had to ask.

“Anytime I want.”

“Do you think it’ll look suspicious if I tag along?”

“The only one I could bring in without raising any alarm is Codsworth.”

“What if I dressed up as a Mr. Handy? I’ve always wanted to try that.”

That brought a snort from his former partner.

This woman not only held the key to the Institute, but she was the mother of the Big Boss. If anyone could get him a VIP pass into the lion’s den, it’s her. Deacon had to keep an eye on her, and keep her close...

“So,” said the spy, “you’ve been trapped underground for a while, huh? Want to get some fresh air?”

“I’d love to.”

“I know a place. Best view you’d ever get, if you don’t mind climbing some stairs.”

To that, she nodded. “Anywhere. I missed the sky.”

A genuine smile found its way to the liar’s face. “Your wish is my… strong recommendation, Miss Bennett. I’ll meet you outside the statute in ten, just like old times.”

Nodding, his former partner got up from the chair and echoed, “Just like old times.”

As the door closed and the man was left alone with his thoughts, the dingy detective office seemed to have darkened a tab.

Could things really be the same?

Of course not.
Not even the professional liar could pull off this blatant lie to himself.

What the future would be, Deacon didn’t know. One thing he knew for certain was that, for a brief moment, a missing piece had filled the human-shaped void inside of him. However fleeting the moment was, Deacon was at peace.

And that terrified him to no end.

The doctor opened a bottle of fine whiskey and poured a glass for his patient. As per the pair’s tradition, the two old friends shared a drink with each other at New Year’s Eve, and a toast to a brand new year.

“She is up there?” asked Dean Volkert.

Shaun Taylor nodded as he brought his glass under his nose for a sniff.

Dean shook his head with mild disapproval. “I still don’t know why you’d let her live in the contaminated world up there.”

“She has to learn and find her way.”

“You are treating her like a child, Shaun. She’s your mother.”

The old man took a sip of his drink and replied, “Yet she is half my age and has little experience in this new world. Once she has truly seen how terrible the surface is, she will willingly come back. And then, she will truly ready to take my place.”

“And if she doesn’t want to be the director?” asked the old man’s best friend. “I seem to recall you were reluctant at taking this position yourself.”

“She is not the only candidate, of course. There is always a Plan B.” Shaun Taylor raised his glass. “What should we toast to this year?”

“What else?” said the good doctor. “To your health.”

“To all our health,” said the director, “and a better future.”

The landmass below looked like a realistic model of the map on the war room. The man stared at it with his sharp blue grey eyes narrowed, his thick eyebrows perpetually furrowed. His black beard hid his clenching jaw as the man contemplated on his next move.

He could not afford to make one single mistake. All eyes were watching him, as they had been ever since his youth. He was the chosen one -- the one who carried the name of his ancestor, and the one with the founder’s blood in his veins.

And he was the last of the Maxson bloodline.
The world sat squarely on this twenty-year-old man’s broad shoulders. It was his duty to carry the weight, it was his privilege to lead his brothers-and-sisters-in-arms, and it was his job to protect innocents from mistakes they could make.

A mistake like the one two centuries ago. A mistake that had forever changed the world for the worse.

“Elder Maxson, sir.”

Arthur Maxson spun on the heel and faced his subordinate with his shoulders squared. “Yes?”

“ETA has been delayed due to weather condition, sir,” a soldier reported. “Also, Lancer Captain Kells wants to remind you to prepare for a speech upon arrival.”

Tell the captain to mind his own business. “Noted.” Maxson turned back to the windows in front of him to indicate an end to the conversation.

Speeches. It was all he had done since he’d become an Elder. His fingers itched to grab his gatling laser, his body ached to hop into his power armor and charge right in the middle of a battlefield. The scar on his face was his medal, a testament of his combat prowess, a proof of what he could be. Only now, he was forever trapped inside a war room, staring at maps, thinking of strategies.

Yet, this was his destiny as a Maxson. To lead, to fight, to protect. What he wanted didn’t matter, the only thing that mattered was to fulfill his duty and carry the banner as the last Maxson on earth.

Now, he was handed another challenge: To exterminate the abominations in the Commonwealth.

Arthur Maxson had never backed down from any challenge. The synthetic humans had to be destroyed.

Every single one of them.

A/N: 7700+ words. This is the longest chapter as of now.

I’m sorry about the delay. Been hit with a terrible case of writer’s block. Because of the event in this chapter, I was reluctant to write it. Even though I’d been looking forward to writing Deacon/Nora’s reunion for almost a year now, it felt daunting when the time arrived.

I have to say, their reunion is NOT what I expected and pictured it to be. The location, the situation, the conversations, and the emotions, everything is different than what I’d planned since last July. The characters have grown, they have minds of their own. They drive their stories, their actions, and their words.

Deacon and Nora’s shopping trip was written a little more than a year ago. I don’t expect anyone remembers that. But here it is, one of a few little references back to earlier chapters.

Again, thank you for waiting patiently for this chapter. And a special thank you to tomberi-no, whose constant support was the reason I could get over this writer’s block.

Thanks for reading!
Title: “Auld Lang Syne” -- Poem by Robert Burns, 1788.

Contact info: Gmail - pinoko19. Tumblr - pinoko-k.
“Hey, you!” a balding, graying man in rusty red robe barked. “What’s your name, Scribe Initiate?”

A younger man in a similar yet less elaborated uniform replied, “Fitzgerald.”

Fitzgerald wasn’t his real name. Neither was the name he had been using for the past several years, nor the name before that. Not that it mattered. Lately, he was Louis Fitzgerald. A man with many names and faces was now a Brotherhood of Steel latest recruit.

“Fitzgerald, sir,” the Senior Scribe corrected then sighed. “I don’t expect civilian recruits to understand the intricacy and the importance of rankings. Here, take this acquisition list to Scribe Bryan. On the double, Scribe Initiate! We’re running behind schedule.”

“Yes, sir!” The man named Fitzgerald snapped a salute by pounding his heart with his right fist.

What kind of stupid gesture was that? The man didn’t care, though. If a weird salute and an equally weird uniform could blend him right in, so be it. Being a nod-nod-yes-man was infinitely more effective and far cheaper than using Stealth Boys to sneak around.

“That’s more like it.” The Senior Scribe nodded with approval. “Now, run along!”

The Scribe Initiate didn’t run. Instead, he took the scenic route around Adams Air Force Base, pausing every so often to eavesdrop on some ongoing conversations between various members of the Brotherhood of Steel. His cover as this glorified errand boy had granted him a free pass to almost every corner of the base, undetected, hidden in plain sight.

The spy couldn’t be more thrilled.

Intel was his bread and butter; it was his job to know anything and everything. And when someone had something to hide, the spy could smell it from miles away.

This particular secret the Brotherhood was keeping was huge. It was a massive project for an equally massive airship, or so it would be once it’s completed. For now, it was nothing but piles of random junks.

“Got a new laundry list for you,” said the man when he finally reached his destination.

“Thank you, Scribe Initiate Fitzgerald.” Scribe Bryant took the list and skimmed through it with a frown. “And just how am I supposed to fill this order?”

Unlike the other scribes, Bryant seemed to be the easy-going of the bunch. The spy had certainly taken advantage of this virtue.
“That bad, huh?” the man asked.

“That’s an understatement of the century.” Bryant released a heavy sigh. “I get the importance of this project. We’re building a flying military base, and that means we cannot cut corners for safety reasons. But I’m no magicians. How am I supposed to pull everything out of thin air?”

“Such an ambitious project,” the man commented innocently. “Do you think a ship that size will actually fly?”

“Oh I have no doubt it will,” the scribe replied. “I have full confidence in our engineering team. But the question is, IF we could build it. We’ve been gathering materials for a year before you joined us. And we’re still gathering things around. And I’m afraid supplies have been running low. We need to find another source soon.”

That’s your problem, pal. Not mine.

Through the tiny window at the tip of the monument that was erected to commemorate the Battle of the Bunker Hill, Nora stared at the scenery of the Commonwealth at night.

Lights from the ground far below scattered and twinkled like the stars in the sky.

Her mind, though, was far away from the scenery.

The liberating freedom she’d felt when she’d first set foot back on the surface had now given way to lingering uncertainties and doubts. Like the battle that had taken place a few centuries ago, a war was simmering in the Commonwealth.

It’d be naive for her to expect things would be the same.

No, it would never be the same. Just like the monument the two former partners were standing in; it might be able to survive the war, but it’s not the same park it used to be.

Nora heard the man behind her shifted slightly. Deacon didn’t join her at the window; perhaps he’d rather keep a comfortable distance from her.

“I’ve never come up here before,” she started. “You’re right; it’s beautiful.”

“...Breath taking,” said her former partner.

She pointed at what used to be a patch of green grass, which had now become part of the settlement. The Pip-Boy on her wrist weighted heavier than it should. It was her key to the Institute, a firm reminder that her relationship with her former partner had forever changed.

“This was a park, back in the days,” she told him with a gentle smile in her voice. A smile that never reached her eyes. “My mother used to bring me here when I was a child. And I would spend my time playing right there.”

She didn’t know why she would tell him that. Nor did she know if he’d even care to find out about her life in the past. Somehow, the man who had never taken off his sunglasses had made her feel safe and comfortable.
He could have been her friend, a good friend. But…

It was time to face a reality as harsh as the Wasteland below.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” Nora paused then added, “and thanks for not asking anymore questions.”

“I don’t want to force you to lie,” said Deacon quietly.

“Nothing I could tell you that would help you.” Still, she tried, “The Institute... It’s a big underground facility. They’re the descendants from the scientists who survived the war. A few generations have passed since then. Most of them have never seen the Commonwealth. Security is tight. There are synth patrols everywhere. Even if I could get you in, they would immediately capture you. I don’t want to see you getting hurt.”

Sudden echoes of cheers rose from the ground to the top of the tower. The residents of the Bunker Hill settlement celebrated as the new year came along.

A new year. A new start. In a strange new world.

“What year is this?” Nora asked quietly among the cheers of the celebration from the settlement below.

“2288.”

“Ah, I’m turning 241 this year.” She tried to keep a smile in her voice, but she failed. “We probably won’t see each other again, right?”

The man behind her didn’t reply.

“We shouldn’t,” she answered for him. “They have eyes on me all over the Institute. And probably aboveground.”

“They’re watching when there is light,” said Deacon. “That you can count on.”

“Diamond City is not safe, but you already know that. Thank you for taking the risk to come see me. I’m glad I get to talk to you one last time.” I missed you. “I want to thank you in person.”

“For what?”

“For all your help.” For showing me the new world. For making me laugh. For keeping me safe.

“Never thought I’d help the opposition.”

“I’m sorry…”

“...Me too.”

“Our agreement stands,” she assured him. “No matter what happens between us in the future.”

“Don’t worry about it too much. One face swap and I’ll be a ghost. I’m due for a new one anyway.”

Nora winced. The pain he had to go through to avoid being caught.

If she could help him. If she could protect him.
“Check in with Nick from time to time,” she told the spy. “If there’s anything I could pass along, I’ll leave a note in his office.”

“You’re doing it behind your son’s back?”

“It won’t be the first time. I lied to Shaun about Patriot… and about the mercenary who took me to Switchboard.”

“You wouldn’t get disbarred even if you sold me out, you know? Not that I want you to. I consider it a big favor if you don’t.”

“I won’t.” At last, Nora turned from the view below and faced her former partner. “And it’s not because you’ve hired me with one cap.”

His face was hidden in shadows, covered by his sunglasses. But Nora could feel that he was looking at her, studying her every move to see if she was lying.

She wasn’t.

“Even though we haven’t known each other for long,” Nora continued, “I do consider you a friend. A partner… Even a mentor. What you’ve done for me, I’ll never forget. If things were different, perhaps…” Perhaps what? “…Perhaps we could go to the library together.”

“Or maybe you could teach me how to play piano.”

She was not the only one who remembered some random conversations they had during their travel. A smile came to her face even though her throat had tightened. “You remember.”

Deacon merely shrugged as he stepped out of the shadows. A tiny smirk appeared on his face. “It’s not everyday I had a frozen banana as my partner.”

Despite it all, a faint smile surfaced on her face at the nickname. “Frozen banana… Thanks for the lovely name, Mr. Carton.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Manette.”

“The name is Bennett.”

The man in sunglasses replied with yet another ghost of a smirk.

No, he didn’t mispeak. The name sounded oddly familiar. Manette… Carton.

And then it clicked. “Lucie Manette,” said Nora out loud. “A Tale of Two Cities.”

His grin grew at her answer. “Took you long enough.”

For a moment, a brief moment, time was rewinded back to two months ago, to a time where he was her partner, her mentor, her friend.

If only things were different.

Then suddenly, his smile was all but dissipated as he looked over her shoulder.

Alarmed, Nora turned to see a bright dot appeared floating in the dark sky. “What’s that?”

“Stay back.” He gently pushed her behind him before he used the scope of his rifle to zoom in on
the flying object. “What the hell…”

As the light flew closer, Nora saw what it was. An enormous airship with spotlights on either sides shining down on the ground below. Tiny objects seemed to be dropping from the bowel of the ship. It wasn’t until the airship was right above them then Nora realized the tiny objects were not at all tiny; they were helicopters. And the length of ship itself was probably the size of a baseball field.

“Would you look at that?” Deacon breathed. “Damn…”

“This is not New Year celebration, is it?” asked Nora.

An announcement booming in repeat as the airship cut across the quiet New Year’s night sky. “People of the Commonwealth. Do not interfere. Our intentions are peaceful. We are the Brotherhood of Steel.”

“Brotherhood?” Nora asked.

“A group formed by some soldiers after the war back on the West Coast,” Deacon told her. “A bunch of assholes with superiority complex. They hoard technologies like they’re the only ones who are smart enough to handle anything more complicated than a lightbulb. I met them on an op in Capital Wasteland a few years back. The Brotherhood was a force to be reckoned.”

“What are they doing here?”

“Good question. Not sightseeing, that’s for sure. Them plus a giant airship… I’ve a bad feeling about this…” He turned to face her. “I… should go.”

“I understand.”

“I’ll take you back to Diamond City first.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Deacon gave her a quick once-over. “Unless your weapon is very much concealed, I’m pretty sure you’re unarmed.”

To that, Nora replied with a faintest smile of assurance, “Shaun makes sure I’m protected if necessary. I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t respond, nor did he ask any questions as he stepped away from the tiny window, away from her.

Things would never be the same.

She felt a drop in her gut but she kept her smile, for him. “Take care, Deacon. And please stay safe.”

His nod and his silence were his only farewell. The man in sunglasses headed down the winding stairs and disappeared.

Just like that, he was out of her life.

The air suddenly felt colder.

Nora once again looked at the Commonwealth far below.
The darkness shrouded her former partner and kept him safe. The constant spotlight on her would only bring him harm.

This was for the best, she told herself.

Yes. This was for the best. It was the right thing to do to protect both her son and her partner.

But then why did she feel a void inside?

“The Brotherhood sure knows how to make an entrance,” said Carrington with a frown of disapproval. “Of all the days they could pick, they chose the New Year’s midnight to arrive.”

“Subtlety is not their strong suit,” said Deacon. “Intimidation is their game. And they sure as hell are good at that.”

“What the hell do they want?” Desdemona’s words came out along with a puff of smoke.

“The Brotherhood wants only one thing.” Carrington snorted. “Technology. We must have something here worth their trouble.”

“Didn’t you have an op with them, Deacon?” the alpha asked.

“Sure did. That’s like what… almost ten years ago? At Adams Base. The food’s not bad. The uniform, though…”

“Can’t be worse than what you wear,” the doctor jabbed.

“Hey, at least my shirt doesn’t give me rashes,” the spy countered without missing a beat. “Heard they’ve changed a few bosses since then. The latest sheriff in town is a kid. He’s been their Elder since he’s sixteen, can you believe that?”

“Sixteen?” Carrington raised an eyebrow. “How old is this kid now?”

“Ripe old age of twenty,” Deacon replied. He pointed at all three of them in a quick succession. “We are old enough to be his dads and mom.”

“Speak for yourself,” Desdemona snapped. “Why would they pick a kid to lead?”

“Crown prince,” said Deacon. “His great-great-grandfather or something like that found the Brotherhood.”

“And here I thought aristocracy was a thing in history,” said the doctor with a scoff.

“From what I’ve heard,” Deacon continued, “a bunch of old men put this crown prince on the pedestal. A perfect figurehead to boost moral, or a convenient puppet for them to pull the strings?”

“We need to find out more,” said the boss.

“If you’re thinking of sending me in,” said Deacon, “I don’t think it’d be easy this time. Last time, they were desperate enough to recruit anyone with arms and legs to do the back-breaking heavy lifting. Now that the ship is done, I doubt they’re sending out invites for their party.”
“Have your eyes and ears on the ground, then,” said Desdemona. “Find out what you can.”

“I’ll tell my tourists to keep an eye out for any tin can men and women,” said Deacon. “Hard to miss.”

The boss then suggested, “We should postpone the move.”

“Yes,” said the Carrington. “But only until we have more intel. The Brotherhood might provide the distraction and cover we need to move our HQ.”

Deacon nodded. “We should prep the new building in case we need to evacuate this tomb.”

“I doubt we have anything they want here,” said the alpha.

“I don’t know, Dez.” Deacon jabbed a thumb over his shoulder and pointed to the general direction of the robot behind them. “We do have the most accurate fortune teller.”

“Son of a…” His boss frowned. “I’ll handle the logistic of the move. You’ve your work cut out for you, Deacon.”

“What a way to ring in the new year, huh?” said the spy with a smirk that didn’t reach his eyes.

To that, the leader of the Railroad took a long drag of her cigarette and breathed, “Just fucking great…”

The director of the Institute looked at the latest report in his hand. *Great. Just great…*

His frown had deepened the lines on the old man’s stoic face. The initial report that had come in shortly after midnight last night meant he had little to no sleep. Not that it mattered much to the old man; the side effects of his medications usually kept him up at night anyway.

This sudden development, though, was giving him a migraine.

“The latest report is that,” said the head of the SRB at the emergency directorate meeting early New Year’s morning, “the Brotherhood has wiped out the feral ghouls at Boston Airport. They’ve claimed the airport as their base.”

“Why is the Brotherhood here?” said Clayton Holdren, the youngest of the board. “It’s a wasteland up there, what could they possibly want?”

*What else?*

“What else?” Madison Li replied with the same word the director didn’t speak. “Technology.”

Every face around the table was spotted with a frown as they simultaneously came to the same conclusion.

“And it’s something we have plenty of,” said Allie Filmore.

Shaun Taylor turned his eyes on the only person in the room who had dealt with the Brotherhood of Steel. “Dr. Li, what can you tell me about the Brotherhood?”
“I’ve never really trusted them,” said the head of Advanced Systems. “They helped us with Project Purity, sure, but it’s because the Enclave was involved. I thought Brotherhood would leave us alone after Project Purity was finished and the Enclave was taken care of. But no… They only grew bigger in size. Mark my words, they’re here to stay.”

“We need more data to evaluate the situation,” the director concluded. “What we have are mere speculations.”

“We’ve never dealt with the Brotherhood before,” said Alana Secord. “I suggest we send someone in.”

“Infiltrating the Brotherhood will be hard,” said Li. “They usually don’t recruit outsiders. Most of their members were born into the Brotherhood.”

“Like us,” Alan Binet pointed out. “But we make exceptions when we notice potential talents on the surface. Such as yourself, Dr. Li.”

Shaun nodded. “What if we send someone who can fight? Will they turn a potential talented candidate away?”

“It depends on how desperate they are,” Li replied. “They won’t turn away any helping hand, that’s for sure. Free labor all in the name of helping the Brotherhood. But if we want to insert one into their ranks, we need all the stars to align.”

“It’s worth a try,” said Secord. “Otherwise, we’re flying blind here.”

“First we need to pick a candidate,” said Filmore. “Who are we going to send?”

“One of our coursers,” said Shaun. “They are all well-trained in combats and infiltrations.”

“Pardon my skepticism,” said Li, “but all the coursers I’ve met so far scream bloody killers. Not the brainless yes-man the Brotherhood is looking for.”

“What if we make a new synth?” suggested Holdren.

“It’d take time to have one ready from scratch,” said Binet. “Robotics is currently having a backlog thanks to Dr. Ayo’s aggressive approach to problems.”

“And we at SRB are still shorthanded because of that,” Secord added.

“There’s no need to make a new one,” Shaun decided. “I have the right unit in mind. Alan, clear your schedule; I’d like you to handle the reprogramming.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Binet. “If it’s a courser, I only need to make some behavioral changes. It shouldn’t take long.”

“We’ll discuss the details in my office.” The director turned to the rest of the board. “This is unprecedented. We need to proceed with cautions. Until we find out what the Brotherhood is here for, we should suspend all aboveground missions for now.”

“One thing I know for sure,” Li added, “The Brotherhood will need food and supplies. Keep an eye on your projects on the surface, Dr. Holdren. The Brotherhood will pay your farms a visit and take what they want.”

