Peculiar

by Maiafay

Summary

Nora had always been a peculiar girl, but what begins as a harmless fetish becomes something much deeper, and a certain synth detective becomes more than just an obsession.
Commonwealth

Chapter Summary

And so...we begin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Soulmates aren't the ones who make you happiest, no. They're instead the ones who make you feel the most. Burning edges and scars and stars. Old pains and pangs, captivation and beauty. Sweetness and madness and dreamlike surrender. They hurl you into the abyss. They taste like hope.

- Victoria Erickson

Part One: The Commonwealth

Robots had always excited her.

When other children begged for puppies and kittens, she had begged for a Mister Handy or a Miss Nanny. Too expensive, her mother had said. Damn robots stole my job, her father had said. But Mister Handy could be my friend, she had said, and they had given her a frown. Peculiar girl, they had said, go play with Sally Johnson down the street. But Sally Johnson was always playing with baby dolls or pretending to be a princess. And Matthew Tyler next door wasn't any better. He never got off his Giddyup Buttercup, and never let her be the cowboy, or Grognak, or the Silver Shroud. Those are for boys, Matthew had said with his meanie face, wiping the snot trickling from his nose with his scrawny, sunburned arm.

Mister Handy would have let her be the cowboy. Mister Handy would have let her be anyone she had wanted.

She got older, and her love of robots enviably took a different turn. It was after a visit to Wattz Consumers Electronics. While her mother had shopped for a new washer, she had clung to the velvet ropes cordoning off one of the many Mister Handy displays. It hovered inches away, three shining arms rotating gracefully around its round body as it pretended to dust and clean a pea green living room set. It paused, seeing her, eye stalks pinwheeling open and closed. It whirred a hello like a mechanical purr. It hadn't been programed to speak yet, but the sound touched something deep inside, something her ten-year-old self had barely begun to discover.

She had explored it later that night, the echo of that sound in her ears, in her body. Her first orgasm, a powerful, shuddering wave of pleasure followed by a fuzzy sense of wrongness. Her mother's voice whispered in her head:

Peculiar.

Her parents never did get a robot. Some instinct must have warned them that her fascination went
much deeper and weirder than they had wanted to admit. But after missed school dances, a lack of slumber parties, and weekend after weekend of her laying around the house, nose-deep in the latest Robco catalogue, it became apparent no human boy could pique her interest, or human girl for that matter. So her parents did the reasonable thing:

Sent her straight to a shrink.

Dr. Weatherby, a boring man with thick brown glasses forever sliding down the huge slope of his sweaty nose, plagued her existence for most of high school. Between his endless personality tests and inkblots and questionnaires and verbal probing, it was a wonder how she managed not to pitch herself out his six-story window to end the torture.

Technosexuality is what he told her distraught parents, and her cure? A tiny bottle of blue pills that tasted vaguely like seaweed. Back in the prewar days, drugs cured everything, and yeah, it cured her all right, killed whatever sex drive she could have had for that boy fumbling with her bra strap or sticking his clumsy fingers inside that delicate part of her body. Her mind was hazy all the time and her grades slipped from A’s to D’s. She had nightmares of Mister Handy cutting her to pieces or burning her alive.

It wasn't until one morning after a particularly nasty dream of being strapped to a chair and spoonfed glass by a Miss Nanny, it was pretty damn clear the meds had to go.

So she lost her virginity to Pete...something. Told her mother the glorious news and flushed those little blue fuckers down the toilet right in front of her face. But her mother had had the last laugh. Another pill took its place; not in the medicine cabinet, but in her purse. Birth control. For the oodles of no sex she would be having. Sometimes you just can't win.

High school ended. Collage began. She could have gone into Engineering or Robotics, but that would have been like an alcoholic trying to be a bartender. So she studied Law like her grandfather, a decision applauded by her parents (with profound relief), and supported with grant money and her father's wise investment in Nuka Cola stock.

Boyfriends came and went, even tried a few girls, but seriously, girls were a pain in the ass. So it was back to boys again, and then men. Nothing past the first date, or first base. So many; too many. Never good enough, interesting enough, funny enough. Dating was like digging into a package of gum drops and getting nothing but the flavor you hated. It was fucking depressing, each night gasping and trembling to images of steel arms and mechanical voices. And forget about admitting her habit to anyone. Nobody understood. Though, a Hester sales rep named Dan Mather gave it a fair shot after a private game of truth or dare in her little rundown campus apartment-when truth: she wanted to fuck robots. Oh shame.

Dan had laughed, then saw her face and backpeddled, apologizing for being an insensitive prick. And just when he seemed like he wasn't such an asshole, he started crawling toward her, his jeans sliding off his barely-there ass, and making what he must've thought were sexy robot noises. He sounded like a dying Protectron.

And speaking of Protectrons, that was how she'd met Nate.

The subway was the worst and best part of her day. The jostling humanity wore her out, but there were Protectrons everywhere, and while not as exciting as Mister Handy and its variants, there was something almost innocent about them, the burbling beeps they made, the flashing lights under their head casing. The urge to touch one was usually manageable—unless they were trundling right in front of her—as this one was. The bulky form of it swayed no more than a foot away, tantalizing, tempting her fingers with the clear view of its inner gears working. All that complexity and beauty
within arms reach. Her subway train squeaked to a stop. The doors opened. People spilled out. The
Protectron made a trilling beep and faced her with a clunky swivel.

"Hello, citizen, please present your subway token."

Its automated voice sent a thrill through her. Her finger traced its glass casing. Smooth and cool. A
ingle began low in her belly and slithered downward.

"Citizen, please present your token. Delinquent behavior will not be tolerated."

"Uh, hey, better give it your token. They get pretty damn pissy if they think you're going to hop a
train. They'll haul you off or worse, and they don't care how lovely you are."

A man with dark hair that curled over his forehead, and handsome in a beaten sort of way, nose a bit
too big, but kind eyes. Deep and expressive. Her hand fell away from the casing. He didn't even ask
why it had been there. Didn't judge. Just smiled.

"I'm Nate," he said, and extended his hand.

His grip was hot and a little moist, but that was okay. The tingle in her body stayed. It swelled and
filled her.

*Maybe...just maybe with him it will be different.*

She married Nate after a year, and three months after that he went off to war. Her old habits returned,
off and on, but nothing past fantasies. Harmless ways to pass the lonely nights—and to lessen the
fear of losing him. But no letter came in the mail. No knock on her door. What did come was the
resentment—not for Nate, but for the war itself. For the so-called land of the free. Why couldn't
everyone just leave each other alone? All this death and destruction over scraps, and her husband
captured in a tug-of-war with no end. It didn't matter whose flag won. The prize was death either way.

Eventually, Nate came home, but as a different man. Injured and sullen. Pulling away when she
touched him, when she kissed him. He was a wounded, suffering thing, a dog that growled at
anyone who tried to help him. It was a miracle she even became pregnant, but that was a rare
moment in the park, after they had moved to Sanctuary to start over. Nate had almost been himself
again, laughing and tucking flowers into her hair. They had found a secluded corner, hedges hiding
them, grass soft and fragrant. The picnic basket stayed covered, the sweet rolls inside, uneaten. He
pinned her with his eyes first, then with his body. He tore at her underwear and she wrapped her legs
around him, riding his desperate, jerking thrusts.

At the end he sobbed. She smoothed his hair and held him to her breast. Rocked him like a baby. It
was all she could do.

Shaun was born nine months later.

She couldn't bond with him. Not even when they laid him in her arms. He cried and cried. They say
babies can sense things. Maybe he sensed how peculiar she was. Everyone told her it would come,
this mysterious *it* like a magical blessing from the maternal Fairy Godmother. Shaun was her flesh
and blood—and a stranger. A needy ball of flailing flesh and big eyes. It was a horrible thing to
think, and no matter how many prayers she said or how much she tried to be a good mom, no
magical blessing came, nope, not for her.

She didn't breastfeed, so Nate took care of Shaun most of the time. It seemed to suit him, get his
mind off the war and its horrors. No more thrashing awake, screaming and weeping. No more
shaking like a chem addict on the floor. Maybe it was meant to be this way. Now she could finish
that last semester of law school and get her career going. Never too late, right?

A mere twelve credits later and she graduated. Now her certificate sat collecting dust. All her applications went unanswered or unread. To cheer her up, Nate talked her into getting a robot. A Mister Handy. And no, she had never told him about her...habit. And now after three years of marriage? Oh by the way, honey, I might find some other uses for our new toy besides dusting and cleaning.

She should be elated. Her childhood wish had come true. But now her habit seemed on the brink of discovery, a curtain that had thinned with the sunlight, revealing how moth-eaten and fragile it was. If she slipped up her marriage was over, so she prepared herself for war. The enemy would not get past her defenses, no matter how adorable or shiny it was.

Nate decided on naming their Mister Handy, Codsworth, who was every bit the English butler, voice and all. "Mum," Codsworth would say, "what would you like for dinner? Mum, I must insist you allow me to do the laundry. Mum, here is your tea, two cubes of sugar and a dash of milk, Oh, mum, here is your paper—opened to the funnies of course," that last bit with a wink in his voice. It was like being an addict with a chem station in the middle of your living room.

Ignoring him—it-didn't work. Like a cat, Codsworth seemed to hone in on her discomfort, going out of its way to appease and satisfy every whim, every need. It was torture. And Nate, she could count on one hand how many times they had had sex since Shaun had been born. The house was stifling. Codsworth was everywhere, puttering around, cooking her favorite meals, planting her favorite flowers, cleaning shit that didn't need to be cleaned—and one day, she had finally had it. Enough was enough, and the straw too, was what her father would have said.

Idioms aside, finding the right moment came sooner than expected. It was a late Saturday afternoon. Shaun was napping, and Nate had gone to the Super Duper Mart to pick up a few things, but a "few things" always turned into a cartful of junk they didn't need. She had an hour—or more if Nate decided to hit the hardware store in Concord.

Codsworth tended the geraniums in the garden, and she hummed the latest from The Five Stars as she showered. She dried her hair and curled it, made her eyes up and dabbed a bit of gloss on her lips. Then the finishing touch: a fine misting of the perfume, Glamour, an anniversary present from Nate and not cheap. A twinge of guilt then like pinpricks in her stomach, but she shrugged it away—and her robe—and strolled from the master bedroom without a stitch of clothing. She headed for the kitchen, still humming, and began to make coffee.

The sound of clinking mugs drew Codsworth, like a moth to the flame. He made a strangled noise and she smiled, her bare backside in full view. "My word, mum! You're...you're naked! Where on earth are your clothes?" The shock in his voice. It was hilarious.

"I don't know, Codsworth, they seem to have fallen off."

"Well, that's just odd. Odd indeed. The last I checked you hadn't lost any weight—not that you need to mind you," Codsworth added with haste, arms rotating back and forth with agitation. Poor little thing, he had no idea what to do. She stirred her coffee, leaning over the counter, breasts pressed against the chilly surface. All three eyes pinwheeled completely open. Was that like pupil dilation for a robot? Some sign of arousal?

"Ahhh." Codsworth's arms stopped moving and he gave an indulgent chuckle. "I know what this is, you naughty girl—"

She straightened, spoon frozen in her hands. Did he know? Truly? Her pulse raced, tiny drums in her
"Thinking about expanding the family are we? A little sister or brother for young Shaun? It's absolutely brilliant, mum. Sir will be most pleased when he comes home—and don't worry, mum, I'll make myself...scarce," Codsworth said with emphasis on scarce. He chuckled again: my, my, humans are so darling, aren't they? and floated toward Shaun's room.

The spoon clanked in the mug. Of course he would think that. And what was she thinking? He wasn't programmed for...sex. No robot on the market was made for that. Even if she somehow made him understand, it would be like taking advantage of a child. Or a pet. And then another epiphany came, this one like a slap in the face.

The robot she wanted didn't exist. It would never exist. The Robotic Ethics Board wouldn't allow it. A robot could be any shape or size but human. No androids allowed. They didn't have the tech, nor the energy to wade through the moral swamp of creating a robot that looked like a person, acted like a person. Because if you did, then by golly, you might have to treat it like a person, and that's when the waters got murky.

So that was that. This was her life, pining for a fantasy that would never be realized, and here she was, standing naked in the kitchen, trying to seduce a talking appliance. The heat building in her eyes spilled over, splashed onto the countertop.

"Mum? Are...are you all right?" Codsworth glided into the living room as if her tears had summoned him.

"Yes, Codsworth, please...please just give my robe."

When Nate came home she was still in that robe, bundled under the covers and feigning sleep. In the other room, Codsworth fed Shaun, singing an Old English lullaby.

Nate stood over her, his shadow on the wall, his gaze like a weight. Minutes passed; tension stretched into a taut, thin wire. Then his sigh broke it, and he climbed into bed without a word.

The next morning was October 23rd, 2077, the day the world finally snapped its own wire that had been stretched to the breaking point for years. It had been such a beautiful autumn morning, the reds and golds of the leaves vibrant in the sun. She had been happy, getting ready for the day, making a promise to her reflection that she would give up her habit, that she would try for the sake of her marriage, her child.

Then the newscast. The sirens. The panicking, fleeing herd of humanity.

Good thing Vault Tec had been there to save the lucky ones, distract them with calm directions and cooing assurances. She should have known something was wrong. The Vault Tec staff, the secret glances, the nervous smiles. Decontamination, they had said. Just step into the pod, they had said. Liars, all of them. There had been a poetic justice to their deaths, as would be for the bastard who had shot Nate and stolen Shaun right in front of her pod. He still owed her for the two hundred years worth of nightmares in cryogenic sleep, seeing that same scene play in an endless loop. It had been so impersonal, like Nate hadn't even mattered. She had loved him, and yes, maybe that love had faded a little, but after all that he had been through in the war, a bullet to his head was injustice. It was insulting.

She would find that bald-headed bastard. She would tear out his eyes with her bare hands.

But the new world wouldn't make that easy. When she had stumbled out of the vault elevator, the
shock of the destruction had dropped her to her knees, and she wept there in the dirt like a child
struck senseless, surrounded by the bones of those not fast enough to make it, or privileged enough
to be chosen. She wept for her parents who were dead and dust; she wept for her neighbors who had
never woken from their frozen sleep, and for Nate who had at the wrong moment and time.

She wept for the world. For herself. Everything she loved was gone.

All around her, a barren and scarred landscape, Sanctuary a graveyard of crumbling husks that
people had once called home. Her Pip-Boy crackled a warning wherever she turned. Everything was
poison: The land, the water, the air. How would she find Shaun? How would she even survive the
journey? Everything in this fucked-up world wanted to kill her or eat her.

Codsworth was her anchor, a rusted, dented miracle still trying to clean the empty shell of their
house. But he stayed stuck in the past, unable to fathom what had taken place—maybe programmed
not to. Even when she had told him: Nate is dead. Shaun is missing, he still didn't seem to
understand. So she left him there, weeding dead shrubs, and explored Sanctuary.

Her first kill was an hour later.

The giant bugs didn't count. That had been pest control, and Codsworth had made short work of
them with a few puffs of flame. Those wonderful Mister Handy tools for lighting summer barbecues
and trimming rose bushes and so tenderly changing Shaun had become weapons. Tools of survival.

But Codsworth hadn't been there when it happened. She had intended to stick by Sanctuary, but the
ghosts and the memories had driven her beyond the borders. The lake and the forest called to her, the
blasted trees jutting from the hillsides like a wooden cheval de frise. There had been a broken dresser
sitting in a clearing near a dilapidated shack. The remains of a toilet squatted in the front yard along
with a molded red couch now faded a sickly melon color, and the pieces of the once white front door
on top of it. Through the opening, darkness. Nothing moved—until she cracked open one of the
drawers, and a woman bolted from the shack, screaming, something silver and gleaming waving in
her hand.

"MINE, MINE, MINE!" The woman chanted as if in the throes of some religious fugue, words
rising in a phlegmy shriek. Her gray hair stuck out in matted tufts, half her teeth missing or rotted.
The dirty blue flannel shirt she wore flapped in the wind, holes revealing another layer of grimy
clothing underneath. The silver thing—a pistol—pointed at her and fired.

The drawer exploded in her hands and she ducked, scrambling behind a large, dead tree. More shots,
splinters flying. She was going to die over a fucking dresser. Another shot, this one sending wood
grazing her cheek. She covered her face, shouting, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't know it was yours!"

"Mine, bitch! Mine!"

Her first human contact, and the woman was a fucking loon.

You betcha, honey. Loonier than a toon. And you know what you gotta do. " Nate's voice in her
head, rueful and reluctant, like he had to break some bad news, and gosh he wished he didn't have
to. She hadn't brought the gun she'd found in the Vault. Stupid, but the overgrown roaches and flies
had been hard to hit, and it seemed more logical to save the bullets. She had a combat knife, but she
hadn't planned on using that on anything but those purple fruit trees. They were a bitch to harvest
with all their thorns.

Guess you get to prune something else instead, honey.
The woman reached the tree, panting like an animal, ragged and wheezy. "Gonna get you, bitch!"
And she loosed a gleeful cackle that made the Wicked Witch of the West seem sane.

*Go for the throat, or the eyes. Do it quick.*

The woman sprung around the tree in an *Ah-Ha, found you!* lunge, but found a knife in the throat instead. It stuck there dead center, almost comical with its slight wobble and position, until the blood started spurting around it, a bright red arc splashing the tree. The pistol in the woman's hands fired into the weeds and then fell to the ground. Its owner collapsed soon after. The woman lay at her feet, gurgling, pawing at nothing, and then made a sad, tired sound before dying, as if relieved the whole messy business was over.

She shook over the body—no, her victim—her breath rushing in and out, her fists clenched and aching. But it was only the aftershocks of adrenaline. No remorse came. No guilt. Nothing at all. Like she was a radio station receiving dead air.

*She was crazy, higher than a red balloon on a windy day,* Nate sounding pleased. *Served the bitch right, I'd say.*

She knew it wasn't Nate in her head. He was in Vault 111 where she'd left him, a chilled corpse inside a fancy hi-tech freezer. She couldn't bear to bury him. Not yet. No, this wasn't Nate. It was her, some dormant, seething part of her that had disguised itself as her husband. Soldier of war. Warrior of the apocalypse. If that's what it took to get Shaun back, then so be it.

*Honey, trust me, it gets easier after the first.*

Of course it did. It always did.