The mild-mannered head of BioSciences adopted a sour look on his face. “I’ll get the word out.”
“Wherever the Brotherhood goes, there’s war,” concluded Madison Li with a grimace. “This could get ugly.”

The sounds of gunshots echoed throughout the quiet streets near the Cambridge Police Station. Any Wastelander worth their salt knew to run the other way when trouble arose. Whether the fight was between raiders, Gunners, or Super Mutants, it’s really none of their business as long as the bullets didn’t hit them or any of their properties.

Such was the way to survive in this world.

Yet, a man marched towards the noise, towards the trouble. Soon, the man found what he was looking for. Shielded by the shadows in the dark alley, the man’s sharp eyes scanned the premise as he accessed the situation with an eerie calmness.

Tin can humans versus mutated and decayed ones.

The tin can humans had the advantage of full barricades, but they were outnumbered by the feral ghouls.

The tin can side would lose in twenty minutes, tops.

Armed and armored, the tall man loaded his sniper rifle without even looking as he emerged from the alley. He picked a spot and propped himself behind a cover in the building adjacent to the police station.

The man took his time, though, not at all in a hurry to join in the battle. His goal was to create a certain urgency, and to keep one side alive. The battle was recorded and transmitted through a hidden camera in the goggles that sat strategically on the man’s forehead. His well-worn leather armor gave him the appearance of a seasoned Wasteland mercenary. A gun for hired, and a perfect man to the rescue.

“Man down!” a voice yelled amongst the gunshots.

“Take cover!” yelled another soldier.

This was his opening.

The man clicked off the safety of his sniper rifle and started to pick off some of the ghouls that had gotten too close to the barricades. When enemies started to drop dead by themselves, surely even the most bone-headed humans would realize someone was helping them, right?

But the man wasn’t about to rely on the illogical humans to come to this sensible conclusion. Perhaps it was time to show himself in a more spectacular way.

The man packed his sniper rifle and switched to his combat shotgun, then charged up to the barricaded building. He tossed a well-aimed grenade at an incoming pack that were wobbling on their decayed knees. The explosion announced his grand entrance to join the battle.

This time, a soldier in the center of the battlefield saw him.

The ghouls, though, didn’t even notice the newcomer; they were flying straight to the tin can man
like bloatflies to weeks-old rotten meat.

The soldier’s power armor could take the beatings, but not for long.

With the spotlight off him, the man approached with his combat shotgun almost leisurely, picking off the pack of ghouls from behind, one by one.

Soon, the man was out of ammo. He shifted his grip on his weapon and smashed the back of a nearby ghoul’s head with the butt of his gun. He stomped on the neck of the fallen creature before he reloaded his weapon.

Then, once again, the man rejoined the battle.

The tide had been turned. Now it was two men versus five ghouls.

This wouldn’t take long.

Less than a few heartbeats later, it was all over.

“Vaporized!” the soldier yelled as he killed the last creature.

The man lowered his weapon and nodded at the tin can man.

“We appreciate the assistance, civilian,” said the soldier, “but what’s your business here?”

“ Heard shots were fired, then saw you had a feral problem.”

The soldier frowned. “Evading my question is a surefire way of getting yourself ejected from the compound.”

“You are welcome.” The man shrugged and approached the woman tending to an injured man on the ground. “Your friend needs a stimpak.”

“We’re out…”

Sighing audibly, the man reached for a stimpak from his pack and tossed it to the woman. “Here. On the house.”

“Thank you,” said the woman. At least one of them were appreciative.

The man heard pounding on the ground as the tin can soldier approached.

“Are you from a local settlement?” the soldier asked.

“Diamond City,” the man replied.

“I’ve seen the location from our maps, but I’ve never visited the area myself,” said the tin can man. “If I appear suspicious, it’s because our mission here has been difficult. Since the moment we arrived in the Commonwealth, we’ve been constantly under fire.”

“So what’s your mission here?” the man asked, tilting his head slightly up to take a good look at the soldier’s face. The hidden camera in his goggles was transmitting every sound bite, every image of this conversation.

“That information is classified,” said the soldier. “All I can tell you is that we’re on recon duty, but I’m down a man and our supplies are running low. If you want to continue pitching in, we could
use an extra gun on our side.”

The man considered for a moment. At least he appeared to. “If you want me to help, at least tell me who you are.”

“Very well. I’m Paladin Danse, Brotherhood of Steel. Over there is Scribe Haylen and Knight Rhys. And your name?”

“Taylor,” said the tall man with square jaw and short black hair. “Nathaniel Taylor.”

-- End of Part Three --

A/N: To those who wonder why I bothered to include Synth Nate in ch 15, here is why.

Deacon and Nora’s conversation about Frozen Banana, library, and piano, it’s from ch 14.

A reply to Mandor’s review: Sorry I can’t reply without a link. I just want to say your speculations have been spot on so far. Kudos! X6’s line from last chapter about synths undercover was a prelude to the ending here in this chapter. You're right, it's not just a reference to Danse, but to Nate. (Not that X6 knew it’d turn out like this, though.)

Thank you for reading.

Title: “Soldier Boy” -- The Shirelles, 1962.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19, tumblr - pinoko-k.
Remember Me?

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Thirty Three: Remember Me?

A/N: Flashback in this chapter is the continuation of the flashback in chapter 6, which was posted in March 2016. Here’s a recap: Due to some unforeseen emergency, Deacon had to escort a runaway all the way to Capital Wasteland. Both posed as caravan guards during their travel.

Also, it goes without saying, this story contains spoilers for the entire game. So if you haven’t finished the game, please stop reading, or you will be spoiled. Onward to part four of the story.

The campfire slowly died down to glowing amber logs. As darkness began to engulf the campsite, the man in sunglasses felt safer.

Darkness had always been his ally, his shield. If he shifted his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose, the spy could see his surroundings as clear as though it was early dawn. Such was the perk of wearing sunglasses constantly. Well, one of many perks.

It’d been a long time since Deacon had a faraway escort assignment like this. It was good to be away from the Commonwealth. It gave him a chance to touch base with the Railroad in the Capital Wasteland, to find out gossips from the local merchants. And, perhaps, to visit the Washington Monument -- a phallic-looking structure in the Capital was that looked similar to the one back home in Bunker Hill. Similar, but taller.

Much taller.

No thanks. The spy decided not to climb up to the top of the Washington monument, no matter how good the view would be. Height had always been his nemesis, and Deacon had no intention of fighting this demon right now. Or ever.

The man in sunglasses wasn’t the only one who was up in the middle of the night. Next to him sat his companion. A tall and muscular man with jet black hair. A man who had picked his new name from a faded poster on Slocum’s Joe back in the Commonwealth. The runaway synth who was formerly known as M7-97 was now called Joe, at least for the duration of this trip.

As for the spy who was known to many as Deacon in recent years, he’d been answered to the name Jack. It was but one of his numerous aliases; no one knew his birth name, nor did anyone remember his original face. The man had a new name ready whenever it suited him, and a new face every two years or so. It was all done to keep the opposition off his trail, to survive against the staggering odds of being killed on the job.
Perhaps soon, his companion would follow his footsteps, and start a new life with a new face and a new name. And maybe the poor guy would even some brand new happy memories to replace the dreadful, haunting ones. This was something the spy could never get no matter how much he wanted it.

“T’ve never thought I’d see a sight like this,” said Joe quietly almost in awe.

Deacon followed the taller man’s gaze and looked up at the starry sky. “It’s really something, isn’t it? You have a lifetime to enjoy all the views, my friend.”

“Thanks to you, Jack.”

“Hey, it’s my job. All I could do is to get you started, the rest is up to you. Speaking of which…” Deacon followed the taller man’s gaze and looked up at the starry sky. “It’s really something, isn’t it? You have a lifetime to enjoy all the views, my friend.”

Deacon looked over his shoulder to make sure the rest of the caravan were all asleep.

“…Remember what I told you about the doc at Rivet City?”

Joe nodded. “Yes.”

“You still have the package I gave you, right?”

The tall man patted the hidden pocket of his worn leather armor. “Of course.”

“Good. In case we got separated…” Was Deacon paranoid to double-check? Perhaps. But his paranoia had kept him alive for longer than he should be. “A quick recap: The letter from my boss will get you through Pinkerton’s door, and the caps will cover all his fees plus extra for you to get on your feet. Now, the scary part…”

“…Facial reconstructive surgery and… memory wipe?”

“Remember, all optional,” the spy emphasized. “But if you want it done, Pinkerton is the best. I’m one of his clients.”

The man’s thick eyebrows raised in shock. “...You’re a synth, too?”

Deacon flashed a sly grin. “Maybe. Maybe not. The point is, if you can’t tell, does it matter?”

The synth seemed to ponder on his words.

“The people who are after you,” said Deacon carefully without mentioning the name that started with an ‘i’, “they have technologies beyond our collective imaginations. A face swap would be an effective way to throw them off the scent. Personally, I’m not a fan of mem-wipe, but those who favor it do have a point. You’ll have a neat little background story, plus all the knowledge you’d need to survive downloaded right into the grey matter between your ears.” Deacon tapped his own head with a hidden sigh. “Then you’ll wake up as a brand new person, with a brand new life… Without any baggage from your previous life. No more haunting nightmares, no more regrets… A brand spanking new start.”

Was it a hint of bitter envy he was tasting in his mouth?

If only he could wipe his own memories and start anew…

Deacon shook himself out of his minor reverie before he began to sink too deep into the darkest corner of his mind.

Joe asked after a moment of hesitation, “Did all the other synths go through with the
procedures?”

“Some picked one, some did both. There might even be a few who didn’t do any. The most important thing you have to keep in mind is that you do have a choice. It’s your life.”

“…Choices,” the synth chewed on that word as if it was something new. “I have to admit, it’s overwhelming. What if I picked the wrong path?”

“Ah, the good ol’ freedom of choice. The beauty of it is that even if you screw up, you can choose to correct your path.” The poster child of atonement is sitting right next to you, pal. “The game is not over until we kick the bucket.”

The taller man took a moment to absorb the words of wisdom. “...I see.”

“Keep that in mind,” the spy urged. “Here comes the boring part. I have some standard questions. No pressure, though.”

“Of course, anything.”

“Do you remember anything about the Institute? Like… how did you get out?”

“I...” The synth shook his head and sighed.

It’s the same for all the runaways. They couldn’t remember much about their previous lives, only bits and pieces. Everything had been scrambled and partially deleted from their minds once they’d stepped out of their prison. From older model like Valentine, to new human-like ones like Glory, none of them had intact memories of the place called the Institute.

There’s a fail-safe device had been programmed into all the synths, Valentine had once told the spy. An insurance to guarantee no escapees could lead any outsider into the lion’s den. An extremely clever implementation, Deacon could almost appreciate it if he wasn't fighting for the opposite side.

“It’s okay,” said Deacon. “No one remembers.”

“...I remember…” Joe paused, struggling with words. “...something else.”

The man in sunglasses perked up. Any bits of intel would help to paint a bigger picture. “What is it?”

“I was training... Combat training. And some... tests called psychological evaluations.” The synth shook his head again. “It was brutal. ...I failed. And I overheard words about repurposing this unit.”

“Was that why you escaped?”

The tall man nodded.

This was the most Deacon had heard from an escaped synth. Perhaps the long trip helped him gain the trust of the escapee.

Deacon decided to push his luck. “Did someone help you?”

“I... I...remember... A...” The synth groaned and held his head as if he was in pain.

A what? Deacon frowned. Should he push the poor man further?
“…A man…” the runaway uttered through his labored breaths.

A man? Someone inside the Institute was releasing the synths? Of course. How else could they escape?

*Deacon digested the new intel for a quick second before he put a firm but comforting hand on the runaway’s broad shoulder.*

“Sorry, Jack…” said Joe once he’d caught his breath. “I wanted to help, after all you’ve done for me. But... that’s all I can remember.”

“Don’t worry about it, pal,” said the man in sunglasses soothingly. “You don’t have to remember anything anymore. You have a brand new life ahead of you. Like some dead old man once said, the world is your oyster, let’s crack it open with a sword.”

---

The war-torn monument refused to crumble, just like the man who should have died many times over in the past four decades.

Deacon stood at the very place that used to be his partner’s playground more than two centuries ago. Unconsciously, he glanced up at the tip of the monument, where he’d left an unarmed woman there two days ago. Not just any unarmed woman, but his own partner.

Well, former partner.

Nora had assured him that she would be fine. But had she gotten back home safe and sound? Or could she be one of many who would vanish in some dark alley and never be seen? An easy victim for raiders, Gunners, ghouls, super mutants, just to name a few possible predators in the area…

*Shut the hell up, brain!*

Maybe he should go check on her. Perhaps a glimpse from a safe distance, or a up-close look by walking past her as a DC guard.

*Yes… No!*

*No…*

Shoving all his thoughts away and shifting his focus down to the settlement below the monument, the spy scanned all the faces until he had found the person he was looking for. Tony Savoldi, the son of the owner of the only inn in Bunker Hill. One of Deacon’s many eyes and ears in the Commonwealth.

“You’re late,” said Tony once Deacon was within earshot.

“Busy day.” The spy casually leaned against the bar counter as though he was taking an overdue break. “Have to make the rounds around the town… I’ll have the usual.”

“Got words from one of the caravans,” the young owner mumbled as he reached for a bottle of beer behind the counter and popped it open. “There was a fight at Cambridge a few hours ago. The Brotherhood men and feral ghouls. Heard it was brutal. Casualties and all.”
“Those tin can men had trouble with ferals?” the spy asked as he took a drink from the bottle.
“Which caravan did you hear that from?”

“Doc Weathers,” Tony replied. “If it’s Cricket, I’d say she’s probably high. But the doc? He’s good.”

Deacon had to agree. “Where in Cambridge?”

“Old police station. The doc said the tin cans set up barricades and stuff. Looks like they’re setting up shops.”

“Thanks, pal.” The man in sunglasses finished his bottle then put some caps on the counter. It was more than enough to cover ten times his tab.

Tony wiped the counter and cleared the caps out of sight. “Man, why the hell are they here?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.”

“Hey, D,” the young man called out as Deacon was about to step away. “Who’s that woman you were with the other night?”

“No one,” said Deacon, leaving before Savoldi could ask another question. “Keep doing what you’re doing. I’ll be back for more of your ‘House Special.’”

“Contact has been established,” the head of the SRB reported.

“How did it go?” asked the director.

“Couldn’t be better,” said Alana Secord. “The Brotherhood asked for help. Unit N4-73 is currently en route to ArcJet Systems with the Brotherhood team leader.”

Shaun Taylor frowned. “Why are they heading there?”

“For a deep range transmitter to boost their radio signal at the Cambridge Police Station,” Secord told him. “The recon team has sustained damage, and in need of supplies and reinforcements.”

The old man could think of at least five ways to do so without any deep range transmitters. “They will contact the airship, I suppose.”

“We are holding ArcJet Systems, sir,” Secord reminded him. “We could take the transmitter away.”

“No. Let them obtain the transmitter.”

“Should we evacuate our force?”

“Recall half of the team,” Shaun ordered after a brief thought. “Leave the oldest models behind. I want all the surveillance cameras inside the building running. We need to study how they operate.”

The head of the SRB nodded, then added, “Sir, the police station has only two soldiers, one of them is injured. Should we send in a team to clean up the nest while the leader is gone?”
“They have an airship full of soldiers, getting rid of two wouldn’t even make a dent,” said the director with a quiet sigh. “Don’t alert them of our presence yet. Increase the amount of Watchers around the police station. For now, we observe.”

A lone merchant walked down the streets of Cambridge. The man wore a wide-brimmed hat over his hood; his sunglasses and scarf covered most of his face, shielding him from the chilly breeze of the Commonwealth winter. His backpack was filled with knickknacks salvaged from abandoned buildings, or perhaps even from the pockets of some dead bastards. All in all, he was just a-run-of-a-mill scavenger who was trying to survive in a harsh Wasteland.

Or at least he appeared to be so.

The merchant slowly made his way to the Cambridge Police Station, paying particular attention to the remnants of a former battlefield. Bodies of ghouls were laying around, some were intact, some had become nothing but piles of ashes.

The handiwork of laser rifles. The weapons of choice for the Brotherhood of Steel.

The merchant also noticed shell casings from more conventional weapons scattered around the ground. Shotgun shells, to be exact. Shotguns were not preferred by the Brotherhood, though. The merchant was certain, for he had spent a short time with the isolated group once many years ago.

So… someone else had joined the party. Someone who probably wasn’t from the Brotherhood.

But who in their right mind would bother to tango with the bigots who had sticks up their asses?

The heavy door to the police station creaked open. From afar, the merchant saw a woman stepped out. Ever-so casually, the merchant walked away from the battlefield as though he was done scavenging, but he made sure he was spotted by the Brotherhood local representative.

Everyone needed supplies after a battle like this. A travel merchant who came right to the door steps was as rare as a fountain in a desert.

It didn’t take long for her to take the bait.

“Hey!” the woman called. “Excuse me!”

Well, at least she was a polite one.

The merchant quickly scanned her behind his sunglasses. Dark undereye circle, dirt and dried blood splatter on her face. The woman was no older than thirty, and the muscles on her petite frame were nowhere bulky enough to be a soldier.

She was a scribe, the merchant concluded.

“Ya need somethin’?” he asked.

“Are you a scavenger?”

“I’d prefer to be called an entrepreneur, but...”
“Do you have stimpaks for sale?”

“Ah, sorry, all out. Ya want food? I got some rations.”

Not only did she look disappointed, but she seemed desperate. Was the Brotherhood in such a bind?

“I suppose we could use some food,” said the scribe eventually.

“You’re in luck.” The merchant dug into his backpack and pulled out two boxes of BlamCo Mac and Cheese. “Just add water and heat it and ya got yerself a gourmet meal.”

“How much?”

“Twenty caps for two. But, for ya, it’ll be ten.”

The woman’s tired eyes widened and lit up. “Really? That… is very kind of you.”

“You look like ya could use a break,” said the merchant sympathetically. “Tough day, huh?”

“You could say that…” The woman handed over the caps and took the food.

Brotherhood soldier or not, a good discount could usually loosen some tight lips.

The merchant nodded at the ghouls on the ground. “So, what happened here?”

“We were attacked by the feral ghouls.” The scribe grimaced. “They came out of nowhere.”

The merchant pointed at the painted insignia on the barricade. “Ya with the Brotherhood, ain’t it? A couple of feral ghouls shouldn’t give ya any problem.”

“Normally, I would agree with you. But our supplies are running low, and our team has already sustained damage prior to the attack.”

“You’re still standin’. Dun be too hard on yerself.”

“Thanks to a stranger, really. If it wasn’t for him, I might not be standing.”

Bingo. “A Good Samaritan, eh? Sure as hell is rare in these days…”

“You have no idea,” said the woman with a sigh. “We’ve been a target since the moment we arrived.”

“D’ya come with that big ship?”

“The Prydwen? No--”

“Haylen!” a man yelled from the police station behind the barricades. Judging from the way he was leaning against the door frame, the man was injured.

“I should head back,” said the scribe to the merchant. “Thank you… for the discount. It was nice to finally see a friendly face.”

“No, ma’am,” said the man in sunglasses, “thank you.” For your intel.
Two men walked out from the back exit of the ArcJet Systems building. One in full suit of power armor, the other in worn leather.

The man in power armor stripped off his helmet and released a heavy breath. “That sweep was sloppy!”

The man in leather armor shrugged. “I thought it went pretty well, all things considered. We got what we’re here for.”

“Yes, but we were caught unprepared more than once, which is unacceptable,” chided the man in power armor. “However, your extra gun gave us the edge we needed. I’m not certain I could have accomplished the mission alone.”

“We worked pretty well as a team.”

“Agreed. It’s refreshing change to work with a civilian who can follow orders properly. That being said, I believe we have an important matter to discuss.”

“Are we talking about my payment, paladin?”

“Even better. I have a proposal for you, Taylor.”

The man named Taylor flashed a tiny sly grin. “No, thanks. I’m not interested in getting married again.”

The thick eyebrows on the paladin’s face raised in genuinely bafflement, then furrowed as the joke finally sank in.

“Kidding, Danse,” said Taylor, waving off the pointed look. “What were you saying?”

The straight-laced soldier shook his head to collect his thoughts once again. “We had a lot thrown at us back there. Our op could have ended in disaster, but you kept your cool and handled it like a soldier. There’s no doubt in my mind that you’ve got what it takes.”

“To be what?”

“To be better than what you are,” said Danse. “The way I see it, you’ve got a choice. You could spend the rest of your life wandering from place to place, trading an extra hand for a meager reward. Or, you could join the Brotherhood of Steel and make your mark on the world.”

“I don’t know…” Taylor paused to think. Or he seemed to be. “This sounds… big. Can you tell me more about the Brotherhood? What would be expected of me if I joined?”

“Fair enough. It’s a big decision, and I appreciate that you consider it thoughtfully.” The proud Brotherhood paladin began, “First, you need to understand what it means to be in the Brotherhood. We’re not soldiers of fortune. We’re an army and we’ve dedicated our lives to uphold a strict code of ethics. If you intent to stay with our ranks, you need to obey our tenets without question.

“You’d be under my command, and I’d expect you to follow orders. I only ask for two things from anyone under my command. Honesty and respect. You fall in line, you stay in line. I give you an order, and you follow it. It’s as simple as that.

“No more mercenary work… this is the real thing. You’d have access to advanced military
A stakeout. It’s a game that tested endurance and patience. Often, the reward was nothing but a giant waste of time. Although, from time to time, one would strike gold.

It’d been a long time since Deacon had one of these good ol fashioned, classic stakeout. When was his last one?

Right. Last October… A beautiful day on a hill looking over Vault 111. His reward on that particular mission was something he’d never expected: A partner -- someone who had sneaked inside his mind ever since then.

No matter how many times he shoved that pretty face away, it would always find its way back to the cozy little corner in his head.

Where was she? What was she doing? And, most importantly, was she safe?

Annoyed with himself for not able to control his own thoughts, the man in sunglasses took a long breath and shifted in his seat.

An idle mind was a dangerous thing. A stakeout could bring the best or the worst memories to surface.

To give himself sometime to do, the spy brought his binoculars to his eyes. He had picked a prime location for the job: third story on an abandoned building across the street from the Cambridge Police Station.

So far, all was quiet on the streets below. No activities in the police station yet. And thus, the boring stakeout continued.

The scribe had revealed more information than Deacon had expected. It’s amazing what a little bit of kindness could bring, especially to a mentally and physically exhausted person, someone who was stuck between a rock and a hard place. What she’d told him had made Deacon wonder for the past two hours.

A stranger with a shotgun had charged in and saved the day. Who in their right mind would do that in the Commonwealth?
A Good Samaritan? No, not in this place. A mercenary who happened to stop by? Maybe, but highly unlikely. Mercenaries wouldn’t waste a single bullet until caps were in their pockets; that’s their code of business.

So who?

A lone wanderer who waltzed into the town to save everyone from this hellhole? Even the King of Bullshits had to snort at his own ridiculous guess.

Although, it wasn’t without precedent. A decade ago, a person who had came out of nowhere had made waves around the Capital Wasteland. The Lone Wanderer from Vault 101. But that was then. As far as Deacon knew, the only person who had crawled out of a vault lately wasn’t capable of the heroic deed.

But, it didn’t mean his vault dweller didn’t have the heart. His Lucie Mannette certainly had the heart and--

Stop it!

The man in sunglasses took a long, sharp breath to halt his train of thought before it arrived at the station called Nora Bennett. He reached for a bottle of Nuka-Cola from his backpack and took one long drink to wash all that lovely face away. The most famous drink in the world tasted disgustingly sweet today.

The spy grimaced, then continued with the long and dull stakeout.

His answer finally arrived when the sun began to set. Two figures rounded the corner and headed towards the barricaded compound. One of them was in full suit of power armor, head to toes covered by steel. An armor that befitted the name of their organization -- the Brotherhood of Steel.

It was the other figure that had the spy’s full attention. A man in leather armor who was strolling alongside the tin can man. His getup was something anyone could buy from local merchants; that's definitely not the Brotherhood’s. And Deacon knew those self-righteous assholes would rather die than to go on mission without their uniforms to flaunt their status.

So this had to be the hero who had saved the day earlier.

Deacon adjusted his binoculars and focused on the man’s face. Something oddly familiar about the man in short black hair. Had he met the guy before?

The spy frowned as he zoomed in closer.

And then, it clicked.

His breath stopped as his mind made an impossible connection. He had seen this face before, and he knew where.

Last October. In Vault 111. Inside one of the frozen pods.

No.

No. It couldn’t be possible.

Deacon zoomed in as close as his binoculars allowed as the man turned into the compound. The raven haired man’s profile was clearly visible, and it was identical to the dead man inside the
cryogenic chamber.

Nora’s dead husband was alive?

That’s impossible.

The man had been dead and frozen for the past sixty years. How could a corpse by walking and talking and fighting?

Perhaps it was a colossal coincidence. That this was some random lucky bastard who looked very much like a certain dead guy from two hundred some years ago, who happened to be the rarest breed called the Good Samaritan, who also the skills to support his bleeding heart, who also happened to pass by when the Brotherhood was knee-deep in trouble.

Or…

Deacon could think of an alternative explanation was equally as ridiculous, but a thousand times more disturbing.

What if this was not a coincidence.

This man was a copy of Nate Taylor. And the only organization that had been known to make doppelgangers was…

*Son of a bitch!*

---

Target approaching.
Analysis: Jaw clenched, eyes narrowed.
Conclusion: Hostility level high.
Possible actions: Verbal assault to assert dominance. 5% chance of physical assault. Physical assault chance raises to 60% with minor provocation.
Countermeasure: ...

“All right, out with it!” said the soldier named Rhys. “What’s your game?”

“Game?” asked Taylor. “What do you mean?”

“I can usually size people up at a glance, but you…” The soldier’s narrowed eyes gave the other man a quick once over. “You’re different. And it’s bugging the heck out of me. You’re not the military type, you’re a loner. So I can’t figure out why you’re sticking around. You got what you wanted, so why don’t you hit the road?”

“You want to know the truth?” Taylor sighed. “I’m tired of wandering alone. My family’s gone. All that’s left is me, myself, and my guns. The Brotherhood might be the best chance I’d ever have to turn my life around. When an opportunity of a lifetime presented itself, I’d be stupid not to take it.” The dark-haired man paused, then added quietly, “…It’s what my wife would have wanted.”

“I... see.” The injured soldier looked apologetic for a brief second. “...Look, I’m going to cut you some slack because Danse trusts you. But if you step out of line and put any of my brothers or sisters in danger, I’ll make sure you regret it.”
“Understood.”

“Leave him alone, Rhys. This man saved your life,” the scribe interjected. “Don’t mind him, Taylor. He’s grumpy, especially when he’s injured. Ad Victoriam, brother.”

Rhys scowled. “He doesn’t even know what that means, Haylen.”

“‘Ad Victoriam’ means ‘To Victory,’” Paladin Danse explained as he approached. Stepping out of his power armor, the paladin was about the same height as the new recruit. “In our eyes, defeat is unacceptable because we’re fighting for the future of mankind. Our rallying cry is more powerful than any weapon you could ever carry, Taylor. Remember that.”

“Ad Victoriam,” said Taylor.

“Outstanding.” The paladin nodded with approval. “The radio is fixed. Reinforcement should arrive shortly.”

“About time,” Rhys breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ve received orders,” said Danse, “Taylor, you and I are both to report to the Prydwen immediately.”

“The… what?”

“The Prydwen,” Haylen replied. “That’s the name of our ship.”

“Oh, that ship!” said the initiate with an appropriate amount of wonder. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Amazing, isn’t it?” said the paladin, filled with pride almost as though he’d built the ship himself. “She’s loaded with enough troops and supplies to mount a major offensive. If she’s here, Elder Maxson’s here.”

“Who’s Elder Maxson?”

“Maxson is the commander of this division of the Brotherhood of Steel,” Danse explained. “He’s the model of what every Brotherhood soldier hopes to become.”

“Sir,” said Haylen, “if Elder Maxson is here, that means…”

Danse nodded. “It means we’re going to war.”

“War?” Taylor asked. “With what?”

“I’m not sure,” said the paladin. “But I think it might have something to do with the data on the Commonwealth my team gathered. Get ready, soldier. A vertibird will be here soon. You’re about to get to know the Prydwen up close and personal.”

The Synth Retention Bureau was not a place the director often set foot in. Yet, this evening, Shaun Taylor made his way through the long and cold hallway of the SRB.
“Sir,” Alana Secord greeted him halfway down the hall. “He’s in.”

“Already?” The old man didn’t expect result so soon. “That’s a surprise.”

“And it’s not the only surprise. There’s a new development.” Secord led the director into a room full of monitors. She pointed at one of them and played a surveillance video. “This is the video feedback from N4-73’s camera.”

The man appeared on screen had a weird hood on. He was talking directly to the camera, or rather, to the man who was wearing the surveillance goggles. His words were all about praising the Brotherhood of Steel.

Shaun suppressed a snort. “What am I looking at?”

“This man,” Secord explained, “he’s the recon team leader. He’s the one who recruited N4-73. His position in the Brotherhood is paladin.”

“And?”

Secord paused the video and turned to face the director. “He’s one of ours.”

The old man frowned in confusion. “When did we send an infiltration unit in?”

“We didn’t,” Secord replied. “My team followed the standard procedure and ran the facial recognition program on all the faces in N4’s video. And… we hit jackpot.” She pointed at the man on the screen. “We found a match to one of our missing synths.”

“An escape synth stumbled his way into the Brotherhood?” Fascinating!

“And became a paladin. According to Madison, that’s pretty high up in the ranks.”

A rare, thin smile began to spread on the old man’s stoic face.

“Should we recall him, sir?” Alana Secord asked.

“If we did, we’d cripple their manpower,” Shaun reasoned out her logic.

The head of the SRB nodded. “And their morale would certainly take a blow.”

The old man stared at the man on the screen for a brief moment as he pondered on his next move. “Where are they now?”

“On their way to the airship… which they called ‘The Prydwen’, by the way.”

The Prydwen? What kind of name is that?

“Why don’t we see how this plays out?” Shaun decided.

“Understood.” Second switched to another monitor.

All Shaun could see was distant landscapes and rooftops of buildings, and what seemed to be an enormous gun in the middle of the screen.

“This is?” asked Shaun.

“Live feed, sir. They’re flying on something called a vertibird.” Secord waved at one of the chairs
at the surveillance station. “I have front row seats as we are heading into the unknown territory. Care to join me, Father?”

The old man settled down. His bones might be weary, but his eyes were as sharp as ever. “Let’s observe.”

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A/N: Deacon’s previous stakeout is the opening scene of this story, posted almost a year and a half ago. He was thinking about his late wife then. This time, though...

Also, Deacon headed into the vault all the way back in chapter two. That’s when he saw and had a rather long look into the cryogenic pod where Nate’s body is. (Maybe I should do a “Previously on Project Wanderer” section at the beginning of every chapter…)

“The world is your oyster.” Deacon is quoting Shakespeare, The Merry Wives of Windsor. The line he’s referring to is, “Why then the world’s mine oyster, which I with sword will open.” Yes, he is quoting Shakespeare again. And his reference, as usual, flies over the head of his audience. Except when his audience is his former partner.

Title: “Remember Me?” -- Bing Crosby, 1937.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19. tumblr - pinoko-k.
The sound of distant rapid gunshots echoed through the concrete walls of a long, barren hallway. A boy with a head of jet black hair followed the noise instead of running away from it. The ten year-old was more than familiar with the sound of bullets; he’d heard it everyday for as long as he could remember.

Judging from the speed of firing, the weapons were miniguns.

Briefly, the boy wondered who was out there. Maybe, the better question was: Who wasn’t?

Me!

The boy navigated the every twist and turn of the endless hallways with precision. The Citadel was a maze, but the boy had never once gotten lost, for this had been his home for his entire life. This was the heavily defended headquarters of the Brotherhood of Steel in the Capital Wasteland, led by Elder Owyn Lyons. The Citadel was built on the ruin of a pentagon-shaped building had once been called none other than The Pentagon.

Or so the boy had been told. As far as he concerned, this was his home away from home -- the only home he ever really knew.

The boy soon reached his destination, with one roadblock in front of him in the form of a man in power armor. As always, a guard stood in front of the double doors that led into the courtyard where all the fun was had by everyone else except him.

“Halt!” said the guard. “You’re not supposed to be here, Squire.”

“Come on,” the boy bargained, “just a peek. No one will see me!”

“By order of Elder Lyons,” the guard started to recite, “Squire Maxson is not to be given unsupervised access to the Bailey--”

“--While live fire practice is in effect,” said the boy along with the guard. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I’m glad you know this by heart.”

The young squire peeked at the close doors. “Is Sarah out there?”

“Sentinel Lyons is out on patrol.”

“Aw. It’s not fair that I have to sit inside while everyone else gets to go on patrol.”

“You will have your turn soon, Squire.”
“Right…” the boy mumbled to himself as he headed back the way he had come from.

Of course, the best (and only) kid in the Citadel could go back to his room and continue with his study. Or…

The boy took a turn and headed down another hallway with a similar pair of doors at the end. This one had no guard.

The doors led to the laboratory, which had another exit into the courtyard. Perhaps this door would be unguarded.

But, there was another reason why the young squire was here. For in the middle of the lab was the coolest thing he had ever seen in his ten years of life.

A giant robot.

Or it would be once it’s fixed and assembled. For now, its body was scattered across the lab, with scribes working around the clock to fix it.

Its head was sitting on a special workbench, and the head itself was almost as tall as the boy.

“Hey there, LP,” said the young squire to the metallic head. “How’re you doing today? I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

Squire Maxson was not at all intimidated by the scary looking robot. He was fascinated by it, so much as he wanted it to be his friend -- his very first friend.

“Sarah’s not here,” the boy told the giant head. “But I’m sure she’ll be back soon. And she’s going to teach me how to kill an enemy with a knife. It’s called melee.”

The robot never replied, but it didn’t discourage the boy from talking.

“I went outside the Citadel the other day, you know! Sarah took me out. Just to show me. I killed a Super Mutant, too! I swear! But I, um… I also sort of shot Sarah… But just a little! It was just a flesh wound… I didn’t mean it!—”

“Who are you?” a stern feminine voice asked. “This is not a place for a child.”

Startled, the boy turned and saw a woman he had never seen before. The woman was wearing a white lab coat over her blue dress; it’s not any uniform. She wasn’t with the Brotherhood, that’s for sure.

An outsider? How did she get in here? No way she could have penetrated our defense! Was she a visitor, then?

Yes. Must be a visitor.

Once he had come to a quick conclusion, the boy remembered his manner.

“H…hail to you, stranger.” The boy squared his shoulders and recited as smoothly as his nervousness would allow him, “I am Squire Maxson, loyal servant of the steel. It is… an honor to make your acquaintance.”

The woman studied him with her sharp eyes. The squire held both his breath and his posture -- shoulders squared, chin up, and hands folded behind his back. He was representing the future of the Brotherhood in front of this outsider!
“I’m Doctor Li. I’m here to help Scribe Rothchild with his project.” The woman studied him further. “You’re a squire, huh? Aren’t you a little too young for all this?”

Was he? “Oh, well... You see, I am descended from the great Roger Maxson, founder of our order. I am the last of his line. They say my soul was forged from eternal steel.”

“Soul forged from steel?” Dr. Li arched an eyebrow. “Do you actually believe that?”

No... The boy had never felt the steel in his soul, nor did he even know how it would feel like to start with. He was just a kid. A normal ten year old boy. He was a big fan of ‘The Guardians of Gillyfround’ (he could recite every line!); he loved to read ‘Guns and Bullets’ (not his copy, but hey, Paladin Vargas didn’t even know he had been reading it!); and one of few his prize possessions was a teddy bear that had been given to him by his mother. A mother whom he only remembered by her name, not her face. As for his father, the boy had heard about his deeds, but never met the man...

But, all in all, he was just a boy. A normal boy who carried a name that was symbol to many of his fellow brothers and sisters.

Somehow, the woman’s stern face softened. “...Are there any other kids around?”

“No, ma’am. I was sent to the Citadel many years ago, to be fostered by Elder Lyons. The Brothers and Elder Lyons are excellent teachers, but I get nervous about the protocols. The codex says that outsiders are not to be trusted.”

“What codex?” Dr. Li asked.

Now, this was something he knew by heart! Squire Maxson proudly recited, “‘Shield yourself from those not bound to you by steel, for they are the blind. Aid them when you can, but lose not sight of yourself.’”

The woman snorted very faintly. “Is that so?”

“It’s not simply the outsiders that we are wary of,” the squire explained patiently. “Anyone who has not taken the Oath of Fraternity is suspicious to us. The codex says, ‘Fear those who do not pledge to the Brotherhood, for though their eyes may be opened through service, they are now blind.’ But it also tells us, ‘Give way your suspicions to the wisdom of thine Elder. Where he shows trust, so shall you.’”

“But your Elder is only human,” said Dr. Li, “and humans make mistakes. Shouldn’t you think for yourself, and not let some written texts tell you how to live your life?”

Should he? The boy had never once considered that. “But... the codex...”

“Squire Maxson!” another stern voice yelled before the boy could think it through. An older man with thinning grey hair marched in. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see Liberty Prime, Scribe Rothchild,” the boy responded, then quickly added, “I didn’t touch anything.”

“You’d better not,” said the head scribe of the Citadel. Scribe Rothchild might not be a soldier, but he was an exceptional scientist. Even Elder Lyons had to respect the man.

“He didn’t,” said Dr. Li to the head scribe.
Scribe Rothchild sighed. “The boy sneaks in here every once in a while to talk to the robot.”

“I just want to see if he will be my friend,” the young squire defended himself.

“The Prime is our ultimate weapon, child. Not some toy or… ‘friend,’” chided the old man. “Now, run along. We have a lot of work to do.”

Fine. He could always go to the Den and read Paladin Vargas’ copy of ‘Guns and Bullets.’ It wasn’t stealing! The magazine was right there, under the paladin’s bunk.

Just before he left, Squire Maxson noticed the doctor had the most peculiar expression on her face when she looked at him.

Outsiders are strange. The boy shrugged it off and headed back to the exit of the lab. When he was far enough, away from the Scribe Rothchild’s line of vision, the boy turned and looked at his friend, LP, whose metallic head was sitting on the workbench. Perhaps by next week, LP could talk. If not, the week after, or the week after that...

Arthur Maxson grinned at his giant robotic friend and said, “See you later, alligator.”
Maxson spun on his heel and returned the salute. “Good to see you, too, Paladin.”

The elder studied the paladin. The man’s face was covered with sweats and dirt, his beard unkempt, his power armor was overdue for a polishing. Yet, Maxson envied the man. Danse had been on the ground, fighting and surviving. It was something Arthur Maxson longed to do -- to jump into his pristine power armor, to grab his neglected weapon, to put the boots on the ground.

Danse stepped aside and introduced a new face behind him. “This is our new recruit, Initiate Taylor.”

Battlefield recruitment was far from being the norm. Yet, somehow, the paladin had found a man worthy enough to join their Brotherhood. Curious, Maxson turned his attention to the other man in front of him. Shoulders squared, back straight, chin up. The initiate’s posture was on point.

Had the paladin given the new guy a crash course in military protocols before boarding the Prydwen?

“Initiate,” Maxson greeted.

“Sir,” the man replied with a clean, crisp tone without a hint of hesitation.

Interesting. Not many recruits dared to stare at Maxson straight in the eyes during their first meeting. This one, however, his eyes didn’t waver under the elder’s scrutiny.

“I’ve read Paladin Danse’s report,” Maxson began. “Seeing he’s one of my most respected field officers, you couldn’t get a better recommendation. Welcome aboard the Prydwen, soldier.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Take your time to become familiar with the Prydwen and my staff,” said Maxson. “From now on, this is going to be your new home. Make us proud.”

Normally, this would be when a new recruit would head straight to the mess hall or to the power armor station, but this one remained.

“Sir, I’ve heard we are going to war,” the initiate asked. “Who exactly are we fighting?”

Ah, yes. This soldier had missed his speech to the Prydwen crew. In order for a man to shoot, he must know his target.

“How long have you been in the Commonwealth, Initiate?” the elder asked.

“Born and raised.”

“Then no doubt you’ve heard about the Institute.”

“Everyone does.”

“And are you familiar with their creations called ‘synths’?”

“I’ve heard rumors. But most of us have never seen one.”

Maxson nodded. “That’s because these free-thinking robotic abominations of technology are masquerading as human beings. They are indistinguishable from real, living, breathing human beings like you and me. But, do not forget: They are nothing but machines. And the notion that a machine could be granted free will is not only offensive, but horribly dangerous.”
“Dangerous?” asked the Initiate. “How so?”

This man was a newcomer, Maxson reminded himself. So patiently, the elder explained, “By creating synthetic humans, the Institute scientists have created a weapon that transcends the destructive nature of the atom bomb. Like the atom, the synths are dangerous technologies that could prove to be the world’s undoing for the second time in recent history. We cannot allow the Institute to continue this line of experimentation. Therefore, the Institute and everyone responsible for the creation of the synths are considered enemies of the Brotherhood of Steel, and must be eliminated, at all costs.”

“Well said!” Paladin Danse concurred.

The expression on the initiate’s face was not the same as the rest of the brothers and sisters. There was no cheer, no fire of determination in his eyes. Was this soldier having any doubts?

Then, Maxson realized his mistake. The man was a local -- born and raised in the Commonwealth as he had just mentioned, and the Brotherhood was here to start a war on his homeland.