Codsworth was waiting for her back in Sanctuary, clucked over her like a jet-propelled hen. *"Mum, you frightened me! I thought you were never coming back!"*

No, she was back. And she was pissed. This Commonwealth would fear her. Hell hath no fury like a neglectful mother.

It took a week before she ventured out again. When the DIY training sessions with sharp pointy things, and the few firearms she'd found had finally become second nature. When she had exhausted herself clearing out the homes of dead friends and neighbors. When she'd had enough of looking at the drooping form of Codsworth who was still in denial, still unable to accept reality. She didn't blame him. He was a machine after all. But he did have one useful thing to say:

*"Concord, mum, there are people there."*

And she'd met one on her way to the neighboring town—not a person, but a dog, a German Shepherd that wouldn't stop following her. And that was fine; he did an amazing impression of a rabid wolf when anyone attacked her—which happened as soon as she stepped onto Concord's main street. More crazies like the woman, but these were in leather armor and carried bigger guns. The Crazies had besieged a group of people in the Museum of Freedom, the leader calling for help on the balcony. She had almost left him there, a desperate dark-skinned man who looked as if he'd stepped out of the colonial era: hat, coat and all. He wielded a laser version of a musket, red beams disintegrating any Crazy that came too close. If she didn't lend a hand, she'd be no different than the ones trading gunfire with him.

The war may have ruined the world, but it didn't have to ruin her too.

*Raiders,* is what Preston Garvey called the people that had been hounding his group since Quincy,
picking them off one by one until twenty had become five: Old Mama Murphy, Jun and Marcy Long—and Sturges, dear Sturges who actually made her laugh, made her feel human again, made her want to help. Her walls came down a little, enough to get the power armor on the roof and end the siege. The armor was clunky, hard to maneuver. How the hell had Nate tolerated this thing? It did keep bullets off her, and okay, it was thrilling to jump off the roof to the ground without a scratch, but it was like being encased in a metal coffin.

But the metal coffin didn't seem so bad when a giant demon lizard decided to crash the raider party in the street, tearing them apart like paper dolls and charging at her like a scaly missile from hell. Thank God she had saved the minigun bullets, otherwise she and her poor dog might have been lunch. Deathclaw was what Garvey called it after the dust had settled and the creature had breathed its last. Dead bodies of raiders littered the street, but Garvey and his settlers were safe. The Minutemen, he said, could use someone like you. But by then her walls were back up, higher than ever. Couldn't afford to get attached, get distracted. Not even for a good cause. Shaun needed her.

Garvey could have Sanctuary. It wasn't home anymore.

But she wasn't alone, not really. The German Shepherd that had tagged along went by the name of Dogmeat. An awful name, but he wouldn't answer to any other. Mama Murphy said he belonged to whomever he chose, and apparently he had chosen her. Dogmeat was safe. Not human, not robot; no aggravation or temptation. He did what she asked when she asked it. And the bonus: he did tricks and played fetch.

Diamond City holds answers, but they're locked tight. You ask them what they know, but 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 alley it walks.

That mantra repeated itself in her head as she had neared this fabled Diamond City. Another one of Mama Murphy's little trips into the Twilight Zone, or Chem Zone to be more accurate. This was how the "sight" worked. Getting a frail old woman high, now that was a new low, no pun intended. Just another shitty thing on her shitty list of you should know betters. And it wasn't even the first. She was racking up a body count, cutting a bloody swathe through the Commonwealth like she'd been born to it. That Law degree seemed so far away now, a dream of a woman who no longer existed.

No, honey, not in this world. The weak get eaten or worse.

She glimpsed horrors on the way. Besides the massive mosquitoes, moles the size of Dogmeat, and miserable looking deer with two heads, there were humanoid creatures who twitched and shuffled like zombies. Ghouls, is what Garvey called them. Irradiated humans. Some are normal, but others have gone mad. Those are called ferals. The ferals seem to like abandoned buildings and train cars, so she avoided those. They also were attracted to noise, so she stayed quiet. Dogmeat whined low, ears laid back. He didn't seem to like ferals either. Given their misshapen bodies, bulbous heads, and filthy, tattered clothes, they probably smelled awful.

On her Pip-Boy, the Diamond city marker blinked ahead, the skyline of Boston looming through the fog.

The sight took her breath away. Gone were the pinnacles of technology, the marvels of modern architecture, its former glory shadowed now by an alternate city of decay and ruin. The bones of skyscrapers spiraled to the sky, stark and lifeless, windows like eyes gone dark. Great sheets of metal curled from the sides of buildings, rusted on roofs; collapsed highways blocked entire districts, the piles of debris so high they could be buildings themselves. Advertisement signs lay on their sides, or torn from their frames; huge Nuka Cola billboards lay like twisted corpses in the streets. Raiders were everywhere like an infestation, nesting in barricaded alleys or buzzing along plywood bridges
that spanned between crumbling buildings. And some districts were guarded by big green creatures who looked like men—but due to radiation or something else—had grown twice the size, and were a hell of a lot more uglier. She'd have to ask someone what they were, if she made it to Diamond City alive. Thankfully the mean greens were idiots and easily evaded. Often bellowing *stupid blue lady!* as they attempted to give chase. Charming fellows.

The wooden signs to Diamond city seemed to spring out of nowhere, white arrows pointing to salvation. Another block, and turrets idled in strategic positions, the guards dressed in old baseball uniforms, umpire helmets. Some carried bats wrapped in barbed wire. One guard saw her vault suit and stared as if seeing a unicorn or dragon. Then he shook his head, freeing himself from the spell. He motioned toward a green wall peeking over the remains of an apartment building. *That way,* his nod said. Then he walked behind her as if making sure she got there all right, the gesture so civilized and goddamn *sweet,* she had trouble keeping the tears at bay. She sniveled as she walked, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Some warrior she was.

Diamond city. What her world had once called Fenway Park, this world now called *The Great Green Jewel.* Now she understood how Alice felt in Wonderland. All she needed was a Cheshire cat and some *drink me* potions. Suppose Dogmeat could be her cat, and her Mad Hatter could be the reporter lady cursing and stomping at the gate. They wouldn't let the reporter in, some sort of story she had printed about the Mayor. Something about synths—wait, this dump had a Mayor?

Why yes, yes it did. And after the reporter used her to get inside, she had made his acquaintance, a portly man that oozed insincerity like a proper politician and was absolutely no help in finding Shaun. Nice to know some things didn't change.

However Piper Wright, thorn in the ass to authority figures everywhere was all too eager to point her in the right direction—after an interview, of course. Piper wasn't happy with what the "Vault Dweller" (this damn vault suit needed to be burned) had to say about the state of this post-apocalyptic bliss, but really, could Piper blame her? She just wanted to kill the bastard that had shot her husband and get Shaun back. And if this Institute had a hand in any of it, she'd kill them too, boogiemen or not. Their synths sounded like clone people, bona fide Invasion of the Body Snatcher types, and while creepy, was really not her problem.

"Come on, Piper, where is this detective friend of yours?" She was already at the door of Piper's cramped hole of an apartment, hand on the rusted knob. Outside, Piper's little sister, Nat, hollered for people to read the *Synthetic Truth.* Dogmeat wandered around a small, ratty rug as if deciding whether to lay on it or not, then snuffed in displeasure and padded over to her. He bumped her leg with his nose and then sat on his haunches, panting.

Piper lit a cigarette, the match casting an orange glow on her face and the ends of her silky dark hair. Disappointment in her eyes flickered like the match, her quirky smile not quite snuffing it out. "Okay, Blue, but you'll keep me in the loop, right? I'm not a sign or a street post here. People need the truth, and if you find out anything…" Piper let the thought trail off and fiddled with the cuff of her dull red press jacket, the brim of her newscap hiding her eyes.

She sighed, taking the bait. "Yes, I'll give you the scoop. Promise." That is, if she even bothered to come back here.

"You're the best, Blue, you know that? All right, good old Valentine. Just follow the alley to the corner, and from there to the signs. You can't miss them. A great big neon heart with an arrow." Piper drew an imaginary heart in the air with her free hand.

"Neon heart? Is this Valentine running a brothel?"
Piper almost choked on her cigarette. "Oh shit!" she sputtered between coughing, her cheeks redder than a Nuka Cola label. "Oh wow, I can't wait to tell him that one."

Why was that so damn funny? Whatever, she didn't have time for games. With Dogmeat in tow, she left Piper still giggling in her metal shack, and strolled past Nat balancing on a pallet that looked dangerously close to collapsing. The dark, narrow space between makeshift buildings beckoned, what the denizens of this quaint shanty town called an alleyway.

*Oh, it's...it's bright. So bright against the dark alley it walks.*

Not sure about the walking part, but the small sign burned like a street lamp, the surrounding metal shacks and boarded path bathed in a deep pink glow. Bright letters floated in her vision long after she darted toward the direction of the arrow. It didn't bring to mind a brothel, no; it was more like an advertisement for a carnival sideshow. The signs you'd see shining like beacons over the main attractions, or gleaming near the openings of tents so garishly colored they hurt the eyes. An announcer's voice, booming and dramatic, played in her head: *Come, see the great Monsieur Valentine unravel the mysteries of the universe! Witness his incredible and death-defying powers of deduction! Be stupefied and amazed as he unveils secret treasures and lost heiresses!*

He probably wasn't even a real detective. Who here would know any better? It's not like he had any formal education or training. In this world, anyone who recovers a stolen bottlecap could say they were a detective.

Dogmeat waited outside, and she entered Valentine's office, expectations low. They dipped even further at his teary-eyed secretary caressing Valentine's ties, and babbling about him missing for two weeks. How the heck had Piper not known this? Wasn't this guy her buddy? And now look, another damn charity case. Of course Valentine had gotten himself into a mess. And of course she would hunt him down because finding the detective so he could find her son was just the way things worked in this world. She didn't say that though; the secretary, Ellie, seemed to genuinely care what happened to her boss, and plus it would have been mean. Someone in this world ought to have manners, even if she was screaming with frustration on the inside.

The search for the detective led to another Vault: Vault 114, Valentine's prison or grave—she wouldn't know until the end. And reaching the end took a while. This Skinny Malone character had employed an army. Some were normal men, but others were bald, skin ropey-looking and raw, no noses and black eyes. Oh, these must be the regular ghouls Garvey had mentioned. They may not be ferals, but they still gave her the willies, even if they did die screaming and pissing their pants like regular humans.

Level by level, she and Dogmeat cleared the Vault. Her weapon of choice: a razor-wired bat—courtesy of Moe's Swatters—and just as deadly in her hands as the submachine guns were in theirs. Before the Vault, she'd used the darkness of the subway to her advantage, creeping up and then attacking. *Remember, honey, head, eyes, and throat,* advised her so helpful dead husband. And inside the Vault, where the fluorescent lights illuminated every cobwebbed corner, she would take a hit of Jet—the Mama Murphy special—and barrel toward them with hyperspeed, yelling and swinging with all the savagery of an enraged cave woman, crushing their skulls like overripe mutfruit, her psychotic dog mauling the shit out of what was left.

There was something satisfying about getting blood all over the creamy walls, dirtying Vault Tec's pretty white towels and linen, knocking over shelves, denting lockers, and shattering the glass windows. She was merciless, reckless, and unstoppable, the reflection in her victims glazing eyes showing the same image again and again. Shaun in his crib, his chubby little arms reaching for her, and all the times she let Nate or Codsworth take her place. She didn't deserve to find him alive. She
didn't deserve to find him at all. But she was here and Valentine needed her because who the fuck else was coming to rescue him? His bawling secretary? Mad Hatter Piper? Garvey and his band of not-so-merry-men?

Last chamber, the centerpiece of the upper level a large, round window framed by the horizontal bars of a Vault Tec logo. The Overseer's office. A lone guard, some moron in a slick top-knot taunted someone inside, asking if the prisoner wanted snacks. Top-knot got a smart-ass barb in return that almost made her smile. So Valentine had sass.

She told Dogmeat to stay at the bottom of the stairs. Top-knot was hers. She crouched near the wall of the office, forming a battle plan. Though Valentine didn't know she was there, he did a good job of distracting his guard, got him all worked up over cheating at cards and his name being crossed off three times in Skinny Malone's black book. Something in Valentine's voice tugged at her, the thick Midwestern drawl sending a pleasant sensation through her lower half. He didn't sound old, but not young either. Maybe somewhere around Nate's age—the age he had been, rather. So hard not to think of Nate in that cryopod, a ring of bloody ice crystals around the small hole burned in his temple. Her hands clenched the bat, imagining what remained of baldy's face stuck to the razorblades. Top-knot whined about smoothing things over with Skinny Malone and jogged right toward her hiding place.

Top-knot would have breezed right past had she not uttered a wild yell and even wilder swing, exploding from her crouch, catching him under the chin and snapping his head back. Blood gushed from his bitten lips, tongue, and what remained of his jaw. But he didn't go down. The hard-headed bastard staggered back, bumped into the window, leaving a bloody handprint on the glass. Dead silence from the room. No shouting of *What the hell?* Or *Who is that?* Or some other inane comment. Her respect for Valentine went up a notch.

Top-knot pawed at his holster. She threw herself at him, using the momentum to power the swing. His hand crumpled, two of his fingers tearing off. He howled and she slapped his mouth shut with swift undercut to his bleeding chin. He crashed to the floor, twitched once and died.

Her reflection in the window should have scared her. Fuck, she was a Neanderthal. She'd be picking hair and brains off razors and barbed wire for days. Blood covered the left side of her face, arterial spray from some ghoul in the first hall of the Vault. Still no sound from the Overseer's office. Past her reflection, a figure in shadow, face hidden beneath a brim of a sort of hat. But his eyes… she squinted, trying to make sense of it.

"Hey you. I don't know who you are, but we've got three minutes until they realize muscle-for-brains ain't coming back. Get this door open." Already Valentine was ordering her around. Well, she'd let it go. Who knew what these goons had done to him for the past two weeks.

His eyes stayed in her mind as she hacked the terminal to the door. When it opened, she hesitated. She had bulldozed through this Vault to reach this guy, so what was she afraid of? His eyes had glowed, right? *No, they hadn't, stop being stupid.* Valentine could be a ghoul, though. Not all of them had black pits for eyes. Those feral ones she'd avoided on her journey had eyes so bright they rivaled Valentine's sign.

She took a breath, steadying herself, then entered.

Valentine chose that exact moment to light a cigarette. In the dim office, the flare of the match threw his features in sharp relief. The effect was like a punch to her gut. She gasped, her hand fluttering to her mouth like some fucking damsel about to faint. Her cheeks swelled with instant heat. Why hadn't Ellie told her? Warned her? Did she think she wouldn't have come? Hell, had she known, she would've sprouted wings and *flown* here.
They stared at each other. He took a long drag, his radiant eyes appraising her, lingering on her vault suit a moment before settling on the dripping bat in her hands. His eyes, the iris an inverted horseshoe on the verge of closing, the shade between citrine and topaz. The whites of his eyes were some sort of textured metal, glinting embers where the light of his cigarette touched. His tan trench coat, two shades lighter than his worn fedora, hung open to his waist in a patchwork of repairs and frayed hemlines. His pants needed a good mending, as did his drab white shirt and dusty tie.

The silence lengthened and grew awkward. The cigarette switched hands, going from his undamaged hand to the metal framework of his other. A bubble of hysterical giggles welled in her throat, but she clamped her lips shut. Smoking...he was smoking. Like a person, like a human. Then he spoke to fill the silence, said something her fogged mind didn't quite comprehend.

"Gotta love the irony of the reverse damsel-in-distress scenario," he said, his voice heavy with wry humor. The subtlety and nuances of his accent couldn't have been programmed. Then again, it had been two hundred years. Tech had certainly advanced beyond Mister Handy or the Protectron. Whomever had made this creature had outdone themselves. Valentine then mused out loud, his gaze penetrating and cautious. "Question is, why did our heroine risk life and limb for an old private eye?"

"What are you?" It came out as a squeak. Nothing makes a memorable first impression quite like hysterics. He cocked an etched eyebrow, all-too-human mouth lifting in a lopsided smile, then he stared past her and grew solemn again. The bloody handprint on the window. Her violence to free him. She would do it again in a heartbeat.

"Look, I told you," Valentine said, somehow sounding both patient and irritated, as if he'd explained this one too many times. "I'm a detective. I know the skin and the metal parts ain't comforting, but that's not important right now. What matters is why you went to all this trouble to cut me loose."

The skin and metal parts ain't comforting...oh if he only knew. "A baby," she blurted, trying to look everywhere but at Valentine's face. On either side of his cheeks and extending to his neck, a wide jagged crack revealed the metal skeleton beneath, and a glimmer of a golden eye socket. Her own cheeks went molten. "I need help finding my baby. He was taken, by people"—shit, of course he had been taken by people"—I mean, by people"—of course he had been taken by people."I mean, by a man, and a woman...I think. At least the other sounded like a woman, I don't know. He—my husband—is gone. He's dead. Shot by the man who stole Shaun, my baby. That's his name." She had killed over a dozen men and here she was, blubbering, but whatever level of pathetic she appeared and sounded like, it seemed to work. Valentine smothered his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray on the Overseer's desk, voice low with sympathy.

"Oh, damn...I'm—that's awful. I'm so sorry," he said with such sincerity it brought tears to her eyes. "Listen, don't worry about the details right now. I've taken cases with less. If we get out of here alive, you have my word that I'll do everything I can to find your boy."

She nodded. Twisting the bat had become a nervous tick. Dogmeat nudged her leg with a whine. She had forgotten he was there. Valentine chuckled, a gliding sound that did all sorts of things to parts she didn't want to think about right now.

Maybe old Valentine here has a windup key, why don't you ask him to take off his pants so you can check. A nasty edge to Nate's voice, vindictive, intent on sabotaging the one thing that had finally started to go well.

Shut up, I don't need you anymore.

Oh right, you have a shiny new toy to play with. Well that's swell, honey. Real swell. Just remember, when he rejects you, I'll be here.
"Well hello again, boy. You keep good company." Whether he meant her or Dogmeat, she couldn't tell. Valentine hunkered down to scratch Dogmeat behind the ears with his framework hand, the metal sliding though the thick fur, the dog whining with pleasure and thumping his tail. What she wouldn't give to trade places right now. "This one is a bit picky who he runs with," Valentine said. "But once he's made up his mind, he's loyal to the end. Aren't ya, boy?" Dogmeat gave a soft woof, as if reminding them danger still lurked nearby. Valentine straightened and doffed his fedora at her. "And does my heroine have a name?"