The elder switched to a softer approach. “I care about them, you know. The people of the Commonwealth,” he told the initiate. “Turning your weapons on the very same people that you’re trying to save can be a bitter pill to swallow. The Brotherhood is here to prevent a war by starting one of our own. The difference is…” Arthur Maxson looked into the other man's eyes and stated, “…our war won’t reduce civilization to ashes. This campaign will be costly and many lives will be lost. But in the end, we will be saving humankind from its worst enemy… itself. Ad Victoriam.”

Paladin Danse saluted. “Ad Victoriam!”

A robotic abomination of technology.

A weapon that transcends the destructive nature of the atom bomb.

Technologies that could prove to be the world’s undoing for the second time in recent history.

Those words echoed deafeningly throughout Shaun Taylor’s head.

The insults to his legacy! The utterly ignorant fear of the marvelous achievement of science! Comparing his synths to the atomic bomb? The atrocity! What a feeble-minded fool! What an excerebrose imbecile!

“...Sir?” a voice called faintly in distance. “Sir, are you okay?”

For the moment, all the old man could hear was his ragged breaths and his pounding heartbeats. All Shaun could see was the face of a man on the screen. The sheer ignorance and misguided hatred had made his stomach turn. Every fiber of his being demanded this brute of a man to be drowned with proper scientific knowledge before he was ever allowed to speak again on any subject remotely related to science!

“Father?” Alana Secord called again.

The director of the Institute used every bit of his iron will to control his boiling anger. “...I’m fine.”
“This is troubling,” said the head of the SRB.

“Horrifying and disgusting!” the director snapped. His usual quiet tone was sharper than it’d ever been. “Absolutely disgusting!”

The old man glared at the live feed where the camera was moving onto different part of the ship. If looks could kill, the monitors in the surveillance station would have been blown to pieces by now.

“Sir, I should call Dr. Volkert.”

“No.” There was no time for that. Shaun Taylor took a shaky, long breath to fight his dizziness then announced, “Gather the board, Alana. We need to come up with a strategy. And tell X6-88 to bring my mother back. Now.”

“Last but certainly not least,” said Paladin Danse as he turned the metal wheel on a heavy door at the end of a long catwalk. The bearded soldier nudged the door open with his elbow. “This is the forecastle.”

Taylor immediately felt a cold chill on his face.

The paladin stepped outside the small deck of the Prydwen with his new recruit behind him. “If you ever need a breath of fresh air, this is a good spot.”

“I’m still not used to the idea of not having my feet on the ground,” said the initiate.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to sleeping comfortably underneath massive containers of highly flammable gas,” said the paladin with a ghost of a smile. “And the food in the mess hall isn’t bad… Well, as long as you don’t smell it before you eat it.”

“Can’t be worse than my cooking.” Taylor glanced around at the airship’s exterior. “This ship is amazing. The size of it, and all the vertibirds…”

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Danse nodded. “And we’re going to need that edge when we take on the Institute. They’ve already proven that they’re technologically superior, which means there’s no telling what types of weapons they have in their arsenal. Hopefully, our air superiority and tactical know-how will make the difference. Now all we have to do is find them…”

“After the entrance we’ve made, I’m sure we have everyone’s attention.”

“Good,” the paladin replied with confidence. “If history’s proven anything, it’s that an overwhelming show of force has a chance of halting a conflict before it begins. Besides, why should we hold back when we have a ship like this at our disposal? Synths are nothing but technology run amok. Free-thinking machines are an insult to our way of life. They need to be destroyed.”

“So... diplomacy isn't an option.”

The paladin raised one thick eyebrow at his latest recruit. “What’s the matter? Don’t like kicking in the door?”

To that, Taylor merely shrugged. “Just nervous, I guess. I’ve never fought in a war before.”
Paladin Danse nodded understandingly. “War tempers the strong, and breaks the weak. You have nothing to worry about, soldier. With Maxson leading the charge, we cannot fail.”

“Why are you so confident in Elder Maxson’s abilities?”

“A decade ago,” Danse explained, “the Brotherhood had almost gone completely astray. The Elder before Maxson sent us down a path that was leading nowhere… he was more concerned about charity than the preservation of technology. But when Maxson took over, he single-handedly re-prioritized the Brotherhood from the ground up and put us back on the path to glory. This ship and its crew are a testament to his leadership. Maxson’s a brilliant tactician, a formidable warrior, and possesses an idealistic vision for the future of the Brotherhood. I’d follow him anywhere, without question.”

“He sounds impressive.”

“He is. And I am sure you will agree once you get to know him.” The paladin turned to the initiate. “That being said, this is your first day as a Brotherhood soldier. It will take some time to adjust. The protocols, the new faces, all these can be overwhelming for someone who didn't grow up with the Brotherhood. I know, because I’ve been in your shoes.”

“You’re not born into the Brotherhood like most of them?”

“Believe it or not, I was selling junks in a settlement called Rivet City in the Capital Wasteland many years ago. When the Brotherhood recruited me, it changed my life. Don’t let your nervous energy discourage you, Initiate. I have no doubt you have what it takes to be a fine soldier. This is that beginning of your new life.”

“And say goodbye to my old life,” said Initiate Taylor. “Speaking of old life, can I head back to Diamond City and gather my belongings?”

“I don’t see why not,” said Paladin Danse. “I’ll tell the vertibird to drop you off. Report back to the police station tomorrow morning and await further instructions. And don’t forget to get an uniform from Proctor Teagan before you leave. You are one of us now, Taylor, wear your uniform with pride.”

Nora followed a tall man in black up a flight of spotless spiral stairs.

X6-88’s unannounced appearance in her Diamond City house had been startling, to say the least. Any woman would scream when a man materialized behind her just when she was unbuttoning her shirt. But what scared her even more was the fact that the courser had revealed absolutely nothing about the emergency in the Institute.

Did Shaun suddenly fall ill? Dr. Volkert had said Shaun’s condition had shown improvements. And she had only been gone for two days…

Nora almost bumped into the courser’s back when he stopped abruptly in midstep.

“Sir,” said X6-88. “Mrs. Taylor is here.”

Heading down the stairs was her son, looking pale and absolutely furious.
“What’s going on, Shaun?” Nora asked. “X6-88 won’t tell me anything.”

“He was instructed not to,” said Shaun. “Thank you, X6-88. Come with me, Mother.”

Shaun didn’t wait for her as he marched down the stairs.

Nora followed. “At least tell me what happened.”

“We’re under attack.”

“What?!” That was definitely not what she had expected. “By whom?”

When her son paused and looked at her, Nora saw more than anger in his eyes. There was worry, and sadness…

“The Brotherhood of Steel,” Shaun replied, then quickly resumed his pace and marched into the meeting room, where the other board members had already gathered.

“This is absolutely ridiculous!” yelled the soft-spoken Alan Binet. “How dare he called our works abominations! My father spent his whole life dedicated to our projects. And Shaun! Dr. Taylor devoted his life -- even his own DNA-- to our third-generation synths!”

“Was that really Maxson?” said Madison Li with a heavy sigh. “I can’t believe that’s the same kid I met in the Citadel! It was only ten years ago. The boy was a lonely kid who talked to a robot’s head, for god’s sake! And now he wants to kill all the synths? What have they done to him?”

For once, the board did not quiet down when the director arrived.

“Play the video,” said Shaun to Alana Secord. He then turned to Nora. “See for yourself.”

Nora watched as the screen showed a masculine man with thick black beard and heavy leather coat paced around while giving a speech. A speech that chilled her blood within seconds.

“By creating synthetic humans,” said the man on the screen, “the Institute scientists have created a weapon that transcends the destructive nature of the atom bomb. Like the atom, the synths are dangerous technologies that could prove to be the world’s undoing for the second time in recent history. We cannot allow the Institute to continue this line of experimentation. Therefore, the Institute and everyone responsible for the creation of the synths are considered enemies of the Brotherhood of Steel, and must be eliminated, at all costs.”

Off the camera, a man concurred, “Well said!”

“What the hell…” Nora frowned.

The man continued, “I care about them, you know. The people of the Commonwealth. Turning your weapons on the very same people that you’re trying to save can be a bitter pill to swallow. The Brotherhood is here to prevent a war by starting one of our own. The difference is… our war won’t reduce civilization to ashes. This campaign will be costly and many lives will be lost. But in the end, we will be saving humankind from its worst enemy… itself. Ad Victoriam.”

“That’s enough.” Shaun ordered the video to be stopped and sank down into his chair. His face pale and green with anger and disgust.

“This is sickening!” said Dean Volkert. “This is one delusional lunatic with classic hero syndrome!”
“Who the hell was that?” Nora asked.

“Arthur Maxson,” Alana replied. “One of the elders of the Brotherhood. That airship is his.”

“Did he really compare the synths to atomic bomb?” Allie Filmore chimed in, her normal gentle voice was as sharp as a knife. “They are not even remotely the same! What kind of idiot would think that?”

“He’s never seen the atomic bomb. I have...” said Nora, tasting the bitterness inside her mouth. “How could he even compare the synths to the horror that has turned our world into ashes?”

“Unfortunately,” said Shaun, his jaw clenched, “there are enough people who are willing to die for his ignorant fear. We cannot, and will not, let them destroy our life’s work, our legacy!”

“Hear! Hear!” said Alan Binet.

“Wait, how did we get this video?” asked Nora.

“We’ve sent in an infiltration unit,” Shaun replied.

“A spy?”

“A necessity to gather all the data to study our opponent,” said Shaun. “And thanks to this precaution, we learned the Brotherhood’s true motive. Now, we need to come up with a suitable countermeasure.”

“Retreating underground forever is not an option,” said Allie Filmore. “We need to solve the energy crisis first.”

“We’re not dealing with raiders or any local gangs,” said Madison Li. “They have power armors. And now they even got the vertibirds from the Enclave.”

“Not to mention they have an airship,” Alana Secord added. “We have yet to find out what it is capable of.”

Clayton Holdren hesitated for a brief second before he asked, “Do we have weapons powerful enough to shoot it down from the sky once and for all?”

“No,” said the head of Advanced Systems. “And it will take us a while to design a new weapon powerful enough to take down a ship from a distance. We’re simply not prepared for enemies like these.”

“Teleporting our troops aboard is out of the question,” the head of SRB added. “They will be outnumbered and destroyed within minutes.”

“What about planting explosives?” Allie Filmore asked.

“We’ll need a blueprint of the ship to locate its structural weakness,” Secord replied.

“Any other ideas?” asked Shaun. “Anything that we can implement immediately.”

“Now that our spy is in,” said Madison Li, “they’ll soon put him in their uniform, if they haven’t already. They might take away his goggles. I’ll need to come up with another surveillance device.”

Shaun nodded. “Preferably both visual and audio. What else?”
“What about our weapons?” asked Alana Secord. “We’re not dealing with raiders anymore.”

“It’s going to take some time upgrading every weapon in the armory,” Madison Li replied. “I’ll have my team work around the clock.”

“We need more eyes on the ground,” Shaun added.

“I’ll inform our surface assets to report anything they see,” said Alana.

“That’s not enough,” said Shaun.

“We can’t risk sending more infiltrators,” said Alana. “Our current agents would have to do for now.”

“Maybe I can help,” Nora volunteered.

“No, too risky,” Shaun refused immediately.

“I’m not infiltrating the Brotherhood,” said Nora. “I’ll go to the surface and let you know if I find out anything.”

“Sir, Mrs. Taylor has a point,” said Alana Secord. “The synth detective at Diamond City could help her. This matter concerns him, too.”

For a moment, her son studied her, his expression unreadable. “Very well,” said Shaun eventually. “Dr. Secord, give my mother a holotape copy of the Brotherhood’s declaration of war. Use this however you see fit, Mother. And, do be careful.”

Nora nodded.

Every single synth was in danger. She had to get the info to Deacon. She had to do it soon.

---

“Sir.” Paladin Danse awaited at the doorway of the elder’s private quarters.

“Come in.” Arthur Maxson retrieved two shot glasses from one of the shelves. “Where’s the new recruit?”

“He went home to pick up his belongings,” said the paladin. “The man woke up this morning without ever knowing his fate was about to change by the end of the night.”

Maxson poured one finger of whiskey into each glass. He then changed his mind and made it double. No doubt the paladin needed a drink as much as he did.

“You trust him enough to bring him into our fold. Why?”

“Without him, I would have lost another man. And my mission to recover a transmitter to fix the radio would not have gone smoothly.”

Maxson pushed one of the glasses in front of the paladin, and listened.

“You can tell a lot from a man after fighting alongside with him,” said Paladin Danse. “Initiate
Taylor is careful. He knows how to handle his weapons. And most important of all, he knows how to follow orders without questions. I believe if given the opportunity, he could become an asset to the Brotherhood.

Maxson picked up his drink and took a long sip, then finally voiced his concern, “We don’t usually recruit outsiders.”

“Sir,” said the paladin with the faintest smile, “I was once an outsider.”

Right… How could he be so careless? “My apologies, Paladin.”

“Think nothing of it.” Danse waved away any concern. “Without the Brotherhood, I’d be nothing by a scavenger. I was given a chance to have a better life, a chance to make my mark in this world. And now, I can offer the same chance to another man…”

Maxson nodded. “Drink up, Paladin. You deserve it.”

“Thank you, sir.” The paladin took a sniff before he brought the glass to his lips.

“Have you found the Institute’s location?” Maxson asked after the soldier had put down his shot glass.

“Negative. I have encountered those abominations, but each and everyone was killed before we could capture and interrogate it. However, some were not completely destroyed. I believe we could benefit from studying their bodies.”

Maxson nodded. “Send a team to retreat the bodies. How human-like are they?”

“The ones we saw were robotic. Some with faces that tried to resemble humans, but they’re far from indistinguishable.”

Maxson digested the information for a moment. “Perhaps the robotic ones are foot soldiers. The ones we should be afraid of are the fake humans. They could be anywhere…”

“The abominations,” the paladin sneered with a scowl. “I will more than glad to exterminate every one of them.”

The elder nodded and finished his drink with one gulp. His bottle of whiskey had almost reached the bottom; perhaps it’s time to put in a requisition request. “Well done, Paladin. Get some rest tonight. This going to be a long war.”

“We don’t usually recruit outsiders,” said the pilot as he flew the vertibird across the night sky of the Commonwealth. “You must have really impressed Paladin Danse.”

“I’m just glad the paladin gave me this opportunity,” said the initiate. “He’s one hell of a fighter.”

“You’re damn right! Paladin Danse is one of the best. You can learn a lot from him. Don’t screw this up, Initiate!” The pilot lowered the vertibird along the riverbank. “Looks like this is as close as I can get you. You’ll have to walk the rest of your way.”

“No problem.” Once the vertibird had landed, the initiate hopped down onto the solid ground and
nodded at the pilot. “Thanks for the ride. Ad Victoriam, Brother!”

The pilot grinned. “You learn fast. Ad Victoriam!”

The initiate bidded his fellow soldier farewell with an easy grin and a casual wave. He then headed towards Diamond City. But when the vertibird took off to the sky and the streets of by the river once again returned to silence, the man casually took a turn into a side street, then another turn into an even darker alley. Before he reached a dead end, the man headed into an abandoned apartment.

Seconds later, a sudden bright white light flashed from within the building. In a blink of an eye, the light was gone. And so was the man who had called himself Nathaniel Taylor.

First, the Brotherhood rolled in with their ship. Now, the man who looked just like Nora’s husband joined their party and flew away in a vertibird?

What the hell was going on?

Deacon pushed the sunglasses up his nose with a frown.

Pieces of puzzle scattered inside his mind. There was not nearly enough intel to form a clear picture, not even a fuzzy one. He needed more information, and perhaps a second opinion. He needed someone with a clear mind, someone who had as many eyes and ears on the ground as the spy did.

Deacon checked the time. It was late, but Valentine would still be up. The synth detective never slept anyway. Besides, Deacon doubt he could get some shut-eye tonight. He’d rather be anywhere but this catacomb. His skeleton roommates were not his cup of tea. The man in sunglasses preferred his bedfellow to be someone with flesh and blood and a beating heart, preferably with a full head of hair. Someone warm and soft, with a smile that could light up the entire room.

A specific face came to his mind, but Deacon quickly shoved it away.

He needed to get the hell of out of here before his restless mind drove him crazy. A trip to Diamond City would just be what he needed. But if the liar could be honest with himself for just one second, it would be painfully obvious that the person he truly wanted to see wasn’t the old synth, but an even older, one-of-a-kind pre-war relic.

A/N: Arthur Maxson in FO3 was actually quite adorable. The lines in the flashback are mostly his canon lines, and you can find his favorite story in his personal terminal as well.

The story is getting more complicated, and it’s going to take me a bit longer to write. So allow me to apologize for any future delay in advance.

As always, thanks for reading. And a sincere thanks to those who took their time to leave me a note/review. Thank you for your support!
Title: “This is Worth Fighting For” -- The Ink Spots, 1942.

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It Started All Over Again

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to Bethesda.

Project Wanderer

Chapter Thirty Five: It Started All Over Again

A small crowd gathered at the basketball court of their town chanted in unison, “Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! THREE! TWO! ONE!”

Bursts of cheers erupted at the stroke of midnight.

“Happy New Year!”

Among the group, a young man cheered with the rest of his big, dysfunctional family. Even though these people were not his blood relatives, they were his family -- the family of his choice. These were the people who knew him best, the brothers he spent his waking hours with.

They were the University Point Deathclaws. And, at the wise old age of seventeen, the young man known as Red was one of the best Claws.

Of course, Red was not his real name. Like the rest of the Deathclaws, Red had picked his own name when he’d joined the family. Although some might assume the name was a reference to his hair -- a shade of dark copper, the truth was it’s a short version of the codename of his choice: Red Rum.

Although not the tallest among his brothers, Red’s lithe build and long limbs made him seem taller than he was. With short hair that curled every which way, his cheekbones high and his jawline chiseled, the young man was quite a looker. But the most striking features were his deep set eyes in a shade of cold steel blue. Those eyes that could see right through a person.

Or so he would claim.

Obviously, he didn’t have the superpower of mind reading. The young man was simply exceptionally observant and had a phenomenally good memory. But most importantly, he was the best liar in the entire freaking Commonwealth. He could lie as easily as he breathed.

“Happy New Year, you jackass!!” yelled one of his brothers to Red. A masculine young man who was almost twice the size of skinny Claw. “Put some meat on your bones this year!”

“Fuck you, you brahmin!” Red yelled back with a wide grin. “Hope you get laid this yea--”

A pair of icy hands on his face pulled Red down, interrupting the rest of his witty comeback. Before he could react, a young woman had sealed her frozen lips on his and forced his mouth open with her tongue. All he could register was the taste of alcohol and cigarette.

No. This was not what he wanted...

Red pushed her away.
Undaunted, the young woman clung onto his arm like she had done the day before, and the day before that. This was the longest ‘relationship’ the 17-year-old had ever had -- it’d lasted for grand total of twenty days. Frankly, he was tired of it, tired of her. And… he was tired of everything.

This was the beginning of a new year, where everything was supposed to start all over again. Yet, Red didn’t feel any difference than a minute ago. All he could feel was a sense of weariness that did not match his age, and an undercurrent of restlessness.

The leader of the UP Deathclaws stepped on a wooden crate and spoke, “Happy fucking new year, Claws!”

Red used this as a perfect excuse to shrug away his clingy girlfriend and stepped closer to the man on the crate. Dark hair, sharp eyes, the leader named Raven was a charismatic man a few years older than Red.

“Another new year!” said Raven. “A new start! What do we want this year?”

“Chems!” “Booze!” “CAPS!”

“All of the above!” someone yelled.

“Right! All of the above!” said Raven. “But, what we want most is to protect our town! Protect our town from what, you say?”

“Synths!!” the crowd answered in unison.

“That’s right! Synths!” said the leader of the Claws. “Synths! Those motherfuckers are sneaky as hell, and they’re here to destroy all of us! To take our homes, take our caps, take our loots! And what do we say to that?”

“HELL NO!!”

“Hell to the NO!” Raven yelled from the top of his lungs. “They fuck up our lives, and we’ll fuck up theirs! That’ll show those fuckers not to fuck with us! We’ll find all the synths, and destroy them. Each and every one of them! You can run but you can’t hide, you fake humans! We are the Deathclaws and we will fuck your shit up! We’ll take your loots, take your home, and take your creepy, robotic life! Death to all synths!”

The rest of the gang echoed, “Death to all synths!”

“Death to all synths!” Red chanted along.

If he were given a moment to quiet down and think, to really think, he might be able to hear a tiny voice inside his head screaming a string of questions: Why? What did the synth really do to any of them? Has anyone even seen a synth -- a confirmed one?

The roaring crowd drowned every question in the young man’s mind. This was his family, and these were his brothers...

“Death to all synths!” said his leader.

“Death to all synths!” said his brothers.

And so, the 17-year-old echoed, “Death to all synths!”
“2262!” the leader of the Deathclaws concluded his speech. “Ready or not, you mother-fuckers, here we come!”

Is the accommodation in Diamond City adequate?” Shaun asked as they slowly walked to the center courtyard.

Most of the lights within the Institute had been dimmed down as it was past ten at night.


“It is not where I would choose to live, but I understand your… connection to the world above. I want you to keep in mind that the Institute will always be your home, Mother. Return anytime you want.”

This was her son’s unique way to show his caring side, Nora knew. Smiling, she put one hand on his arm, and Nora was glad he didn’t pull away. Perhaps one of these days, the mother could finally give her son a much needed hug, a hug that was sixty years overdue.

Baby steps, Bennett. Baby steps.

“Sir.” Alana Secord approached with a holotape. “Here is a copy of meeting with Maxson on the Prydwen. As you instructed, the whole thing…”

“Thank you, Alana.” Shaun handed the tape to Nora. “You can use your Pip-Boy to play the tape to anyone who needs to know. It’s voice only, but I think those disgusting words speak for the gravity of the situation. Should you need more copies, we can provide.”

Nora looked at the holotape in her hand. She needed to get this to Deacon.

“There is one thing I need to tell you,” Shaun continued. “The tape contains the voice of our infiltration unit. You might find it familiar... because it is.”

“What do you mean?” Nora asked.

Familiar? Did they send X6-88 to the Brotherhood? But she had seen the courser as recently as only two hours ago…

Shaun didn’t immediately reply. His gaze turned to the elevator in front of them. The glass tube of the elevator shaft disappeared into the dark ceiling. From high above, Nora spotted the platform descending. This was her ride to the teleporter.

But, as the platform lowered further, Nora realized the elevator wasn’t empty, for within the elevator stood one man in leather armor.

“Our infiltration unit has finished standard decontamination process,” said Alana Secord. “We have until tomorrow morning to send him back to the surface.”

Seconds later, Nora got a first glimpse of the man’s face and took an involuntary step back in shock.

“...Nate?”
“That’s N4-73,” said Shaun.

Yes. Yes, of course. But… “He’s the infiltration unit?”

“Yes.”

“But—” That’s your father! Nora stopped herself before those words escaped her lips.

No, this wasn’t her husband, and this wasn’t her son’s father. This was a synth copy of Nate Taylor.

“You must understand,” Shaun explained, “we were in an urgent need of a suitable candidate for the infiltration assignment. Normally, we would send a courser for such a task, but Ayo had little regard to his coursers’ lives. Their numbers have been diminishing, and the SRB is severely understaffed. Since this unit has been pre-programmed with the knowledge and skills of a soldier, and the fact that he had been deactivated and unused for two months, he was our perfect choice.”

Her son had a point. Yet, for a moment, Nora didn’t know what to think.

The glass door to the elevator opened, and the tall man within stepped out.

This is not Nate. This is not Nate...

“Unit N4-73 reporting,” said the synth modeled after the real Nate Taylor. “Mission accomplished, sir. Awaiting for further instructions.”

Shaun nodded. “Welcome back, N4-73. Dr. Secord will take you to Robotics. Report to Dr. Binet for a full examination.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man in leather armor walked away without sparing even one glance at Nora. He didn’t remember her; he didn’t even know her.

“Nate,” Nora called before she could stop herself. What was she hoping for? One last glimpse of the man who looked just like her husband?

The man took two more steps before he stopped and turned to face her. “Surface designation is Nathaniel Taylor, ma’am,” he told her, his tone was as flat as X6-88’s. “Not Nate.”

*Nate hated to be called Nathaniel.*

Shaun interjected, “Perhaps it’s a good idea to respond to both Nate and Nathan as well. Humans prefer shorter names to show familiarity.”

“Acknowledged,” said the man who was called Nathaniel. His emotionless face had the exact same features as his namesake, but this man lacked the soul of Nate Taylor.

Wordlessly, Nora watched as the copy of her late husband walked away. A chapter of her life had been closed and forever sealed.

“This is most unprecedented,” her son’s voice brought her out of her reverie. “An attack on everything we have worked for our whole lives. Decades of researches were distilled into our finest achievements, and now… the Brotherhood is threatening to take everything away. Desperate times call for desperate measures, Mother. We have to use every asset we have at our disposal, however unconventional it might be. I’m sure you’ll understand.”
Forcing herself to focus on the matter at hand, Nora nodded.

Every synth and everyone involved with the synths were all at risk, whether they were aboveground or under. The Institute or the Railroad.

“As I have said before,” Shaun continued, “use this holotape as you see fit. You have my full authorization to do whatever you need aboveground. The synth detective might not want to cooperate with us or even help us, I understand that. But with his own existence being threatened, I hope he will see the light and help you on the surface.”

“Nick is a reasonable man, Shaun,” said Nora. “The Commonwealth is his home. Promise me you won’t take him back.”

“We have no intention of recalling him, Mother. We have known about his business in Diamond City for many years. To be quite honest, I’m pleasantly surprised by his success. I admit I would like to examine his memories and programming for my own scientific curiosity, but... I respect his tenacity. He has more than earned his new life, and it shall remain that way. You have my word.”

Diamond City. The settlement with only one entrance, unless one knew how to fly over the walls of the Great Green Jewel of the Commonwealth.

A Diamond City guard returned from his nighttime patrol on the outer perimeter. He dragged his tired feet through the gate and nodded at an older guard who had just begun his own graveyard shift.

“All is quiet,” said the returning guard to his colleague.

“Ain’t got an incident for a while,” said the guard behind the old ticket station. “Seen any Brotherhood asshats?”

“No tin cans around.”

“Better keep it that way. Heard they’re nothing but trouble.” The older guard stretched and yawned, then muttered a complaint about shifting his sleeping hours. He didn’t bother to look at the patrol’s face.

They never did, not at this hour.

The guard headed back inside the settlement. Bounce returned to his tired steps as he descended from the long staircase into what used to be the baseball field. It was dark, but the man could see as clear as though it was midday. His steel blue eyes, for once, were not covered by a customary pair of sunglasses.

A guard wearing sunglasses at night shift? That would turn certainly more than a few heads. A big no-no for someone whose job was to blend in. Although he was without his sunglasses, the man’s face was hardly visible. His helmet covered most of his face, and the darkness covered the rest.

The man took a detour route to avoid the marketplace, to avoid being seen. He weaved through the dark alleys and arrived at a particular building with pink neon sign outside. The guard took off his helmet and donned his sunglasses, then headed into Valentine Detective Agency.
The synth detective spared one quick glance at his late night visitor. “If you’re here looking for the lass, she’s not here.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Mr. Valentine,” said the liar.

“Try her house. You know where she lives.”

“I’m not looking for her. I’m looking for you.”

“And to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I got something. The Brotherhood.”

That got the detective’s attention.

Deacon sat down across his old ally. “I checked out their outpost in Cambridge. Someone played the Good Samaritan and helped the Brotherhood recon team. The thing is… that man looked just like our pre-war friend’s dead husband.”

Valentine’s yellow eyes shone. “Bennett’s husband?”

“I know. The man is dead and frozen. I saw his body, Nick.”

“Yes, I remember you told me.”

“So this new guy is either a dead man walking,” said Deacon, “or one freakish coincidence with someone who looked just like a dead man, or…”

Almost immediately, the detective made the connection, “A synth.”

Deacon nodded.

“What’s the Institute up to?” Valentine mumbled to himself out loud.

“There’s one way to find out,” said Deacon.

“…You mean our pre-war friend? Ah. So you are looking for her.”

Was he? No, not really.

Well, maybe. Unconsciously.

A soft knock interrupted their discussion. The door opened before the elusive spy could make a quick exit through the rooftop hatch.

“Nick,” said a feminine voice that caused Deacon to bolt up from the chair. “I need to talk to you--Deacon?”

The man in sunglasses quickly turned around and saw a woman in long dark hair at the doorway of the cramped office.

“Well, speak of the devil,” the synth detective mumbled. “Come on in.”

A genuine grin found its way to the liar’s face. “Long time no see, Miss Manette.”

Almost forty-eight hours. That counted as a long time, right?
This time, he failed to bring a smile on her face. *What’s wrong?*

It was Valentine who voiced Deacon’s silent question, “Something wrong?”


The news wiped away Deacon’s grin. “What do you mean?”

“The Brotherhood of Steel,” his former partner announced, “they are here to destroy all the synths.”

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“Initial diagnostic is completed,” said Dr. Alan Binet. “The unit is running at optimal level.”

“Thank you, Alan,” Dr. Shaun Taylor sat down in front of a terminal.

Here in the lab of Robotics, the former head of the department felt like he was back at old home.

Sitting opposite of him was a man with cables attached to his bare chest and the base of his skull. His features were similar to the old man’s, but younger. The man’s eyes were closed and remained perfectly still.

“Entering debugging mode…” said Dr. Binet, monitoring at a station nearby. “All vitals are within normal ranges. Ready when you are.”

“Bring yourself online,” the old man ordered.

The man with jet black hair opened his warm brown eyes.

“Enter infiltration mode.”

A confident smile surfaced on the man’s face. “Hey there. The name is Taylor. Nathaniel Taylor.”

“Tell me about your family.”

The confident smile morphed into a gentle one as the man began, “My wife, Jackie… She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She was kind and patient. Oh so patient. We had a baby. A boy…”

“Jackie?” asked Alana Secord quietly at the back of the lab.

“Short of Jacqueline,” Binet replied. “Mrs. Taylor’s middle name.”

Paying no mind to the his colleagues, Shaun asked the unit, “What happened to them?”

The smile was all but disappeared. The man’s brows furrowed, his lips pressed thin. For the longest moment, the black-haired man struggled. “I… I don’t want to talk about it…”

“You can tell me,” said the old man.

“...One day, when I was out...” The man’s voice started to break. “...a man came to our house. He took everything we had, then killed my wife and our son. ...I...I couldn’t save them!” The man took a shaky breath then repeated in a whisper, “...I couldn’t save them...”
“Pretty damn convincing,” said Secord. “Good job, Alan.”

“We didn’t have enough time to write a brand new narrative for him,” said the head of Robotics. “So, we had to improvise and only made some changes to his existing narrative. I wish we had more time to work on him before we sent him out. We still have to iron out the wrinkles each time he reports back. And, hopefully, he doesn’t glitch when he’s on assignment.”

Satisfied, Shaun took some notes before he moved on to the next stage. “Enter diagnostic mode.”

Any expression on Nathaniel’s face was gone in an instant.

“Tell me about the ship, Prydwen.”

The synth’s friendly tone morphed into an monotonic one when he spoke, “An airborne military base. Weighs forty thousand tons. Four pylons with a single jet engine each, as well as hydrogen, keep the ship aloft.”

“Is the ship capable of combat?” asked Shaun.

“Negative.”

“Well, that’s some good news,” said Alan Binet.

“Hydrogen,” said Secord, “if we could find a way to place some bombs…”

Although the plan was sound, Shaun could foresee potential obstacles. “We’ll need more than one infiltration unit for this solution, and we have only one chance.”

Alan Binet paused to think. “It would be rather difficult to teleport on a movable object in the air,” he concluded. “One slight miscalculation and the synths could materialize outside solid footing.”

Alana Secord frowned. “It’d be easier if that damn ship would just land on the ground.”

The old man could feel a headache coming. “Find out everything we can about this Maxson boy, Alana. And I want the record of our escaped synth.”

“M7-97? On it,” said the head of SRB. “And if you want to know about Maxson, sir, ask Madison.”

...These free-thinking robotic abominations of technology are masquerading as human beings. They are indistinguishable from real, living, breathing human beings like you and me. But, do not forget: They are nothing but machines. And the notion that a machine could be granted free will is not only offensive, but horribly dangerous."

Deacon grimaced at every word.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” said Nick Valentine with absolute disgust.

The man in the holotape continued, “By creating synthetic humans, the Institute scientists have created a weapon that transcends the destructive nature of the atom bomb. Like the atom, the synths are dangerous technologies that could prove to be the world’s undoing for the second time
in recent history. We cannot allow the Institute to continue this line of experimentation. Therefore, the Institute and everyone responsible for the creation of the synths are considered enemies of the Brotherhood of Steel, and must be eliminated, at all costs.”

“Well said,” another voice from the tape agreed.

“I care about them, you know,” the man claimed. “The people of the Commonwealth.”

“Like hell you do, asshole,” Deacon mumbled under his breath.

“Turning your weapons on the very same people that you’re trying to save can be a bitter pill to swallow. The Brotherhood is here to prevent a war by starting one of our own. The difference is… our war won’t reduce civilization to ashes. This campaign will be costly and many lives will be lost. But in the end, we will be saving humankind from its worst enemy… itself. Ad Victoriam.”

Nora ended the holotape on her Pip-Boy.

For a long moment, no one spoke a word.

This had got to be simultaneously the most chilling and the most blood-boiling thing Deacon had heard in many, many years.

Brotherhood of Bigots was truly to its name.

But what froze the man who had seen it all was not just the declaration of war. It was a dreadful sense of deja vu. Deacon had heard speeches like this before, a hell of a long time ago when he was another person with another face, another name.

Horrible memories from the past crept up on the spy, catching him completely off guard. Once upon a time, he partook at activities that would forever haunt him till his dying day. Once upon his life, he’d been a bigot, a scum. Had his conscience not scream at him at that particular event, would he continue his way and be just like those Brotherhood soldiers?

The man in sunglasses shuddered to even think.

“‘No war is just but mine.’” Nick Valentine snorted with a scowl. “Only madmen could justify trying to wipe out an entire people just because they were made, not born.”

“You can’t let the Brotherhood sees you, Nick,” said Nora. “You should stay here in Diamond City.”

“Sitting by the wayside is not a luxury we have right now,” said the detective. “If they come for me, I’ll show those boys what a synth can do.”

Shaking his head to drive away all unwanted memories, Deacon forced himself to focus on the matter at hand.

First things first. “How did you get this tape?” Deacon asked.

“Shaun sent an infiltrator to the Brotherhood,” Nora told them. “This is the audio recording of the speech. I’ve seen the video of it. Their leader, Arthur Maxson, he looks younger than I thought, but he’s determined.”

An infiltrator? So Deacon’s guess was right. The man in leather armor was not some random guy who looked just like Nora’s dead husband.
Now, the next question was… “Do you have any idea who the infiltrator is?”

Instead of answering, the pre-war relic paused then asked, “…Why do you ask?”

She knew. “Because I saw him,” said Deacon.

Her surprise was genuine. “You did? Where?”

“I spotted him outside the Cambridge Police Station. A man in dark hair and leather armor, coming back with a Brotherhood soldier—”

“I know who he is,” his former partner admitted.

“You knew about this?” Valentine asked.

“I just found out…” she told them. “Shaun created a synth that modeled after Nate. It’s his… gesture to make me feel at home, to have my husband back. But… that’s not Nate. No matter how much he looked like Nathan, that’s not the same man I married.”

Deacon understood this sentiment more than she’d ever know. “We can’t replace our spouse…”

“We can’t,” Nora agreed. “It’s all the memories we shared, the bond that we formed. It’s the little things that made a relationship special. But Shaun… he doesn’t quite understand that. The synth was deactivated after my initial meeting with him—” There was a pause before her eyes landed squarely on Deacon’s face. “Wait. How did you know how Nate looked like? I’ve never shown you his picture.”

Oops. “I went to the vault,” the liar admitted.

His former partner looked at him with an eyebrow raised, but she didn’t seem offended or angry. “You wanted to verify my story.”


Her chest rose and fell with a quiet yet heavy sigh. “…I would have done the same.”

A tiny grin of relief found its way to Deacon’s face. “I’ve a feeling you would.”

Nora handed him the holotape. “Take this. You guys need to be prepared, too.”

This tape would cost a mini nuclear explosion in the HQ.

“What that lunatic’s talking about is going to cost lives. In droves,” Valentine commented.

“What can you do?” Nora asked.

“It depends,” said the detective. “Are you here as Henry Bennett’s daughter, or the ambassador for the Institute?”

“I want to help the synths and keep civilians from being killed.”

She did not directly answer the question, Deacon noticed.

“Look, Nick, I’ll be honest,” said the former lawyer. “Without teleportation, no one can ever gain access to the Institute. Not even the Brotherhood. And the Brotherhood isn’t going to give up. All
the damages will be done here in the Commonwealth. Maxson said it himself. He’s going to start a
war here. Right here. People’s lives will be turned upside down, if not completely destroyed. We
cannot let this happen.”

“I don’t know how we’re gonna stop a war,” said Nick Valentine eventually, “but I sure as hell am
gonna try.”

“Work with me, Nick,” Nora urged. “I need eyes and ears on the ground. In return, I will bring you
all the information I can get from Nat-- N4-73, the undercover synth.”

“I cannot believe I’m helping the Institute…” the old synth grumbled.

“You’re not,” the pre-war lawyer assured him. “You’re helping the synths and the people of the
Commonwealth.” Her bright blue eyes then focused on Deacon. “Same offer goes to you, too,
Deacon. You two are the only people I can trust.”

“Remember what I told you about trust?” the spy said.

“’You can’t trust everyone,’” his former partner replied. She patted the pocket of her jacket. “I have
your note right here.”

Somehow, the liar was touched. “In case you forgot, we are on the opposite sides.”

Something on her expression changed. It was as if her game face had shifted. The determined look
in her eyes was softened considerably. “...How could I forget?” she replied, her voice quiet.

If he leaned forward and reached out, he could touch her.

Deacon pinned himself down onto the chair. “You sure you trust me?”

“If the information that I’m related to the Institute ever gets out, I suspect I’ll be killed within
hours, if not minutes,” the pre-war relic speculated, rightly so. “My life is in your hands, and you
don’t even have to pull the trigger yourself.”

Deacon didn’t answer to that. He didn’t have to, for they both knew it was true. Instead, the spy
pocketed the holotape and said, “I’ll check in with you tomorrow.”

The smile she gave him was almost worth the risk he was taking. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Looking over my shoulder won’t make me work faster,” said the head of Advanced Systems
without looking up from her screen. “I will have the device ready for you in a moment.”

“I’m here for your advice,” said the director.

“Sure, I have one,” said Madison Li. “Don’t let them win. Or you and I and everyone else will be
slaughtered like animals.”

Shaun snorted at the obvious. “What can you tell me about this Arthur Maxson?”

“Not much…” Li sighed as she hit her enter key with an air of finality. “Arthur Maxson was about
ten when I first met him. The kid was already a squire, trained by a bunch of killers to be one of
them. From what I gathered, his father died before he was born. His mother sent him to the Citadel to be fostered by Elder Lyons in Capital Wasteland. Lyons was an oddball in the Brotherhood; he was shunned by the rest of the elders for being compassionate. I guess Lyons’ teaching never completely rubbed off on the boy. The kid never had a chance; he’d been indoctrinated by the Brotherhood’s beliefs and… what’s it called? Oh, the Codex.”

“Codex?”

“It’s their bible. Written by some scribes -- that’s their non-combatants, the technical staffs, their brains behind the brawn. The Brotherhood live and die by their Codex. As someone explained to me: If it’s in the Codex, they have to abide to it. If it’s not in the Codex, it’s not important.”

Shaun frowned at this archaic concept. “Who decided what to put in this Codex?”

“Who knows?” Li shrugged. “But they treat it like the most sacred text. If the Codex told them to defecate in their bed before they’re allowed to sleep, you bet they would do just that.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Never underestimate the power of brainwashing.” Li released a heavy sigh. “...I used to think that boy might have a chance to grow a brain of his own. You know, the first time I met him, he was trying to be friends with a robot. Not just any robots like a protectron or a Mr. Handy. The robot he talked to was actually just a dismantled head, and it’s the size of the boy himself.”

“A head the size of a boy?”

“The robot itself was the size of a building.”

Shaun was alarmed. “They possessed the technologies to build that?”

Li considered for a brief second. “There’s no point keeping Brotherhood’s secret for them any longer. They didn’t build the robot from scratch. It’s pre-war tech. U.S. Army’s secret weapon to fight the Chinese in Anchorage. The Brotherhood found it in the basement of the ruin where they built the Citadel. They tried to salvage it, but they ran into power issue. That’s what I helped them with, in exchange for their help with Project Purity.”

The old man’s blood ran cold. “Do we have to worry about this secret weapon?”

“Thank God, no. It was destroyed by the Enclave. It took an orbital warhead bombardment controlled by a satellite relay station to take down that beast. Blown to pieces.”

The machine at Li’s workstation beeped.

“Good. It’s done.” Dr. Li headed to the lab next door, then came back with a small item in her hand. “It’s the best I can come up for now. Audio only.”

Shaun took the red circular plastic disk in his hand. Six black dots spread at equal distance along the perimeter of the thin object. Etched in the center was one word in black and white: TOPS.

“What’s this?” asked Shaun.

“The listening device,” said Madison Li as though he had asked the most stupid question.