From the tantalizing glimpse under his hat, the cracks from his damaged cheeks hadn't quite touched his smooth, bald head. They tapered into the thicker line that fused the back of his skull with the front. Her fingers curled around the bat, already tracing those edges. He was like a living doll, a beautiful, broken doll. And then she was a child back in her bed again, all those nights of dreaming, hands roaming, pretending something like him existed.

A robot. And a man. Perfection.

She hid her smile behind the curtain of her dark hair, her name like a promise.

"Nora."

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Chapter End Notes

If my fic was a movie: Natalie Dormer plays my Nora. That woman is gorgeous. However, picture Nora as you like ;)

Any time I can be more realistic than Bethesda, I will: Glowing Sea radiation, chem addiction, character interactions, etc.

Story will be three parts, and those three parts will adhere to the main plotline - to a point. The deeper into the story, the wider and heavier the canon divergence. Not AU, but there is an original plotline concerning Nick that ties it all together.

Also, I have a shovel and will be filling plot holes as I go ;P

Fun fact: there is a scavver just outside Sanctuary that is very possessive of an item much like the MINE! woman. There is a dresser (no shack) and the scavver gets hostile if you get too close. I thought it would be a perfect opportunity for Nora here to get her hands bloody.

Comments, feedback, kudos are loved.
Nick and Nora fumble through that awkward "get to know you" stage. Nora struggles with jet addiction.

Her goals had been simple:

Kill Baldy in the worst way possible.

Get Shaun back.

And now a third had been added to her list, no less important and by no means last.

Seduce Nick Valentine.

If the debacle with Codsworth had taught her anything, it was to know the object of your affection before attempting to woo it, and even then, it was a balancing act: a game of push and pull, of lure and retreat.

*Don't throw yourself at any man,* said her mother long ago in their bathroom of sunny yellow tile and soft white rugs, the seaweed pills taking their final death swirl down the toilet. She and her mother had stood over the bowl as they would a coffin at a funeral, the water refilling, three years of misery spewed into the septic tank. Her mother had asked Peter's last name, and she had answered with averted eyes. Her mother had taken her shoulders, given her a gentle shake. "*You don't do that again. Never again, you hear? You make him work for it. A man respects a woman he's chased and won, not the one who clings to him and weighs him down. There's a reason why they call it the ball and chain, honey."

In a different time and place, she stared into another toilet bowl, the rim cracked with age, the once sky blue now faded to a cloud. The walls, metal and concrete instead of checkered tile, a cement floor and a worn *Welcome Home!* mat instead of plush rugs. And a locker room shower, torn from its home and fastened to a new one. She had long since given up on forcing the noodles to vacate. She spat into the water and rested her head on the seat. Yeah, Ellie's pretty patootie had sat there, but so what? She needed to think, get herself in order, and let Takahashi's power noodles decide whether to continue on, or abort digestion all together.

On the floor next to her knee, a cherry-red inhaler. Her last puff of jet. She needed to get more, or make more, or...something. Just for today though, and tomorrow — okay, just until she and Valentine found Baldy and made him suffer. Then she'd give it up. Go cold turkey. She wasn't getting any visions anyway. Not even after ten or so doses. Maybe something was wrong with the stuff she'd found in that crazy woman's shack. Maybe it was bad; maybe it just didn't work for her. Or maybe all she needed was to find or buy a better batch. Preferably find. Even in the prewar days, chems were an expensive habit to maintain — but not only that, it was becoming a crutch. If she kept leaning on it, it'd soon have her hobbling around on perfectly healthy legs.

Her mother's voice stayed with her, that wise advice for men from a dear departed world. Oh, how the rules had changed. Can't play hard to get with a man — or in this case, a synth — who might not
want you to begin with, and thought you were a psychopath.

She had almost blown it at the vault.

Top-knot's name had been Dino, and Dino had friends. A lot of them. Valentine had asked her: "How do you want to play this?" And she had played the same grisly tune she'd been playing ever since waking out of cryosleep. "Loud and hard, eh? Well, it gets the job done." A thread of disapproval in his voice, a glint of it in his yellow eyes. So he was a judgmental robot. Why was he angry? He'd been a prisoner to these goons, harassed and threatened. Sure he and Skinny went "way back" but that didn't excuse the last two weeks — two weeks that could've been more had she not bothered to find him.

Rather than remind him of this, she pulled her punches — her swings, anyway — and let Dogmeat and Valentine pick off the thugs as they chose. She laid off the jet too. If Valentine had an issue with her bashing heads in, he would probably have an issue with her puffing her way to victory. She was still riding the high anyway, the breezy mobility of her movements, the way the dullest color seemed to pulse with life.

Outside where Vault 114 met Park Street Station, Skinny Malone and his crew greeted them with machine guns and hard glares.

Two triggermen flanked Skinny: one ghoul, one human. Skinny motioned with his machine gun at the bullet holes in the walls, the bodies on the floor. "What the hell, Nicky," Skinny, said trying to sound tough, but it came off more like: Aww, come on Nicky. He was a walking mobster cliche. Pudgy in his clean and pressed black suit, matching bowtie snug under his doughy chin. The satin ribbon of his fedora gleamed under the construction lights. "You come in here, shoot up my guys? We gotta good thing goin' in this vault. Do you know how far this is gonna set me back?"

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for your two-timing dame, Skinny. You ought to tell her to write home more often," Valentine said.

Next to Skinny, Darla, a scraggly brunette clad in a sequined number that belonged more in a nightclub than in an underground vault, wagged her bat at Valentine. "Aww, poor little Valentine," Darla cooed, mocking. "Ashamed you got beat up by a girl?" Maybe miss mob queen should think about finding a wonderbra, give those baby B's a much needed lift in that dress. And that bat? Please. It didn't even have barbed wire. Darla continued to flap her beak, squawking this time at Skinny: "I told you we should have just killed him, but no, you had to get all sentimental!"

"Darla, I'm handling this." Again that plaintive whine, Aww honey, I told ya. "Skinny Malone's always got things under control." So Skinny talked about himself in third person. Yay, another nutball. Did he talk that way all the time? During sex? Skinny Malone's gonna give it to you hard, baby. Yeah, yeah, just like that, doll, show Skinny Malone some lovin.

Her giggle drew their attention: Darla, Skinny, the two thugs. They scowled at her vault suit, then sneered at her bat—except Skinny who seemed to note the blood caked on the wood and on the crushed skulls of his dead men. The dawn of realization bloomed across the bland expanse of his face. His sausage finger worried the trigger of his weapon. She flashed him her Mona Lisa smile, the one that always made Nate want to throw her into bed, or throw up his hands in frustration. Yeah, that's right, buddy boy, it's not Valentine you need to worry about.

Beside her and a growling Dogmeat, Valentine tensed as if sensing a turning point. Violence or diplomacy, he had her back. Rescuing him had guaranteed that, but what happened after this — after her case — depended on her choice.
And she chose wrong.

The bitch had wanted to kill Valentine, and Skinny hadn't let her. The fires were already smoldering between them. All it needed was a little stroking. "You know, Darla, Skinny here is never going to listen to you. Not now, not ever," she said sounding wise and resigned. *Been here and done this, sister.* "He'll always ignore your warnings. He'll always brush you off. It won't matter how right you are. He's always going to choose himself over you. So why not save yourself the trouble and give him a good whacking now, rather than later. You could take his place, lead his crew. What would your Daddy think then?"

Her clue was the disappointed turn of Valentine's lips, the cracks in his skin deepening with his hardening expression, the way his eyes dimmed as if to say, *Thought so, toots. Vault suit or not, you're just like the rest.*

Shit, she had to fix this. Like right now. Darla teetered on the verge of agreement, her birdlike stance stiffening as she caught sight of new prey. Skinny took a step back from her, raising his gun — the equivalent of baring his throat — and that's what decided it. Darla's smile turned predatory. Valentine had been right: Darla did have a mean streak.

"Hey, hey, doll. You're gonna let some vault bitch tell ya how I am? She don't know me. She don't know you."

"You don't know me either, Skinny."

"I know you ain't gonna whack me with my guys standing here. You ain't that stupid."

"I bet a hundred caps they won't lift a finger to save your fat ass." Darla, saying it sweet, fluttering her lashes. Skinny's men looked at each other. Then at Darla. They shifted in place, uncertain.

Darla gripped the bat, knuckles white and popping. A trickle of sweat ran down the side of Skinny's plump cheek. He could shoot her, easy, but for some reason he didn't. He stood there, cringing, waiting for the strike.

*Fuck, he's in love.*

"Wait." She commanded their attention again. Valentine raised an eyebrow with his entire body. "You see that, Skinny? See how easy she turned on you? And from a stranger's words." Darla paled, the hawk reverting to a harmless sparrow. "You're right, Mr. Malone," she said, using formality, giving him respect— and she hoped — some gumption. "I don't know you, but I know women like her. They'll tell you they love you, they'll say it's forever. And then they'll hurt you. Leave you. Kill you. You see what she is now. Save yourself, Mr. Malone. Send her back to Daddy and don't spare her another thought. You deserve better."