Suppressing a sigh of irritation, the old man clarified, “I know, but what’s this supposed to be?”

“Ah, you’ve never seen this… It’s a casino chip from The Tops Casino in New Vegas. Or, I should
say, a perfect duplicate of one based on our database, aged to perfection. This chip is small enough for N4-73 to slip into his uniform pocket.”

It sounded ridiculous. “What possible excuse could one have for keeping a useless thing like this?”

“It’s called memento. Lucky charm. Don’t you have one?”

“I’m not superstitious.”

“Well, lucky for you, soldiers are a superstitious bunch. They carry lucky charms with them all the time. Just come up with a cover-up story, in case someone asks him about it.”

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“Tell them… his father gave this to him. His old man got it from someone who came from the West. It’s the chip that turned his luck around at The Tops casino. Something along that line. I’m sure Binet could come up with a touching story. He’s done marvelous works on some of personality meshes. Always so real, so life-like.”

“I will give this to Alan.”

“Listen, Taylor,” said Li after a brief pause, “it’s not just our work or our lives on the line, innocent people will die at crossfire. I’ve seen it. The blood, the screaming…”

*And the loss of all synths -- the future of a better world.*

“You said you came here for my advice,” said Madison Li, “here’s a real one: Our pride is worthless comparing to the good of the future. Back then, if our team didn’t seek the Brotherhood out for help, the Capital Wasteland might not have clean water. There are battles we can’t fight on our own. We need allies.”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” said Shaun Taylor, “we’ve been isolated for two centuries.”

“And that’s the problem,” Li pointed out bluntly. “The world is hell up there, yes, but there are good people. People whose lives that would benefit tremendously with the technologies we have. Even if it’s just the most basic necessities -- food and water. If we help them, they will help us.”

Maybe… maybe she’s right…

“The enemies are at our doorstep, we cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand like we have for so many years. It’s high time to stop being the selfish pricks. We can break this cycle, Dr. Taylor. I’ve lived most of my life on the surface, I know how things work. I can help. Think about it.”

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A/N: “Bring yourself online” is a tribute to Westworld. The Tops Casino chip is based on real life version of the chip in Fallout New Vegas Collector’s Edition “Lucky 7 Poker Chips.”

A quick reply to Mandor regarding the potential conflicts in the past between Maxson and the Institute. In Arthur’s view, did he think the Institute had already fired its first shot at his people between Fallout 3 and 4? Short answer: I have no idea. Longer one: I don’t think Maxson has personally encountered synths before. The distance between Boston and Washington DC is about 400-some miles, or 700-some km. Without airplane or train, it’ll not be easy to travel that distance.
So I’m guessing the Institute has not made it down to DC after they’d lost Zimmer ten years ago.

That’s it for now. See you next time. As always, thanks for reading!

Title: “It Started All Over Again” -- Frank Sinatra, 1943.

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The Fat Man

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Project Wanderer

Chapter Thirty Six: The Fat Man

When the holotape ended, there was nothing but silence within the burial chamber of this ancient catacomb. Faint music from the radio outside the makeshift private office was playing a song from the better days.

‘I don’t want to set the world on fire…’

Quite fitting, Deacon mused. Whether they wanted it or not, the world was about to be set on fire soon. Very soon.

Judging from the harsh scowls on the faces of the Railroad alpha and their resident doctor, the calm before the deadly storm wouldn’t last long. A nuclear explosion would take place in this stuffy, musty underground home of the dead in three, two...

“This is a joke.” It was the official leader of the Railroad who broke the silence with an icy tone could cut through steel.

Here we go... “I wish,” said Deacon. “That’s the one and only Arthur Maxson talking to a new recruit.”

“Where did you get this?” Carrington asked.

Of course the resident genius would ask. Deacon turned the doctor with a perfect poker face. “Would you believe me if I said I infiltrated the Brotherhood and recorded this?”

The doctor snorted. “That’s impossible, even for you.”

The spy merely shrugged. “Hey, been there, done that.”

“The Brotherhood’s only been in town for two days,” Carrington pointed out. “You couldn’t possibly have infiltrated their ranks.”

Someone did just that. Deacon stopped himself from revealing that particular detail. “The tape is the real deal,” he told the doc and the alpha. “And so is the threat.”

Desdemona scowled as she lit up a cigarette and considered. “You trust your source on this?”

Yes. “Yes.” Deacon knew he had to give them more than just one word. The situation was grave, and he could hardly blame them for being skeptical. Hell, he, too, would question if someone had brought him this intel. “I know a guy who knows a guy who knows this guy who joined the Brotherhood.”

“And taped the encounter?” asked Carrington with his trademarked sideway glance of scrutiny.
“Hey, this Maxson kid is a rock star in the Brotherhood,” said the liar. “Everyone practically worship the ground he walks on. The green recruit’s just collecting memorabilia.”

The alpha took a long drag of her cigarette while she studied the spy with her patented narrow-eyed glare of death.

Deacon was immuned to that. Just as he was immuned to Carrington’s scrutiny, Tinker Tom’s craziness. He could even tolerate Glory’s love of violence, as long as no civilians were involved. This was his family. Loved it or hated it, this was all he had. One big dysfunctional family.

“If the tape is real,” said Desdemona eventually. “We are in serious trouble. Sooner or later, the Brotherhood will hear about a group helping the synths.”

“The tape is real,” Deacon assured them. “And you’re right. We will be on their radar, it’s only a matter of time. Good news is, I’m pretty sure we won’t be getting any new packages anytime soon. So we should focus on moving any existing ones out of town asap, now that the Brotherhood shit is about the hit the fan. I’ll get more intel from my source when she gets her hands on anything new.”

The doctor’s eyes suddenly lit up as if he’d solved the most complicated equation in the whole damned world. “It's the vault woman, isn't it?”

The alpha frowned. “The Wanderer?”

Son of a… “Does it matter where I got the intel from?” the spy deflected with ease.

“Oh course it matters,” Carrington scoffed. “For all we know she might be a synth, here to set us up.”

“She’s not a synth!” Deacon replied quickly and firmly. In fact, so quickly that he had inevitably confirmed the doctor’s suspicion. He couldn’t take back his words, could he? No. But he could certainly add to it. “I checked.”

“How?” Desdemona asked.

“By asking her things only the real pre-war relic would know,” said Deacon with a hidden sigh. The one lesson he had given her under the guise of an elaborate prank. The note that she was still carrying in her pocket… “C’mon Dez, it’s not my first rodeo.”

“Even if she’s the real one,” Carrington countered, “who is to say she’s not working for the Institute? Pitting us against the Brotherhood. Killing two birds with one stone.”

“She saved Patriot!” You asshole! A rare temper suddenly flared inside the most layback man in the Commonwealth. It had caught the man in sunglasses completely off guard.

Why would he feel so incredibly offended when Carrington was raising a good point?

“You mean our Patriot?” asked Desdemona in surprise.

“The very same,” said Deacon after a subtle breath to snap back to his calm self. “One of the synths at Ticonderoga told me that. He said the synths in the Institute like her; they called her ‘the lady.’ If it wasn’t for the lady, Patriot would have been caught. If she's helping the Institute to undermine us, why would she help Patriot? All she needed to do was to hand the guy over and be the shining heroine who saves the day.”
“Where is she?” the alpha asked after lighting her second cigarette.

“I don’t know,” said the liar. “I didn’t get her number.”

His boss frowned. “What number?”

*Telephone number.* Deacon swallowed a sigh. His former partner would definitely get the joke. “I have no idea where she is.”

“Find her, Deacon. I want to talk to her.”

“It’s not the best idea, Dez.”

“I’d be the judge,” said the leader of the Railroad. “I’m not going to act based on one holotape. I want to get a read on her myself. Go put a message in the dead drop, or whatever the hell you do to communicate with the Wanderer. Find her.”

Without the cover of the night, the city underneath could been seen in its full dystopian glory. The late morning sun tried hard to peek through the cloudy sky. The wind was chilly and strong, but the tall man in heavy leather battle coat was not at all bothered by the weather.

“Look at this place,” said Arthur Maxson in disgust. Frowning, he breathed in a breath of cold winter air on the deck of Prydwen and continued, “Leaving people to their own devices is what reduced this metropolis to ruins in the first place. I refuse to allow mistakes of the past to be repeated.”

The elder turned to the two men with him. One of them was a paladin that had earned his rank and Maxson’s trust. And the other was an initiate -- a new recruit that had somehow earned the trust of the paladin.

By default, Arthur Maxson should trust the new soldier. Yet, the man had yet to show his loyalty to the Brotherhood or his effectiveness on the battlefield. Today would be the initiate’s first test.

“In order to bring the Institute to its knees, we need to use every weapon at our disposal.” Maxson pointed at a building afar. “Take a look over there. That’s Fort Strong. Our scouts have returned with the report that it’s infested with super mutants. Having those aberrations of nature close enough to smell is making me sick to my stomach. To make the matters worse, they’re sitting on top of a massive stockpile of Fat Man shells we could use in our campaign. I want both of you to head over there, wipe out everything that moves, and secure that stockpile. Understood?”

“Those super mutants are a threat to the security of the airport,” said Paladin Danse. “It’ll be a pleasure to exterminate those filths.”

The elder studied the initiate. The man had changed into his proper uniform. With his back straight, chin up, hands folded behind his back, the initiate looked every bit a Brotherhood soldier should be.

“Initiate,” said Maxson, “you have yet to reach the rank of Knight, therefore I cannot grant you access to power armor. However, I refuse to let my soldiers head into the battlefield without proper equipment. Go get yourself a suit of combat armor and a laser rifle from Proctor Teagan. When
you are ready, a vertibird will drop you off at the fort. This is your first mission, Initiate. Make us proud. Ad Victoriam!”

“I’ve studied the record,” said Alan Binet, sitting across the director’s desk. “M7-97 failed from the final stage of courser training. He was due for reassignment, but escaped fifteen years ago.”

“And found his way to the Brotherhood.” Shaun Taylor reached for a cup of hot tea then leaned back onto his chair.

A morning meeting with the head of Robotics was nothing out of the ordinary. The situation they were discussing, however, was.

“Quite a remarkable journey, I must say,” said Binet.

The old man took a quiet sip of tea to calm his queasy stomach. “Under any other circumstances, I would find it rather intriguing that an escaped synth could survive on the surface all these years. The data he has collected would help us tremendously in our research. But…”

“One of our own is fighting on the enemy’s side,” said Binet with a sigh. “Fighting his own kind…”

“He is one of the earlier models,” said Shaun, putting down his cup. “The prototype built after him also escaped. Remember that one?”

“Yes. The courser, wasn’t it? He was already on duty at that time. I remember back then I wondered, why would a courser run away? Had he developed a--” Binet stopped himself from continuing his thoughts out loud.

“A conscience?” Hiding a smile behind his stoic front, the old man studied his former protege across from him. Robotics would be in good hands for a long time, under Dr. Binet’s leadership.

Good ol’ Alan Binet’s face turned red. “Well, I mean…”

“We are men of science, Alan. It’d be a disservice to have a closed mind on all matters. We have to consider all possibilities, only to rule them out when they’re proven to be false.”

“Oh, I absolutely agree,” said Binet with a smile of relief. “Everything is possible until it’s proven otherwise.”

The Department of Robotics was definitely in good hands. “Dr. Zimmer had to go after that prototype courser,” Shaun reminisced. “And he’s never returned since. I wonder what happened to him…”

“The surface is a treacherous place,” said Binet. “Even with a courser as his bodyguard, Dr. Zimmer could encounter unexpected dangers.”

“Do you think there’s hope for the surface?” asked Shaun seemingly out of the blue.

“I don’t know, Shaun. My mother used to tell me to never give up hope. ‘Hope springs eternal’ was what she said.”
“Yes. Mrs. Binet was always optimistic, always kind…”

“You!” Alana Secord rushed into the director’s office. “Sorry to interrupt. The Brotherhood has found a stash of Fat Man shells, and they’re about to go and retrieve it.”

*What the… “Where?”*

“Fort Strong,” Secord reported. “Near the airport. That place is filled with super mutants.”

“This is troublesome.” The mild-mannered Alan Binet frowned. “If the Brotherhood got their hands on the warheads, it’d be disastrous.”

Shaun agreed. “We need to get to retrieve them first. How much time do we have?”

“N4-73 is currently preparing for the assignment,” said Secord. “We can send a team in to secure the stash before they do.”

That was certainly one option. But... “It might alert the Brotherhood that we are monitoring their movements,” the director pointed out. *Think, Taylor! Think! “Who else is on the assignment?”*

“Only M7-97 and N4-73,” Secord replied.

The former head of Robotics shared a look with his successor.

“Sir…” said Alan Binet. “Perhaps we could take advantage of that.”

“Indeed.” Quickly, Shaun Taylor ironed out all the details of a precise plan inside his head. “Dig through the military records in our archive, Alana,” ordered the director. “Find out where exactly the stockpile is located, and how many. Also, have X6-88 on standby. I’ll stop by the SRB after I talk to Dr. Li.”

“The Commonwealth looks different from up here, doesn’t it?” said Paladin Danse over the noise of the vertibird’s engine. “It never ceases to amaze me how drastically your perception of the battlefield changes from the air.”

“Can’t say I’m used to flying yet,” said Initiate Taylor. “It’s quite a long way down.”

“Don’t worry, Taylor.” The stoic paladin showed a hint of a teasing smile. “We are not going to drop from the sky. Our pilots are the best. Anyway, this is your first official mission as a Brotherhood soldier, so stay sharp. Any questions?”

“Shoot everything that moves. That’s our order, right? Sounds easy enough.”

“Have you ever encountered super mutants?” the paladin asked.

“I usually turn around and walk the other way when I spot one.”

Paladin Danse nodded. “Understandable. But now that you are a Brotherhood soldier, retreat is no longer an option. Don’t be intimidated by their size. Like every other mutated freaks, the super mutants can be killed. They are big and strong, but they are slow. Keep a distance and keep firing.”
“There are mutants in DC as well?”

The paladin sneered. “Yes. They’re the results of some sick experiment in a vault. Those monstrosities are just another example of man blindly taking a step forward only to wind up stumbling two steps back. I’ve been fighting for years, trying to put a stop to this madness. And just when I thought we were getting the upper hand, along come the synths. I’ve seen what these super mutants do to people… Can you imagine what the synths would do to us if they ever got the upper hand? It would be armageddon, repeated. And maybe the end of everything that we hold dear.” Danse shook his head and released a sigh. “Look, I don’t mean to bore you with my rhetoric. I just want you to understand how important these missions are.”

Taylor waved away his concern. “No need to apologize. I’m glad I’m given a chance to fight for a good cause.”

“Thank you, brother,” said the paladin sincerely. “It’s good to know you’re taking my advice to heart.

“Sir,” said the pilot. “The fort is littered with super mutants. I can’t land until we clear the area.”

“Roger that,” said Paladin Danse. “Circle around. We’ll begin aerial assault. Taylor, that minigun in front of your is loaded and ready to fire, I suggest you put it to good use.” The paladin readied his laser rifle. “Let’s show these filthy monsters what the Brotherhood is capable of! Ad Victoriam!”

“You want me to do what?” Dr. Madison Li raised an eyebrow high.

Shaun ignored her look. “Can you do it?”

The head of Advanced Systems let out a heavy sigh. “Sure. I’ll have my team stop working on their projects and make it happen.”

The old man ignored her sarcastic tone as well. “Good. Proceed.”

“You’re serious?” Li studied him for a second. “Of course you are.”

Again, the director asked, more firmly this time, “Can you or can you not do it?”

“With a schematic, yes.”

“I’ll forward it to you,” said the director. “Time is of the essence, Dr. Li.”

Li snorted. “Then get out of my hair and let me work.”

The basement of the fort fell into silence as the last two men standing lowered their laser rifles.

“All targets neutralized,” the paladin announced. “Glad to have you on my team, Taylor. You must
hate the mutants as much as I do.”

“Absolutely,” said the initiate. “Wiping them out was a pleasure.”

Paladin Danse nodded with approval. “I wish all the mankind share your sentiment. Come on, let’s see how many Fat Man shells we’ve got here.”

The storage room at the end of the hallway was lined floor to ceiling with shelves on all three walls. Each wall housed nine crates -- crates that were certainly big enough to hide a full grown human.

Danse carefully opened one of the crates nearby. Within, there were nothing but parts lining neatly in four rows. Each row consisted of components that were ready to be assembled into a Fat Man shell.

“Look at that…” said the paladin.

“They’re just parts?” said the initiate in confusion.

“For safety reason,” said Danse. “The parts are fragile, but once they’re put together, they will be deadly enough to wipe this building off the map. It’d not be wise to store a fully assembled Fat Man shell, let alone more than a hundred of them.”

Twenty seven crates. Four shells each. The two soldiers were standing in the presence of one hundred and eight warheads.

One hundred and eight warheads that were about to be in the hands of the Brotherhood.

N4-73 pondered on his next step.

“Anyway,” said Paladin Danse, “you should head back to the Prydwen and report to Maxson. He’ll mobilize a team to secure the stash.”

“You’re not coming?” asked Taylor.

“Negative. I’ll remain here to keep an eye on these warheads, in case there are more of those mutant filths.”

That should buy him enough time to teleport back to the Institute and make a quick report…

Outwardly, the initiate looked at the crates, then looked at the paladin. “I can’t leave you here without backup.”

“Your concern is noted, but unnecessary,” said the paladin. “I can handle a few mutants myself. You have your orders, Initiate. Dismissed.”

Taylor nodded and headed back to the elevator. But before he could reach the end of the hallway, the Brotherhood initiate heard a voice coming from storage unit.

“M7-97, initialize factory reset,” said a man. “Authorization: delta-3-6-gamma.”

Doubling back, Taylor saw a man in black leather coat a few steps behind the paladin, who remained standing with a blank expression on his face, his head hanged down ever-so slightly.

Paladin Danse had been switched off.
“He’s a synth?” asked the infiltration unit in surprise.

“Correct,” said the courser without a hint of expression on his face. “He doesn’t know. And we will keep it that way. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Behind the courser, N4-73 spotted a team of troopers materialized into the storage room.

“What is going on?” asked N4-73. “I was about to report back to the SRB.”

“That will be unnecessary,” said the courser. “We will take care of things on this end. Report to the ship as you were instructed.”

“What should I tell Maxson?”

“That the mission was a success, and Paladin Danse is guarding the warheads. Return with a team to retrieve the Fat Man shells, if you are ordered to do so. If not, proceed with your day as an initiate and gather as much information as you can.”

The infiltration unit watched as the synth troopers began to carry the crates out of the shelves and teleported them away. “Should I delay my return to the ship to buy you some time?”

“Negative. It might raise suspicion,” said the courser. “Let the Brotherhood claim their prize. Father has everything under control.”

“My god, what have they done to him?” Alan Binet shook his head at the synth sitting by the diagnostic table. “He’s been reprogrammed, and badly so. It’s like someone used an axe for a job that requires a scalpel.”

The father of all synths shared the same sentiment with the head of Robotics. An utter, pure disgust! Somebody had been messing with his synths! Someone who was untrained and unqualified.

“The Railroad.” Shaun Taylor scowled. “They are handling technologies that are beyond their grasp.” The old man kept a laser focus on the current project despite the intense dismay he was feeling. “We won’t have time to retrieve all the data, Alan. We’ll focus on the more recent ones. Within a year or so.”

“Right. Accessing memories module,” said Binet. “Downloading…”

“Sir,” Alana Secord reported in, “N4-73 is back on the ship. He’s about to debrief Maxson.”

“How much time do we have?” Binet asked.

“An hour, at most,” said Secord. “The switch is almost completed.”

“How good are the replicas?” asked Shaun.

“Do you have to ask?” said Madison Li with slight annoyance as she entered the lab. “Good enough to fool them until they actually use the warheads. There won’t be any explosions except the
ones inside their heads, I can guarantee that.”

“Thank you, Dr. Li,” said Shaun.

“Just don’t ask me to make you real warheads. I’m not going to repeat my mistakes by making more weapons of war.” Li eyed the synth with cable attached to the base of his skull. “Is that the paladin?”

“Yes. One of ours,” Shaun replied. “He escaped and found his way to the Brotherhood.”

Folding her arms, Madison Li shook her head in pity. “And now he’s fighting his own kind. There’s an irony in there somewhere.”

“We could use him as our asset,” Secord suggested.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have time to reprogram him,” said Binet.

“You’re not letting this one slip through your fingers, are you?” Li asked the director.

The old man gave her a look that said it all.

Of course not.

A blinding white flash dissipated. Unit X6-88 found himself back in the basement of Fort Strong once again. He released his grip on the arm of a deactivated synth. His current assignment was a task the courser was unfamiliar with, but Father had entrusted this crucial mission to him. Failure was not an option.

The courser studied the basement and began to form a battle scene inside his head. He could see it perfectly. Now, it was his task to create a memory of this non-existing battle between a soldier and a super mutant.