"I know, doll. I do, I do." Skinny loosed a weary sigh, jowls wobbling like his lips. Darla stammered and hid the bat behind her back — like that was going to make Skinny suddenly forget she had almost bashed his head in.

"Skinny, can't you see she's playing us?"

"Yeah, but you fell for it, Darla, head first. I always knew what kind of dame you were, but I didn't care. I shoulda cared. My mama always told me if you love, em, you gotta let em go, so I'm telling ya to leave. I'm not gonna sleep with one eye open all the time. Go home."

"Skinny!"
"Go on, Darla. Don't make me say it twice." And to Valentine he said, "You too, Nicky. Get the hell outta here. Consider us square for what happened at the quarry. If I ever see your ugly mugs back here again, I'm shooting you myself."

A part of her hadn't wanted to run. It had wanted to bash Skinny's brains all over the vault floor for his threat. But Valentine had pulled her along, Dogmeat running ahead of them, and when they exited Park Street Station, leaving a morose Skinny Malone and Vault 114 behind, Valentine had sighed at the "ominous" Commonwealth sky, grateful to be under it again. And then he grinned at her, saying:

"Gal, you sure got a way with words."

But was it enough to get back into his good graces? And did it matter? Because even if he didn't think she was a nutcase, there was another snag.

As if on cue, a timid knock on the bathroom door. "Sweetie? Are you okay?"

"Yes, fine… gimme a minute, please." She slumped to the floor and groaned, put her head on her knees.

Ellie, Valentine's adorable little secretary.

Ellie had practically thrown herself at Valentine when he had stepped into the office, calling her name. She had come flying down that rickety ladder from the loft, coiffed hair in disarray, her flower skirt twisted, and vest rumpled as if they had caught her taking a nap. He had swung her around once, laughing, and then plopped her back in her chair. "I take it you missed me," he'd said, and Ellie had burst into tears. Valentine stared at her in surprise, then broke into fond, heartbreaking smile. He knelt beside Ellie, his human hand covering her shaking one. "Oh, hey now, none of that. I'm alright, see? Not even a ding."

She idled near the door, an observer, a stranger. The green-eyed monster inside her spoke in Nate's voice.

Ah, the cliche. The dashing noir detective and his doe-eyed secretary. Looks like you're too late, toots.

If that was true, they would've done more than just hug. When Nate had come home from the war, she had clung to him, her hands everywhere, taking his breath, his pain, giving her soul to fill the emptiness in his eyes — and she feared — in his heart. She hadn't let him go for days, her silent, brooding statue who refused to let her gaze into his eyes, as if she might turn to stone from the horrors there.

Valentine and Ellie looked at her then as if she had spoken, each wearing the same startled frown. How natural his expressions were, his voice, the way he moved. If she were blind she would've thought him a human man. Then her stomach rumbled again — louder to make sure she'd heard it this time. The ill-tempered gurgle rolled like thunder into every corner of Valentine's tiny office. Dogmeat blocked her attempt to escape, tail wagging and tongue hanging as if to say, nope you're not going anywhere. An exchange of smiles between her new hosts. Valentine steered her to the ripped cream-colored chair in front of Ellie's desk, telling her to stay put until he got back.

Fifteen minutes later of trying to keep a grateful Ellie from paying her caps and having no luck, Valentine returned carrying two plastic bags that had seen better days, the smell of meat and pasta sending her stomach into another growling fit.
Ellie reached for her meal with gimme gimme hands, and Valentine teased her, tugging the container away before her grasping fingers made contact, rewarding her only when she laughed his name. The other container he sat on the desk as he would a plate for a honored guest, a wrapped plastic fork laying on top of the dingy styrofoam.

"I didn't know how well you and chopsticks got along," he said, "so I pulled a few strings for ya. Takahashi only hands them out to the upper stand folks, but he and I worked out a deal."

A wrapped fork. Luxury. This world was insane.

By the side of her chair, Dogmeat gnawed on the brahmin thigh bone Valentine had given him. His contented growls challenged her stomach for who was loudest. Her power noodle bowl vanished in minutes, as did Ellie's. Valentine vanished into a corner room with no door. Mattress springs squeaked with weight. A heavy sigh. Chewing quieter didn't help her eavesdrop better because Ellie decided that moment would be a swell time for small talk — AKA twenty useless questions about where she was from, where she'd been staying, where she'd met Dogmeat, what she thought of Diamond City, and had she met Piper yet? During this, no commentary from the other room, Valentine either eavesdropping himself, or reading, or performing maintenance, or whatever else synths did alone.

A different kind of grumbling began in her stomach; Takahashi's noodles had sunk to the bottom, souring, curdling. Saliva pooled in her mouth.

"Bathroom?" The word came out desperate, queasy. Ellie pointed at a small door hidden behind a short row of cabinets, her round eyes widening.

And she'd been bowing to the porcelain king ever since.

Past the bathroom door, a murmur of voices, Valentine's welcome baritone.

"She alright?"

"I think so, she said she was."

"Which in dame-speak means she isn't."

"Leave her be for now. I'll keep checking on her...the poor thing. She probably isn't used to our food, and she looks so exhausted. Can you imagine what it must have been like coming out of that vault, seeing this world for the first time? She must have been terrified."

"I...can more than relate."

"Oh...that's right. Damn, I'm sorry, Nick. I always forget there was a different Nick before that old hat and trenchcoat."

She side-scooted to the door and pressed her ear against it. Valentine's voice swelled on the other side.

"Don't fret about it, Ellie. The past is the past. She's a tough gal, though, from what I've seen so far. Brains and brawn, not a combination you find often these days."

There was no mistaking his tone of admiration. She grinned at the door like an idiot. So she hadn't completely screwed her chances. And the fact Valentine hadn't stolen a moment alone with his secretary — that she knew of anyway — signaled that they were co-workers and friends, not lovers. She'd ask later to be sure. Didn't want to be what her mother used to call a cannonball, a relationship
wrecker. Her moral compass may be askew, but it wasn't broken.

"I'll give her another five minutes. After that I'm fetching her myself." Valentine's threat got her moving.

She sat on the toilet seat and inhaled her last hit of jet. She braced herself, hands grasping the seat rim as if preparing to fly away on the Porcelain King Airlines. Everything whooshed past her in a roar of sound. Colors popped behind her eyes. For fifteen seconds…euphoria. Then the free-fall of the crash, the tremor in her hand—a tremor that hadn't been there before—but she was awake, ready to go, ready for anything, even a interview that would force her to relive the worst moments of her life. Bring. It. On.

Standing didn't bring retching; so far so good. The Jet had propelled (no pun intended, har har) the power noodle lump to move forward. Probably would pay for that later in another way, but it was her own damn fault for eating too much, too fast.

She made a fist and opened it. Over and over. The trembling stopped.

She flushed the toilet, signaling to a certain someone that she was finishing up. In the smudged mirror with a jagged crack splitting a corner, a pallid specter stared back, eyes bloodshot and encircled by purple. Jet got the neurons firing again, but it sure did a number on her face. Even her bags had bags. Cold water brought back some color, and biting her lips brought back more. A bag of cosmetics would have been wonderful right about now, but all she found inside the mirror were a box of bobby pins, two clean but tattered dishrags, a hairbrush, some lint, a pink toothbrush with a third of its bristles missing, and a half-rolled tube of two-hundred-year-old toothpaste.

A bit of that on her finger, and the bitterness washed away—as did the dried blood around her face she'd missed during a hasty scrub down in Vault 114's bathroom, Valentine outside the sliding door, his exasperated words: "Doll yourself up later, doll. It won't matter to Malone how pretty your corpse is."

How many minutes had passed? She slicked back her hair in a bun, then in a ponytail — but no, that brought too much attention to her reddened eyes — so she let it down again. Fluffed it — dammit, was that blood? Back up it went, this time softened by tendrils at her temples. The dark of her hair accentuated the unhealthy paleness of her skin, but it'll have to do.

Footsteps coming. Heavy. Male. Ellie called: "Nick, just give her another minute." Shit, shit, hurry up. She shoved the empty jet into her suit pocket, flipped her ponytail, smoothed her vault suit over her hips, threw open the door —

And ran right into Valentine.

He grunted. She yelped. One glorious moment of fumbling against him — a whiff of bittersweetness and copper, of ancient cloth and tobacco — before coming apart.

"I, uh, pardon me, was just about to knock —"

"No no, it's fine, I should've let you know, wiggled the doorhandle, or…something."

Ellie stood behind the gun-metal desk, clipboard hiding her face and a suspicious titter.

Valentine straightened his hat and pulled the white chair out for her. "So, I suppose we've all dawdled long enough. Ready to tell me about your case?"

No, she wasn't, but she sat anyway, her hands folded in her lap. The pads of her thumbs wouldn't
stop twitching. Far too many knickknacks within reach: pens, pencils, magazines, folders filled with case files, a cup of paperclips that once had been different colors, but now bore the same shade of gray. One of those in her hands and it'd be a twisted knot by the end.

Dogmeat curled at her feet, offering his support in doggy snores.

Valentine took the seat behind the desk, all business now. Ellie remained standing, pencil poised and ready. All eyes on her then. No pressure.

"Tell me everything," Valentine said, eyes like lambent wicks of flame. "No matter...how painful."