“M7-97. Narrative override. Authorization: delta-3-6-gamma. Begin revision.” The courser started, “Paladin Danse, you were alone, guarding the crates. You were tired, and you removed your helmet to take a break. A lone super mutant returned. The elevator was too far for you to hear its arrival. The super mutant entered the hallway. You finally spotted the monster. You raised his laser rifle and engaged in battle. The super mutant retaliated.”

The courser quietly moved to the side room outside the storage and continued, “You dodged inside this room to avoid damaging the warheads. The room was nearly bare, with nothing substantial enough to work as a proper cover. The super mutant entered the room from the entrance on the other end. The battle continued. Close quarter. No cover. This had to end fast. The super mutant charged towards you. One powerful swing from its club on your head would be enough to end your life. You realized this and aimed your weapon at its head. And fired. The super mutant fell, but its raised weapon hit you in the head.” X6-88 paused for a brief second to carefully consider the narrative. Satisfied, he concluded, “End revision.”

Now, it’s time for staging the scene.

“Unit X6-88 reporting in. Bring in the super mutant.”
With another flash, a team of three synth troopers materialized nearby, holding a giant green creature. The larger than normal super mutant had been long dead; it was one of the few leftovers from a cancelled project in BioScience. Sealed and stored in the abandon lab, the bodies of the super mutants had never been properly disposed. And now one of the failed experiments had found a new purpose postmortem.

The mutant should be proud of its contribution to the Institute.

“Awaiting for instructions,” said one of the troopers.

X6-88 pointed at the spot where the super mutant was supposed to fall. “Put the mutant here,” he ordered the troopers, then guided the power-armored synth to the place where he had been ‘hit.’

Now, he had to set the stage.

The courser picked up the soldier’s laser rifle and randomly fired some shoots across the room.

Then, with the battle scene properly set up, the courser shifted his attention to the super mutant. He had to create the fake final blow. The shot had to be precise enough to be fatal, yet the trigger finger had to be light enough not to pulverize the dead green body.

Killing was easy. Killing without overkilling was not when the weapon was a laser rifle. Lucky for X6-88, Brotherhood’s weapons were subpar. This particular laser rifle was not even good enough for target practice.

X6-88 aimed the weapon at the dead center of the super mutant’s forehead. No, this was too precise. He shifted his aim to the right, then fired.

Blood and brain matters spattered onto the floor, but the body remained intact.

The courser dropped the gun by the metal boots of the power-armored synth, then picked up a cruelly crafted wooden board that was typically used by those brainless green giants.

Before he proceed to the final touch, X6-88 took a closer look at the synth that had turned into the Institute’s enemy. He knew nothing about this unit, other than the fact that this was an older model, and an unit who had failed the courser training.

Why did this unit run away? And why did he join those who hated them for what they were? How could he pretend to be a human while he was a synth?

Questions. So many questions. But one particular question startled the stoic courser: If Unit X6-88 had failed the courser training, would he run away?

X6-88 scowled at this pointless question.

He had passed all the tests. He was a courser. He was one of the best.

And Father trusted him.

No. He would never betray Father.

He wouldn’t. He couldn’t.

This old unit was obviously defective. He was not good enough to be a courser. He was not good enough to be a synth.
Wooden club raised, the courser smacked the soldier’s head. The power-armored unit fell onto the ground.

The stage was set.

The courser put the power armor helmet on an empty crate along the hallway. He then looked around the scene once more to make sure not a hair was out of place. It was a job well done. Father’s trust was not misplaced.

One last thing. “M7-97. Initiate restart sequence. Set delay to 30 seconds. Count down begin.”

Perhaps someday he would meet the unit in battle. Or perhaps not. It didn’t matter to the courser. Whoever stood in the way of the Institute had to be eliminated, whether he’s a synth or a human.


Perhaps someday he would meet the unit in battle. Or perhaps not. It didn’t matter to the courser. Whoever stood in the way of the Institute had to be eliminated, whether he’s a synth or a human.

“Unit X6-88 reporting in. Ready to relay back to the Institute.”

“Paladin!” the initiate called. “Paladin Danse!”

The man in power armor stirred and pushed himself up from the ground.

“You okay?” Taylor asked.

“Arg…” The paladin shook his head. “...I’m fine…”

“What happened?”

“I made a mistake.” Danse pointed at a larger than normal super mutant on the floor. “That thing showed up when my helmet was off. I was caught off guard…”

“Don’t be so harsh on yourself,” said the initiate. “That’s a giant super mutant, and you took it down by yourself.”

“Hardly an accomplishment,” said the paladin, scowling. “I was lucky this time.”

“Take it easy.” The initiate helped his brother get back on his feet. “You should check in with the doc.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been bashed on the head. I’ll be fine, Taylor.” Paladin Danse looked at the team of soldiers behind the initiate. “We need to secure these warheads. Let’s get to work.”

The radio from Diamond City Surplus played a song as a man in sunglasses walked by.

‘...And that one is you, no other will do. I’ve lost all ambition for worldly acclaim…’

Deacon ignored the song and headed to a certain direction. Today’s outfit of choice was a simple one: The Wastelander. Among a sea of Diamond City residents, the master of disguise was
blending in seamlessly. No one bothered to give him a second look as he made his way to his destination.

The spy could think of a hundred and one reasons he should turn around and leave. But he put one step in front of another, and another. Every step led him closer to a certain front door.

He was here because of Dez, not because he wanted to see her.

Right.

Right...

And so he knocked.

_Run!_ A tiny voice screamed at him inside his head. _There could be traps inside the house! Bugs, hidden cameras!

_Shut the hell up!

You can’t let your guard down, you idiot!_ The tiny voice retaliated. _I’m the reason you’ve survived all these years--_

The door opened. The tiny voice of paranoia was instantly squashed when he spotted the surprised face staring at him.

“Hey,” his former partner greeted with a smile that somehow could light up the whole room. “Come on in.”

The spy caught himself in midstep. No. This was not a social call. “Dez wants to see you.”

“Dez?” asked Nora.

“…My boss.”

For a second, she didn't reply. But he could see the apprehension in her eyes.

“Look,” said Deacon quietly, “I understand if you don’t want to come--”

“I’ll go.”

“…You know this could be a trap, right? You know how easy it would be for me to kidnap you, and use you to bring down the Institute?”

She looked at him in the eyes -- the eyes that were hidden behind his sunglasses. “I know. And I’m sure you also realize how easy it would be for me to have you kidnapped, and perhaps even tortured for information?”

“I know,” said the liar honestly for once. “Yet here I am.”

“Here we are,” his former partner echoed. “I trust you, Deacon.”

Those words warmed him more than he’d ever admitted. A genuine smile found its way back to his wary face. “You keep forgetting my lesson, Miss Manette.”

“I don’t trust everyone, Mr. Carton. I trust you.”
The man who could bullshit even in his sleep was lost for words. The sky might be dark and grey on this cloudy day, but he had found his sunshine.

“...So, where is the meeting?” asked his Lucie Manette.

“My favorite place.”

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A/N: A lot of things are happening all at once, and a lot more are incoming. Sit tight.

Lucie Manette and Sydney Carton are characters from A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens.

A super ginormous thanks to tomberi-no, who has been helping me reviewing the story before it's published. Writing is so much more fun because of you, tomberi-no-san. Thank you!!

As always, thanks for reading. And thank you for the reviews. See you next time.

Title: “The Fat Man” - Fats Domino, 1950.

Contact info: gmail - pinoko19. tumblr - pinoko-k.
“So… they made you a new husband, huh?” asked Deacon.

“Hm.” Nora took a breath of cold air and glanced at the grey sky above.

The sun was hidden behind layers of thick clouds. The unfiltered, fresh air on the surface carried a permanent sour stench. The pavement underneath her boots was cracked and littered with occasional debris. Yet, there was an air of familiarity, a sense of comfort that she was not able to feel in the safety of the Institute. Perhaps it was city -- the landscape, the buildings, the streets.

Or perhaps it was the company.

How strange. She had come to trust a man who had never taken off his sunglasses in front of her, whose eyes she had never seen, whose real name she didn’t even know.

Did it matter, though? The color of his eyes, or what his name was? As Shakespeare had said through his famous character, ‘What’s in a name?’

It was his character and his actions that truly counted. The fact that he had helped her, the fact that he had kept her safe, and the fact that he had made her laugh.

This strange new world seemed more bearable when he was around. A man with the ability to turn all her half-empties into half-fulls. And that was what truly mattered.

“...I wouldn’t take the deal, either,” said Deacon, his tone took a quiet turn. “If a synth version of my wife showed up, I’d freak the hell out.”

Nora almost stopped in her tracks. Although she had absolutely no reasons to be, she was shocked, to say the least.

“You’re married?” There was more than hint of sourness that Nora couldn’t ignore. And it wasn’t coming from the air.

“Was,” Deacon replied. Nora could see his frosty breath from his parted lips before he turned to face her. “She got tired of me humming show tunes in my sleep,” he told her, flashing an easy grin. “Ran away one day. That was years ago.”

The reason was so ridiculous that it had to be a lie. The first part, though… He did have a wife. Once.

*What was her name? What did she look like? Do you have a kid?*

*Stop it, Bennett! That’s none of your business!*
A grown man was married. Why was she so surprised? Yet, the former lawyer was at a loss for words. All she could utter was a weak, “Oh.”

Deacon shrugged and added, “Didn’t some dead guy used to say, nothing is certain except death and taxes? ...Oh wait. Scratch the last one.”

A random quote from Benjamin Franklin seemed out of place. But, like the man himself, there’s often more to his words than meets the eyes.

The self-proclaimed liar who couldn’t tell the truth even if he wanted to, did tell her the truth in his own unique way. His answer, his real answer, was hidden underneath his words. Nora spotted it: Death.

They had both lost their spouses. No wonder he understood her so well.

“I’m sorry,” Nora mumbled. What more could she say?

Deacon waved a hand to dismiss her concern. “The world doesn’t stop spinning no matter how bad things are. Hell, even a nuclear bomb didn’t stop the sun from rising. Life goes on.”

“It does…”

What happened to his wife? How did she die?

Would it be out of line for her to ask? Would he even tell her the truth?

She could feel his eyes on her profile, studying her. Nora halted the train of thoughts.

The cold winter breeze felt prickly against her warm cheeks.

Deacon broke the brief silence, “It’s good that you didn’t accept the body double, though.”

“Why?” she asked before she could stop herself.

“Because…” There was that grin of his again. “...it’s a scam. Obviously.”

That’s it?

Of course. Was she expecting a different answer?

Nora pushed that ridiculous thought away. “A person can look exactly like another person, but it’s still not him. It’s not the face, it’s the inside.”

“It’s not the face?” His smirk widened. “Aw! And here I am, swapping faces, thinking I could be someone else.”

She glanced at the man in sunglasses, a man whose whole face she had yet to see. “You know, even if you change your face again, I might still recognize you.”

“You think?” To her surprise, his grin turned into a softer, genuine smile. A smile that made her feel as comfortable as a cozy fireplace in a harsh winter night. “Well, I’m glad.”

Her steps took her closer to her companion. With each step, the distance between them diminished until her elbow almost touched his. Was it for warmth, for safety? Nora didn’t know.

All she knew was it felt right.
It wasn’t the landscape, the buildings, or the streets that made her feel at ease.

It was the company.

It was him.

For the longest moment, everything felt right. The conversations, the company, and the simple delight that he could bring a smile to her face -- a smile that brightened this shitty hellhole.

But the magic was over when a certain building loomed in front of them.

“The library?” Nora glanced at the four-century old building.

“Well, I promised I’d take you here,” said Deacon. “I was hoping it’d be under better circumstances.”

Her gaze lowered for a brief second, perhaps to access the situation, the potential threat, or whether or not if she should run.

_Run_, Deacon urged silently.

“Let’s go.” The pre-war relic crossed the street without waiting for him.

Deacon hurried to catch up.

“I used to spend my days here,” she told him as if nothing was about to happen. “Studying for my bar exam.”

“Huh, that’s funny. I used to spend many hours here, too,” he replied without missing a beat despite the tension in his gut. “How come we never met?”

“Perhaps it’s something called ‘two hundred some years apart’?”

“That didn’t stop us from being pals, though.”

The tiny smile she gave him eased his knot in his stomach. “Fate.”

_Fate_. “Maybe I should send this Fate a gift basket.”

“We should.”

_We_, he noticed her choice of word. And he did not mind a single bit.

“Wait.” Deacon stopped her just before the entrance. Without a second thought, the spy took the Stealth Boy off his belt. “Take this.”

Nora looked at the device without taking it. “Why?”

“Consider it an insurance.”

She glanced up at him, frowning. “But you won’t have any.”
Dez won’t kill me. “I’ve more tricks up my sleeve.” He quickly continued before she could ask another question, “Do you still remember how to use it? You flip this switch, then press this button. It’ll buy you thirty seconds. People can’t see you, but they can still hear you. So try not to make any noise when you run away.”

He could have handed it to her and stepped back. He should have. But he didn’t.

Whatever part that drove his actions would remain a mystery to him for a long while, but all Deacon knew was he had taken a step closer and landed right into her personal space. Without another word, he lifted her leather jacket up a little and clipped the Stealth Boy onto her belt. She was close, close enough that her hair brushed the tip of his nose.

If she looked up…

And she did.

Deacon could almost see his own reflection in her eyes. The monster that he was, in the eyes of someone who was untainted by this world.

Run! a tiny voice inside his head yelled a silent warning to the pre-war woman. Get away from this monster! He’s cursed!

Deacon took a hasty step back to quiet the voice. “We need a codeword,” he told her, snapping back into the professional spy mode.

“A what?” Nora asked, almost in a daze.

“A word that would not make sense to anyone else. In case anything goes south, that’d be my signal for you to pop the Stealth Boy and get the hell out.”

She studied him for a brief moment. “You don’t trust your boss.”

“I trust that she’d do anything for our little dysfunctional family. And I do mean anything…” Deacon swallowed a sigh. “Trust me, I’ve known her since she was a green recruit.”

“…You think she’d kidnap me?”

“I hope not,” said the spy quietly. “Look, it’s not too late to turn around.”

“But… What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll deal with my boss.” Deacon shrugged. “What can she possibly do to me? Kick me out? Nah. She needs me. She and I both know that.”

The eyes that were looking him were very blue, even under the cloudy grey sky. Deacon was tempted to slide his sunglasses down his nose to see the color of her eyes without tint of the dark lenses.

“…Sidebar,” said Nora.

“Sidebar?”

“The codeword.”

Right. Lawyerspeak. “You sure you want to do this?” asked Deacon, giving her one last chance to exit.
His Lucie Mannette nodded with no uncertainty. The soft, delicate features on her face hardened to a firm, unwavering look. “Whatever it is, we’ll face it together. We’re partners, right?”

*Partners.* The cloudy sky seemed brighter, the load on his shoulders felt lighter. A genuine smile found its way to the liar’s wary face. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

---

A tall woman with a striking silver hair greeted them at the foot of the stairs. Glory, aka The Angel of Death was there with her trusty sidekick, aka the minigun. Deacon held back a tense frown as the Railroad heavy’s eyes scanned Nora from head to toes, then back up again.

“Don’t mind the minigun,” he told his partner. “This is Glory. You met her.”

“Yes, at the church,” said Nora. “I’m--”

“The Wanderer,” Deacon interjected quickly before she could say her name. He’d been careful not to reveal this piece of intel to anyone in the Railroad. And he wasn’t about to tell anyone anytime soon. “The one and only. You cleaned this place?”

“Did a quick sweep,” said Glory. “Some were already dead when we came in. Those idiots probably killed each other.”

“Guess there are traces of humanity left in the mutants, after all,” commented Deacon half-heartedly. The knots in his stomach got all tangled up into a giant ball of anxiety. “Come on. We’re late for the party.”

The Angel of Death, however, did not move. Glory once extended her gloved hand to the pre-war relic, but not for a friendly shake. “Weapons. Hand ‘em over.”

“She’s not armed,” said Deacon.

“Says the liar,” jabbed the Railroad heavy.

“It’s okay, Deacon,” said Nora, unzipping her leather jacket. “She can search me if she wants.”

Glory spotted the device on her belt. “Stealth Boy?”

“Not a weapon,” Deacon pointed out. “Unless she hauls it like a rock -- a very, very expensive rock. In that case, everything around us could be a weapon. Hell, she could throw books at us.”

The tall, silver-haired agent snorted. “This way. Dez is waiting.”

---

The library was covered with dust and debris. This was once Nora’s home away from home. Time had taken a toll on her favorite place in Boston. The reading room where she had spent countless of hours in was now in disarray. Tables were askew, chairs were broken, some of the bookshelves were moved away from the wall to form some sort of barricades.
Nora glanced up at the coffered ceiling. Familiar patterns greeted this old friend, returning more than two centuries later. Even the high ceiling could not escape the disaster. Nora spotted bullet holes and dark spots of what seemed to be smoke or fire damage.

“This place used to be so beautiful…” mumbled Nora.

“I could only imagine,” Deacon replied quietly. “All these books… Such a shame.”

The pair followed the silver-haired agent through a side exit and into the center courtyard of the library. Nora was more than familiar with this quiet spot. It was a sanctuary where she used to take a break from the stacks of heavy books, a place to stretch her achy muscles from studying for the bar exam.

The mini garden remained somewhat intact. The decorative fountain in the middle still stood in one piece, although now was dry without a drop of water. The trees and the plants had long been dead. The green sanctuary was now a brown and barren.

From the other side of the fountain, a red-haired woman stepped out. Her breath formed a dense white cloud as she approached. It took Nora a second to realize it wasn’t due to the cold air, but the cigarette in the woman’s hand.

*No smoking in the library!*

But it didn’t matter anymore, did it? No more rules, no more laws. This was the post-apocalyptic world.

“The Wanderer,” said the leader of Railroad. “Or is there a name you want to be called?”

Out of habit, Nora almost answered. But she spotted the tiniest twitch in Deacon’s brow. He had prevented her from telling Glory her name just a short moment ago. Whatever reasons he had, Nora trusted his judgement.

“It doesn’t matter,” the former lawyer replied, steeling herself as if she was standing in court facing her opponent. “You can call me whatever you want, Desdemona.”

Nora doubted it was that woman’s real name. This was the Railroad, where everyone used codenames.

Desdemona studied her intently for a moment. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t kill you where you stand.”

“Dez!” Deacon immediately stepped between his partner and his boss.

“It’s okay.” Nora put a gentle hand on her partner’s arm before she stepped away from him and once again faced the leader of the Railroad. “Here’s one reason: I can’t help you if I’m dead.”

“And why would you help us? You are the mother of the Institute’s leader.” Desdemona shot her spy a glance. “...If the intel is correct.”

“It’s correct,” Nora confirmed. “But you are also mistaken. I’m an outsider. It certainly wouldn’t matter to the Institute if you killed me.”

“But it would matter to your son,” said Desdemona. “You are a valuable hostage.”

“My son doesn’t own the Institute,” Nora explained. “Every major decision they make is decided
by a group of people called the board of directors. Even if you kidnapped me, there’s nothing my son could do if the board didn’t want to take actions. And if he took actions on his own -- which he would not -- he could easily be fired by the board and be replaced by another person. That is their system.”

Truths and half-truths were weaved together to form a convincing argument. It’s all in a day’s work for the former lawyer.

Desdemona’s piercing gaze remained on Nora. “The Institute stole your son and murdered your husband, how could you forget about all that?”

“I haven’t,” said Nora, her voice sharpened in an instant. *How dare you make that assumption? * “And I never will.”

“Yet you are on their side!”

*What choice do I have? Turn my back on my only child?* “The people who were responsible for kidnapping my son were all dead. The man who murdered my husband was killed in front of my own eyes. Should I blame the children or grandchildren of those involved with the kidnapping? Would it give me back all these years I have missed in my son’s life? Would it give me back my husband? No! No, it wouldn’t.”

Nora took a long breath to calm the fire in her belly. The air was cold and laced with a sour stench. This was not the world she once lived in, yet this was the world where she was stuck in. A world where she would spend the remaining of her life, however long or short it would be.

“Come on, Dez,” said Deacon to his boss. “It’s not like she wanted things to turn out like this.”

Nora shifted her focus on her partner momentarily before she continued, “A wise man once told me, ‘the world doesn’t stop spinning no matter how bad things are.’ If we keep looking at the past, we’ll miss everything we have in the present. My son is alive…” *And dying.* “...The Institute has been his home his whole life -- I don’t like it a single bit, but there’s nothing I can do to change that fact. I don’t care if he is the director or the janitor, what matters to me is that he is still here on this earth, that I could still spend some time with him. Even if it’s just an hour or minutes.”

“You might be able to forgive and forget,” said Desdemona, “but I cannot. Not with what they have done to us!”