And so she did, going as far back as the day itself, that morning like no other. They needed to hear it. All they had to compare was this world, its drab brown and grays, like the molted skin of a dead thing. They had never beheld the golden splendor of autumn, the bold green of fresh-cut grass, the scarlet petals of a blooming rose. The luxury of new cars, and television, and all the shiny prewar toys. Describing this loss of comfort, of peace, made the hole in her heart widen a little more. She had taken so much for granted. What was that old adage?

You never know what you have until it's gone.

"You're telling me you're prewar?" His tone, hollow with awe, with disbelief, and with some other emotion that eluded pinning down. Ellie gaped like the Diamond City guard had. Suddenly she wasn't a client anymore. She was mythical.

"Oh my God, I thought you were just from a vault—not from before, before...How—"

"She's getting there, Ellie," Valentine said, scolding without the bite. "How about we let her?"

Ellie retreated behind her clipboard again. Valentine's attention returned, pinned her in place. Her hands wished for a paper clip, a pencil, anything that would bend and break. The twitch in her thumbs traveled to the heel of her palms. She sandwiched her hands between the cushion and the armrests, and inched forward in her tale like a train grinding along on its emergency brakes.

Vault Tec and their betrayal. The phony show of concern. Valentine straightened in his chair at their mention, mouth drawn into a reproving line. No love lost there, it seemed. She pressed onward, her train groaning on the tracks, urged faster toward its dark destination. How do you describe the passage of frozen time? An ocean of ice that spanned forever, measured only by the glittering tips of glaciers, spikes of awareness that rose and dissolved into white. There was only one moment when the ice thawed, when she stirred, limbs petrified, frost covering the window of her pod, her suit, her flesh. She was an ice queen, and her king was out of reach, imprisoned in his own crystal tomb, their little prince dozing in his arms. Helpless, all of them. Like insects who had been surprised by winter. The few feet of space between them might as well have been an abyss.

And then him.

Leather jacket creased with age and grime, rolled into cuffs at his elbows. The color of his pants could have been brown or gray or green—the crusted window of her prison prevented her from knowing. A gun holster crossed his chest, the holster itself, empty. Some sort of armor covering his shoulder, metal and discolored. Tactical gloves, one whole, the other fingerless.

His clothing didn't matter though (it does matter, Nora. Details, give me all of 'em), it was the way he moved, that casual arrogance. No one would oppose him — least of all the woman who accompanied him, or escorted him, or employed him — anonymous in her shapeless hazard suit, the visor a black mirror that gave away nothing. No badges. No distinguishing logos. (A hazard suit you
say? Hm, not many in the Commonwealth have access to high-tech gear like that). The woman had spoken in calm, pleasant tones. No trace of accent, but educated. Cultured.

"Here, this is the one," the woman said, pointing to Nate's cryopod.

(so they knew where and what to look for. This wasn't random)

The man shrugged, indifferent. "Open it up."

All she could do was pound on her ice cage. The man didn't even look at her.

"Is...is it over?" Nate said, bewildered, blinking against the stark light. In his arms, Shaun yawned and jerked, waking from his enchanted sleep.

"Everything's all right now. You're safe," said the man. Professional and calm. "We just need to see your boy a minute."

"Yes, we need to run some tests, make sure he's healthy." The woman reached for Shaun even as she said it, eagerness rushing her words, washing away the fake sincerity. Nate, damn him, had always been too perceptive.

He recoiled, hugging Shaun tight. Startled and squeezed, Shaun began to wail."No, you're not Vault Tec. Get away from us! Nora? Nora! Where's my wife?"

I'm here...I'm here. Like a ghost whispering through a wall, punching at it with weak, numbed fists.

The man stepped in, gun already pointed at Nate's head. "I said, give us the boy." Reasonable, like he was asking for the time, or the weather. "I'm not asking twice."

Nate didn't see the gun. He saw her. Their eyes met and locked. In her mind, their life played out: All the first times. When they made love, when they married, when he left for the war, when he returned. When he held Shaun for the first time — and now for the last.

The man fired. Nate's head slammed into the padding of the headrest, leaving behind a dark red smear. The woman caught Shaun as he slipped from Nate's slackened grip. Shaun, not wailing now, but screaming, little fists and legs lashing out. Nate's eyes gazed at the ceiling, seeing nothing, blood streaming from the hole in his temple and the back of his head. The woman bounced Shaun to calm him, but Shaun didn't like to be bounced. He liked to be rocked. Nate and Codsworth had taught her how to calm him those few precious times she'd bothered to be a mother. Rock him, honey... good...yeah, like that. Slow and gentle. Be a tree limb swaying in the wind. Then Nate would kiss her cheek, his voice husky in her ear. See, not so hard after all.

And now he was dead.

She kicked the pod door until her legs buckled, pounded on the glass until her fists ached. She screamed for her husband, for her son. No! No! Don't take him! He's all I have left!

He turned to her as if he'd just noticed her flailing there, hysterical with grief and fury.

And smiled.

(Nora...Nora, you don't have to say anymore)

Oh no, she did. He had the audacity to come up to her. This balding son-of-a-bitch with a jagged scar over his left eye. His gaze like corroded steel: none of the shine, all of the hardness.
"At least we still have the backup."

Those words haunted her dreams still. There would be no peace until he was dead.

A fan rattled on the filing cabinet, yarn streamers fluttering: pink and red, like a valentine. Ellie's touch, a bit of color and humor to brighten the room. Valentine rose, stiff not from lack of movement, but from anger. Ellie sighed as he lit a cigarette and began pacing: oh no, here he goes.

"Bald and a scar over his left eye," Valentine mused between drags, smoke curling from his exposed cheek. "Sounds like a certain merc I've had my eye on for a while. Ellie, what notes do we have on the Kellogg case?"

"Off the top of my head, I know the description matches. Conrad Kellogg. He has a reputation for dangerous mercenary work," Ellie said, digging through a filing cabinet. "But no one knows who his employer is."

"I think I gotta pretty good idea." Valentine paused and took the file that Ellie found, leafed through it, grunted in disgust, and tossed it back on the desk. "It makes sense finally. How he gets in and out. Neat and clean. Then the woman — hazard suit, educated. That alone rules out raiders, gunners, and super mutants. The latter can't even string more than four words together."

Super mutants? The mean greens? She liked her name better.

"So that leaves one player left. The Institute. And that means we're gonna be rattling a mighty big cage here. No one knows who they are, or where they come from. Not even me, and they made me."

And a hell of a job they'd done. Ever since they'd met, she'd wondered who could create a robot so sophisticated and sapient — and who would have had the balls to do so. Given what Piper had said and the various snippets of gossip around Diamond City, the two and two made sense.

Restless in the chair, sitting on her hands now. "You don't remember anything about them? Nothing?"

"No, none of us do. Doesn't matter the make or model, once a synth escapes, or gets cut loose, there's nothing but memories of static. White noise. Some sort of failsafe, I guess. Makes sense. If they're smart enough to build something like me, then they're smart enough to cover their tracks. But Kellogg, he's not as smart as he thinks he is." Valentine stabbed the file with his metal finger. "He lived here not too far back. Had a kid with him."

A kid? Already the possibility burned. Even her hands had stopped shaking. "How old was he?"

"Around nine or ten," said Ellie, wincing when she realized she crushed whatever hope had started to blossom. "But yes, a boy, maybe his son, or another kidnapped child."

"Either isn't too comforting," Valentine muttered.

"It could be him," she said, and before Valentine could deliver a predictable "now now you don't know that" speech, she pressed on, "Who knows how long I was in that vault. It felt like hours, but it could have been months - years. I didn't even know that it'd been two hundred years until Codsworth told me."

"Codsworth?" Valentine glanced at Dogmeat snoozing away still.

"My Mister Handy. He survived the war...still tends our house. Waters the brown garden." Her voice faded to a whisper. Her hands were misbehaving again.
"Why isn't he with you?" A note of accusation. Valentine frowned at Dogmeat. "A Mister Handy would be...handier as a companion. Teeth and fur only go so far in the Commonwealth. One bullet can kill Dogmeat. One bullet to a Mister Handy and he whips out a flamethrower."

"Codsworth's confused. Doesn't really understand what's happened to us. He wouldn't leave."

"I...see. Well, guess some help is better than nothin'. Least now you have me. Kellogg disappeared a short time ago. The boy too. No one knows to where. His house is in the abandoned West Stands. We'll go there first thing in the morning —"

"Why not now?"

He shot her an indecipherable look. "'cause if I blow too hard you're gonna fall over. You need rest, Nora, not a field trip across town."

"He's right, sweetie. you're ready to collapse. You can sleep here for the night," Ellie said. "You can clean up and shower, borrow one of my jerseys—"

"No." Dogmeat opened his eyes as if sensing her urgency, and a second later was up on all fours, tail wagging, ready to go. "Now that I know his name and where he lived, how can you expect me to wait? If that boy was Shaun, I need to know. I won't be able to sleep not knowing. Don't you understand? What if he was your child?" she said to Ellie, who gave Valentine a helpless, "what the hell do I say to that?" look.

Valentine shrugged in reply, "not a damn thing". "All right, Nora. But if you make me carry ya back, I'm gonna charge ya extra. Let's go." Valentine opened the door, Dogmeat trotting out with a low bark, and her soon after, losing her balance as the blood rushed back into her legs.