Nora was walking on eggshells, yet it’s not a path she could turn around and walk away. For the synths, for Shaun, and for Deacon…

“The persons responsible for the attacks on the Railroads are all gone,” Nora told them. “The SRB -- Synth Retention Bureau -- handles the missing synths. The former head of SRB had been missing for more than ten years, presumably dead. His successor was the one who was giving you troubles in the last decade. A vicious man, and he’s never trusted me. He has been replaced, I made sure of that.”

Desdemona frowned. “What do you mean?”

“They had footages of your operation at Malden Center,” said Nora. “Glory was caught on camera, but the other person was never seen. The head of SRB was determined to find the mysterious man.”

“Or woman,” Deacon added.
“Or woman,” Nora echoed with a knowing look at her partner. His presence calmed her nerves more than he’d ever know. “The head of SRB was closing in on this mysterious person. I had to do something.”

“Did you kill him?” asked Glory.

“No. I framed him.” She dropped her gaze to the cracked ground of the garden. “I’d have been disbarred for what I did. But I would do it again…”

“Hey,” said Deacon quietly, “the Bar Association no longer exists.”

A sad smile flashed across her face. “That’s true…”

“What did you do?” asked Desdemona.

“Long story.”

“We have time.” The leader of the Railroad turned to her bodyguard with a minigun. “Guard the entrance and keep an eye on the premises. The Wanderer and I have a lot to talk about.”

“You sure?” the tall woman asked.

“C’mon, G,” Deacon chimed in. “Our friend is unarmed. Even in a fist fight, my money’s on Dez.”

Glory nodded. “I’ll be outside.”

The Angel of Death was out of the picture. Deacon let go of a breath he had been holding.

But the situation continued to be delicate. On his right, his boss had taken a seat at the edge of the fountain. On his left, his partner had settled down on the bench across.

Which side should he be on? If he stood by fountain, Nora might feel isolated. But if he went with his heart and sat by his Lucie Mannette, no doubt his boss would feel betrayed.

Deacon wisely chose to stand somewhere in the middle of the fountain and the bench.

Was this what a pre-war trial looked like? Or was this closer to an interrogation? Or a peace talk that was meant to stop a war? Whatever it was, Deacon couldn’t quite shake off the uneasy feeling.

“If what you said is true,” Desdemona started, “you helped Deacon. Why?”

“He’s my partner,” Nora replied.

Deacon liked that simple answer. He liked it a lot.

“Partner?” Desdemona repeated with a frown.

“More than that,” Nora clarified. “He helped me look for my son, risked his life for me, and taught me many things about this strange new world. He is a mentor, a friend. I trust him.”

The cool air in the courtyard suddenly felt warm to the subject of the conversation. Hiding a smile,
Deacon carefully maintained a perfect poker face.

Desdemona’s sharp gaze landed right on her master spy. “...I can see that. You followed Deacon right into something that could have been a trap.”

_Come on, Dez, not again._

His partner, however, was unfazed. “You are taking as much of a risk as I am with this meeting, aren’t you?” The former lawyer turned the table on the Railroad alpha. “Showing yourself in front of someone who -- you think -- is associated with the Institute in broad daylight. Why? Because you know there is a chance I can help you. And you are right. I can help you, Desdemona.”

The alpha snorted. “Unless you show us where the Institute is, I doubt you can.”

“There is no front door,” Nora replied. “The only way to get inside the Institute is through teleportation. And don’t ask me how. I’m a lawyer, not a scientist.”

“She’s right,” Deacon decided to add his two cents. “Think about it, Dez. If there’s a hidden door to this secret lair, I would have found it by now. She can help us… Hell, she’s been helping us, and you know it. Patriot, remember?”

“Is it true that you helped Patriot?” asked the alpha, lighting up yet another cigarette.

“I helped a friend,” said Nora. “I didn’t know he was Patriot, and he still doesn’t know my connection with the Railroad.”

“What did you do?”

Nora glanced at the grey sky as she began her tale, “The SRB was investigating the leak -- the escape of synths. The head of SRB couldn’t close the case, and so my son wanted me to take over the investigation with fresh eyes. I knew I had to find the leak before the SRB did. And I found out it -- it was from a friend of mine. The kid is not even twenty, but he’s a genius. He told me everything. How long he’s been sending the synths away, why he’s doing it… And he gave me a choice: To hand him over, or to help him. I chose to help him.”

“How?” asked Desdemona. The cigarette in her hand was lit, but not yet touched.

“Patriot remotely planted evidence in the head of SRB’s computer,” Nora told her. “And I reported back to the department, pointing them to the beginning of a trail. They followed the breadcrumbs and found everything -- every incriminating documents -- right in the private residence of their boss. The man denied it, of course. But how often does a criminal plead guilty voluntarily? Like I told you earlier, the man who was responsible for all the raids in the past ten years had been replaced. He’s been in the detention center ever since.”

The Railroad alpha studied the pre-war relic, her eyes narrowed as she took a deep drag of her remaining cigarette. Deacon recognized that look -- Desdemona was thinking.

Eventually, Desdemona asked, “Why are you helping us?”

“Let’s not look at the beautiful gift horse in the mouth, Dez,” said Deacon. “The Brotherhood of Bigots has joined the party. Intel is hard to come by, but they already have a man inside.”

Nora nodded. “It is why I agree to meet with you. The Brotherhood’s presence concerns every synths in the Commonwealth, and those who are involved with them in any way.”
The alpha narrowed her eyes. “We could just sit back, and let the Institute and the Brotherhood kill each other.”

“It took you years, yet you still haven’t found the Institute,” the pre-war lawyer countered. “Do you think the Brotherhood could find it in weeks? Or months? How long do you think it would take them to notice the Railroad?”

His partner had brought up the exact point that had been bothering Deacon. The Railroad might fall before the Institute…

“You’ve dedicated your life saving the synths,” Nora continued to fire, “you obviously care about them. Now their existence is being threatened, and your entire organization will soon come under the Brotherhood’s crosshair. Can you win this fight on your own?”

No.

The Railroad alpha didn’t answer. But Deacon knew her answer was the same as his.

“We’re on the same boat, Desdemona,” Nora urged. “We need to help each other.”

“‘We’?” Desdemona scowled. “You want me to work with the Institute? The same bastards who have been hunting us down like mole rats?”

“No. I am asking you to work with me.”

“You are the Institute.”

“If I worked for the Institute, why would I risk my life coming here, knowing how easy it’d be for you to kill me? If I really worked for the Institute, we’d be having this conversation in the interrogation room of the SRB.”

There was a flash of fear in Desdemona’s eyes. She was right to be afraid. Deacon had put all his eggs in one basket by being the two women together. He could lose his partner as easily as he could lose his boss.

Hell, he could lose both.

“I told you,” his partner concluded, her tone calm yet firm, “I am an outsider. All I want is to help the synths.”

“And she has,” Deacon prompted. “Patriot, Dez.”

For the longest moment, the Railroad leader silently stared down at the pre-war woman, gauging her. “What do you want from us?”

“Intel,” said Nora. “Eyes and ears on the ground. And I’ll give you all the update I have from the inside of the Brotherhood.”

“Sounds like a fair trade,” said the spy to his boss.

The alpha frowned. “...And how do we know you won’t sabotage us?”

“Why would I want to go through all these troubles to sabotage you?” asked the former lawyer in half exasperation. “If my goal was to destroy the Railroad, I would have handed Patriot to the SRB. And you certainly wouldn’t be standing here right now.”
That sent a chill down Deacon’s spine, knowing how right his partner was. She had put her life in his hands by agreeing to this meeting, but he had also put his life in hers simply by showing his face in front of her.

Trust. It was such a terrifying concept. Terrifying, yet satisfying. A double-edged sword that could be his destruction or salvation.

“I don’t expect you to trust me,” said Nora. “But think about what I said. All I’m asking is to trade information. Our goal is the same -- to help the synths.”

Just when Deacon thought the worst storm was over, just when he thought he could breathe a sigh of relief, he caught shadows from the windows across the courtyard. Several huge shadows.

Son of a bitch!

His partner saw it too. “...What’s that?”

Alarmed, Desdemona whipped around and saw the green giants through the windows on the top of the stairs. “I thought Glory was guarding the entrance!” the alpha whispered in a harsh tone.

“The subway entrance,” said Nora quietly. “In the basement.”

Deacon nodded, that was his guess too. “Time to go. Quickly and quietly.”

It was too late. One of the mutants glanced at the courtyard. “Humans!”

Shit!

From the corner of his eye, Deacon spotted his boss had suddenly faded away and disappeared. Stealth Boy. Not wasting another second, the spy immediately grabbed his partner’s hand and dragged her up the same stairs they’d come from.

“Pop your Stealth Boy and run!” he told her as they stumbled back into the reading room adjacent to the garden. “I’ll distract them.”

“No!” Nora pulled him between two askew bookshelves. She quickly clipped the Stealth Boy back onto Deacon’s belt. “Go. I’ll buy your some time.”

“You crazy? You’re not even armed!”

“I don't need to be.” She looked into his eyes. Her warm, nervous breaths tickled his neck, yet, her gaze was steady and firm. “Trust me. I’ll see you back in Diamond City. Go!”

Deacon felt a shove and stumbled out into the open. He heard a very faint, yet familiar hum. Whether he liked it or not, the Stealth Boy had been activated by his partner.

Just then, a series of blinding flashes lit up the dim library. One by one, synth troopers materialized out of thin air as the transparent man in sunglasses stood among them in awe.

None of them noticed him.

This had got to be the most bizarre moment of his life.

Where the hell did the synths come from? Why were they here?

“Scanning,” a synth nearby announced. “Target located.”
Their laser rifles immediately pointed at the green monster who had stomped its way across the courtyard and into the library.

It’s time to bolt!

Quickly, Deacon looked back between the bookshelves to get his partner.

But it was empty.

Nora had disappeared.

Run! his instinct yelled at him. Get the fuck out of here!

His feet moved of their own accord and took him to the exit as a battle took place behind him.

Questions after questions flooded his mind with each step.

Did his Lucie Manette just summon an army of synth troopers? Where did she go? Was it a hidden Stealth Boy? Or… teleportation?

What the hell happened?

In the blink of an eye, the sound of battle was gone, the dusty bookshelves had disappeared, the air was once again crisp and odorless.

And she was once again all alone.

Standing in the middle of the dim, circular room, miles away from the library she’d escaped from, Nora fought back the dizziness and nausea from teleportation.

Did Deacon make it out? Was he safe? Perhaps she should head back to the surface…

Where would she find him, though? It’s not like she had his phone number that she could call.

Nora stepped out of the teleportation room to gather her thoughts for a moment. The only thing she could do was to return to Diamond City and wait for her partner. He would come find her… wouldn’t he?

Out of desperation, she had shown her secrets in front of the Railroad, in front of Deacon. Synth troopers were at her disposal, perhaps even coursers should the need arise, and most importantly, the ability to teleport…

What would Deacon think? Would he be suspicious? Perhaps even afraid of her?

He should be…

She had summoned an army of synths with the device on her wrist, anyone on the surface would be wary. Especially someone who had been dodging the Institute for years. Especially someone who was as smart and cautious as her partner.

Partner… Did he even want to be partners with someone his boss did not trust?
That thought only made her nausea worse.

“Mother,” said a voice from the speakers above. “Come see me in my office.”

Shaun?

How did he know she was back? Nora glanced at the Pip-Boy on her wrist. Was her son tracking her?

Or perhaps it was the unscheduled teleportation that had given her away. After all, who else had the privilege of coming and going as she pleased?

The elevator took her down the glass tube and traveled further underneath the earth. Still shaken from the narrow escape, Nora pushed a few strands of stray hair off her face and put on a calm front before the elevator stopped.

Sitting behind his desk in the director’s office, Shaun looked exhausted, even more so than usual. Was he feeling sick again? “You okay, Shaun?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” He glanced over at her. “You, on the other hand… What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t suppose you summoned the synths to keep you company.”

Shaun knew. Of course he did. “I was at the library,” Nora told him. “And the super mutants showed up.”

“Hmm. The mutants.” Her son scowled. “BioScience should have handled their waste disposal properly.”

“What do you mean?” Nora asked.

Shaun shook his head. “Nothing important. Be careful, Mother. The Commonwealth is no longer the place you once knew. If you wish to read, I could get you some books.”

“It’s not just the books, Shaun,” said Nora gently. “I used to spend hours at the library. That place was beautiful.”

“Was.”

“Was…” Her son was right. The building, the books… If only she could show her partner the library in its full glory.

“Mother…” Shaun hesitated for a brief moment before he asked, “...Do you truly think there is hope on the surface?”

Did she? Her thoughts zoomed right to her partner. A selfless man who had dedicated his life to help others. A survivor who was not only smart and resourceful, but kind and funny.

“I think so,” Nora replied. “The world up there is far from perfect, but there are people doing what they can to help others. They might not be able to change the world, but they’re trying their best to make it a better place.”

“A better place,” Shaun repeated underneath his breath. “Is that enough?”
"A step forward is better than none, no matter how small."

Tilting his head slightly to one side, her son seemed to ponder on her words for a brief moment. The same habit Nora’s father used to have, now appeared on her son. Two men had never met each other, yet they shared the same little quirk.

Shaun then told her, “Dr. Li has a rather unprecedented proposal. I would like to hear your opinion on it.”

Was he asking for her advice? The mother was heartened. “Sure, what is it?”

“She proposed that... if we provide assistance to the people aboveground, they could return the favor and help us in fighting the Brotherhood of Steel.”

Nora was pleasantly surprised. “What sorts of assistance?”

“Mainly in helping them develop a sustainable system to grow radiation-free produce, and showing them how to build proper water filter efficiently.”

Her son’s change of heart put a warm smile on Nora’s face. “That’s a good idea, Shaun. The people up there could really use the help.”

“Dr. Li has experience in both projects,” Shaun continued. “She was once involved in a project that brought clean water to Capital Wasteland. Later on, she led a team of scientists and began to grow radiation-free produce inside an abandon ship. I do not question her expertise, of course. But the people… How would they react?”

His concern was not unfound. Distrust on both sides ran too deep, but was it irreparable?

“No, she shouldn’t discourage him before they even tried.

“It won’t be easy,” said Nora, “but… the first step is always the hardest.”

A frown appeared on her son’s weary face. “We’ve tried diplomacy before, and it was a disaster. Would it be different this time?”

“That was decades ago, wasn’t it? Things are different now. The Brotherhood is here.”

Her son pondered for a moment. “Do you think they would help us fight the Brotherhood?”

“I don’t know, Shaun. We wouldn’t know until we tried. What have we got to lose?” Nora added, “The Commonwealth is their home. If the Brotherhood is here to start a war, people are going to suffer because of it. They have more than enough reasons to want the Brotherhood out of their lives. They might be powerless to do so on their own, but together, we might be able to achieve the same goal. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Shaun became thoughtfully quiet briefly before he concluded, “Thank you for your input, Mother. Will you be staying here tonight?”

“I’m heading back to the surface. Codsworth is waiting for me.” It wasn’t the Mr. Handy that was on Nora’s mind, but it’s the only name she dared to mention.

“...I see. Very well.” Her son gave her a long, unreadable look. “The surface is treacherous, Mother. Please be careful.”
“Deacon!” Desdemona stopped the spy the moment he set foot inside the ancient church. The Railroad alpha had been waiting for Deacon by the broken pews inside the crumbling building. “What the hell happened back there? The synths. Did the Wanderer call for them?”

“To buy us some precious time to escape,” said Deacon, his tone sharper than usual. “Do you believe her now? If she really wanted us dead, she could have called the synths while we were there. A perfect opportunity to chop off the head of the Railroad in one strike! But she didn’t. She saved our asses, Dez. What more do you want from her?”

Desdemona let out a long sigh. “…Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

The stone walls of the church were closing in on him, Deacon felt suffocated.

Standard protocol during emergency evacuation was to scatter and regroup at HQ. But now that he was back at the HQ, it didn’t feel right.

He should look for his partner, wherever she was. He should… He had to.

Deacon turned around and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” asked his boss.

“I’ve a sudden craving for some noodles,” said the liar. “Don’t wait up.”

The sky had turned dark when the man in sunglasses once again stepped inside the biggest settlement of the Commonwealth. Layers of thick clouds covered the moon and the stars. Not that the spy was in a mood for stargazing.

Step after step, Deacon found himself approaching a certain doorstep in the Diamond City, until he stopped and stared at the door in front of him. This time, he knocked without hesitation.

Seconds later, the door opened. The woman in the doorway looked unharmed.

Deacon released a heavy sigh of relief.

“I wasn’t sure if you would come,” said Nora.

“I need to make sure you’re okay. You disappeared.”

“We’ll talk inside.”

Deacon hesitated.

His partner seemed to understand. “No traps. No synths. The only robot here is Codsworth. Do you trust me?”
A metallic ball with three arms and three eyes floated behind his mistress. “Hello there, Mr. Deacon! It is so good to see you again. Why are we standing here? Come! Come on in. It’s cold outside!”

Deacon wasn’t sure if it was the robot’s friendliness or his partner’s inviting smile that made him took the first step. A step inside Nora Bennett’s new life.

The first thing that hit him was the most delicious smell.

“Cods is cooking his famous stew,” said Nora with a knowing warm smile. “I was hoping you’d stop by.”

“Nothing like a bowl of warm hearty stew in a cold winter evening, eh?” The Mr. Handy floated back to the kitchen. “It will ready in a moment. You can’t rush perfection!”

The smell of home cooking, the warm smile on a lovely face, the books on a bookshelf by a cozy couch, the classic music playing softly through the radio in the background… A sudden realization hit Deacon like a ton of bricks.

He was home.

Deep down, in his most selfish desire, this was what he wanted. A cozy place, a safe haven, with a partner who understood him. He sure as hell didn’t deserve any of these, but he wanted it all.

He felt a soft hand on his elbow, leading him to the couch by the bookshelf. The most comfortable couch he’d ever sat on. Where did she find all the furniture? If she had set this house up, he would have known.

Then, Deacon realized the answer, but it was not an answer he wanted to even admit…

“Is Desdemona safe?” his partner asked.

“She’s fine,” said Deacon. “She always carries a Stealth Boy when she’s out and about. We all do.”

Nora seemed relieved. “But you gave me yours…”

To protect you. “And you gave it back.” Deacon studied his partner. Her eyes, her nose, her lips. Then back to her eyes. “What the hell happened? The synths… Your handiwork?”

“My Pip-Boy,” Nora replied. Deacon glanced at her bare wrist; the device had been taken off. “I can use it to call for help. It’s my son’s way to protect me.”

Deacon recalled what she had told him at Bunker Hill tower. “So that’s what you meant…”

“I didn’t want you to know, didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Why did you show your hand, then?” asked Deacon. “You could have popped the Stealth Boy and run.”

The eyes that looked at him screamed an answer, almost as if she silently yelling, ‘Don’t you know, you idiot?’

Still, he waited -- waited for a reply he wasn’t sure if he was ready to hear.
“I didn’t want to see you get hurt,” she replied.

Why do you care? The liar wanted to ask, but he couldn’t. He didn’t deserve a home like this; he didn’t deserve her.

“I know who my son is,” said Nora quietly, “and that’s something I cannot change. But I hope we can still work together, not just for the synths, but for everyone. I am here now, Deacon; I can never go back to two hundred some years ago… So I might as well make this world a better place. Would you help me?”

Of course. “Doubt your son would want you to hang around with someone like me.”

“Last I checked,” said his partner with a tiny smile, “I am the mother.”

The music played softly in the background, the aroma from the boiling pot filled the warm and cozy house. But what made it feel like home was the smile on the face that was looking at him.

There was one nagging question.

“…How did you get out?” asked Deacon. “You have a built-in Stealth Boy in your Pip-Boy or something?”

His partner didn’t answer. Her gaze dropped to her own hands, perhaps to the wrist where her Pip-Boy would sit.

“Or…” Deacon almost didn’t want to guess, but it was an answer he had to know.

“…Teleportation?”

Her silence was her answer.

A flood of possibilities rushed to the spy. Could he take her Pip-Boy and infiltrate the Institute? Could Tinker Tom to study it, maybe even reverse-engineer the device to make their own teleporter? Did Tom even have the skills to do that?

“Deacon,” said Nora, “please, don’t--”

The soft classical music in the background suddenly faded as a voice of a man spoke through the speaker of the radio, “Mr. Montague, or whatever your name is…”

For a fraction of a second, Deacon thought it was a DJ or some sort.

But the look on his partner’s face told him otherwise. Her face turned pale as ghost, her eyes widened in shock. “Shaun?!”

Shaun? Her son? What the hell? Deacon bolted up from the couch.

“I suppose it’s about time,” said the man in the radio. “You and I… we need to talk.”

A/N: Shakespeare’s famous character who said ‘What’s in a name?’ was none other than Romeo Montague in ‘Romeo and Juliet.’
A giant thanks to tomberi-no for beta-ing this chapter and the ones before this. Yes, what you did was beta-ing, even though you might not think it was. Polishing the turd until it shines!

Thanks for reading. As always, thanks for those who took the time to review this story. Thank you for your constant support!

See you next time.


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