He steadied her, his sigh bordering on impatient. It said: see, you can barely walk.

As much as it pained her, she shrugged him off. Maybe he was used to coddling humans, but she would crawl there if she had to.

The West Stands loomed above Diamond City like a neglected sculpture, shacks jutting like limbs unfinished, stadium chairs like broken twigs shoveled inside piles of scrap metal and trash. Metal paneling tinged with russet, deepened to a blood orange in the setting sun. Kellogg's "house" was the biggest shack buried inside one of Fenway Park's entry points, had its own catwalk with two scratched-to-hell stop signs warning away any potential visitors.

Valentine gave the lock a thorough jimmying, dexterous metal fingers sliding in and out of the opening, twisting this way and that — the motion so blatantly sexual, all she could do was stare and fantasize.

"Yeah, yeah, grin all ya want," he said. "I know what it looks like."

If those fingers were that gentle in stroking a lock, what would they be like inside her?

An explosive spark jolted her mind out of the gutter, and Valentine jumped back, cursing, shaking his framework hand as if was on fire. And it was, in a sense. Sizzling blue electricity roped around his fingers and tangled them together — then yanked them apart. His fingers tried to claw the air; tried to tear themselves free from his wrist.

"Damn you, Kellogg. I'd just calibrated this! You bastard. You son-of-a —" He clutched his spasming hand to his chest and staggered to the catwalk railing. He hunched over it, gasping.
"Oh my god! M-mister Valentine, are you okay?" Oh fuck, oh fuck he was hurt and it was all her fault.

He laughed as if breathless, protecting his hand, and maybe himself, from her prying gaze. "Still Mister Valentine, eh? We're always past formality here, Nora. Call me Nick from now on, or I won't answer ya."

Nick...he wanted her to call him Nick. "Are you hurt, Nick?" She edged nearer and he scooted further away. A flash of Nate, how he'd hidden his pain with distance. He may be synthetic, but Nick wasn't above wounded pride.

"No, not hurt. Not permanently anyway. Guess Kellogg left a little fuck you present for yours truly. Must have known I'd come snooping around eventually. Had the lock modified, probably cost him a fair amount of caps, too. Don't bother with your bobby pins, the mechanism's too deep. Only the key will work without getting zapped again, and only the Mayor has it."

"Okay, I'll go get it then. Be right back."

"No! Nora, the office is closed by now. We can do this tomorrow—"

But she was down the stairs before he could finish, Dogmeat in tow. She hurried through the marketplace, stopping at the glowing CHEM-I-CARE sign that had distracted her from Nick's nimble fingers.

There, an older man leaned against the poster-covered wall, his blue visor fraying white along the edges, the word Timlist scrawled across the band. Yellowed t-shirt, ripped jeans, his smile unassuming and friendly. His gaze roamed over her suit, her body, liking what he saw.

"Hey there, blue bird. What can I do for ya?"

Not sure how long later, but she was riding the platform — and the jet — to the Mayor's office. How Diamond City sparkled now, finally earning its namesake, a beautiful and festive sight for the eyes. Strings of fairy lights crisscrossed the Power Noodles stand, glowing under the crimson canopy that billowed with the wind. The sounds of laughter and music, the Diamond City Radio eyebot passing beneath the grated floor of the platform, its speakers blaring: "I'm a wanderer, yeah I'm a wanderer. I go around around around..."

It was like a fairground without the rides. How could she have thought this place a shanty town? It was magical.

The meeting with the secretary went well, a woman with ash-blond hair and a pinched expression, like she had a mouthful of sour mutfruit the entire time. Mayor McDonough had left for the day, and his secretary (whatever her name was) was on her way out. It hadn't taken much to convince her. In fact, the secretary had practically thrown Kellogg's keys in her face, telling her to get out and get that son-of-a-bitch. See, nothing to it. Easy breezy.

Piper met her at the bottom of the platform, looking like she planned to spank someone. Then her brain kicked in, showing her the last ten minutes in jet-fueled slow motion. Oh yeah, Piper had been there, hadn't she? Wow, she'd forgotten all about that. Yelling as usual. Mayor...something about...something, something. She giggled and pressed the red button of the lift, stumbled out and kept going. Piper grabbed her, swearing.

"Damn it, Blue. Watch yourself. What the hell are you on?"

"Nothing," she said, pouting. Then: "Jet."
"Fuck, are you serious?" Piper glanced around and pulled her closer to the entrance of Publick Occurrences. Dogmeat trailed after, sniffing at the pallet where Nat had stood earlier that day. "You can't be doing that stuff, Blue. It'll mess you up bad with a capital B. And I know Valentine has a zero-tolerance policy against chems. Oh hell...your eyes. You can't see him like this. Let's get some coffee or something. Give you time to come down."

"Nope, can't. Gotta go back 'cause Nick's waiting for the key. Kellogg shocked him." She sobered a bit, remembering, "The fucker."

"Jesus! This Kellogg guy attacked Valentine?"

"Oh, no no no. His lock attacked Nick. It was a special lock that needed a special key." She waved it in the air. "See?"

"Yeah, I was there, Blue, remember? You got in Geneva's face and threatened to turn it inside out. You're gonna be lucky that doesn't get back to McDonough, or Valentine."

"What?" The brightness was waning, as was her giddiness. Jet fumes going...going...gone. Her hand began to twitch. "I don't remember saying that. She was nice. She told me to get that bastard."

"She was fucking terrified of you," Piper crossed her arms, all stern and motherly. "Hell, I was terrified of you. I would have said anything too to get you out of my face."

"Shit...I'm sorry. I didn't — "

"Look, you need to clean up. And sleep. And then...go sleep some more. See Doc Sun in the morning, or get some addictol if you can afford it. Solomon has it at the Chem-I — "

"I know where it is," she said, petting Dogmeat who wagged his unconditional love. At least someone here didn't judge her.

"Right, I bet you do." Piper's hands fell on her shoulders. An affectionate squeeze. It was supposed to make her feel all warm and fuzzy, but it made her feel like shit. Everything was normal ten minutes ago, and now reality had to go fuck up her night. Her hand spasmed like Nick's, jolted by her own stupidity. "It'll be okay, Blue. Everyone messes up. If it were Nat, I'd be doing every crazy thing possible to get her back. But not that kind of crazy. Chems are bad news. Some people can't handle them, they die the first hit. And some...well," Piper gave her a little shake as her mother had all those years ago, in that yellow bathroom with white rugs. "I don't want to see you dead. Valentine doesn't wanna see you dead either. Promise me you'll stay away from the chems. Promise me."

"I promise," she said, needing to get away before she started bawling.

But she couldn't see Nick just yet. She had one more stop to make.

When she asked Solomon for addictol, he gave her an airy shrug. "Sorry, blue bird, but I think that's a little outta your price range, but I'll sell ya some more jet though, if ya like. Half off."

She had argued. Begged even. But he smiled in his sunny, blithe way, giving apologies in his aw shucks, babe tone of voice until she gave up, fists and teeth clenched as she made her way back to the West Stands.

Nick was smoking when she reached the top of the stairs, flinging the ashes between the catwalk grating. "Well, look who it is. Thought for a minute I'd be adding your name to Diamond City's mountain-PILE of missing persons. Got the key, I take it?"
She nodded, using the key to motion at his hand, saying shyly: "It's okay, right? Not damaged?"

"Don't worry, doll, I've had worse. Nothing that a little motor oil and screwdriver can't fix. Now, let's get this door open. I wanna know what Kellogg's been hiding in there."

It wasn't much from the look of the dinky two-bedroom apartment. A dim ceiling light illuminated the grand remains of a dusty table, battered chair, and dirty concrete floor. The loft — if you could even call it that — revealed a stained mattress and a broken lantern. A page from a Grognak comic book peeked from under the mattress, a treasure that had been in the boy's hands. She couldn't bring herself to fold it, so Nick took it from her, rolled and tucked it into his front pocket.

"This place is too small. Something's off." Nick walked in a circle and fiddled with the golden flip-lighter he'd found, the flame sputtering and dying. Sputtering and dying. She clasped her hands behind her back, playing the part of gumshoe sidekick — and hiding the increasing violence of her tremors. They were in her arms now, coiling upwards, like something burrowing under her skin.

"You boobytrap your home, Kellogg, and for what?" She might as well be invisible. Nick was in La La Detective Land, talking to Kellogg as if he was in the room.

Dogmeat had curled into a corner, bored into sleeping again. She wandered to Kellogg's desk, opened the drawers for the third time. Dust balls and paper clips. A torn notebook with blank pages. Power Noodle receipts. This place should have his stink, his mark. Aside from the comic book page, there was nothing to give away the previous owner. It was like he'd never existed.

Then Nick passed behind her, the flame dancing wildly. She turned on her Pip-Boy light, making herself useful. Something red and round winked from under the desk. "Oh, Nick," she breathed. "Here."

The button revealed a merc's paradise, a secret room with guns and more guns. A dufflebag full of ammo and melee weapons — none like her bat, though, so she left those alone. Nick helped himself to the ammo, saying Arturo would have to do without his business this week. Plenty of food and purified water on the shelves. And two bottles of Nuka-Cola Quantum lighting their corner of the shelf like eerie blue lamps. Then the chems in a mottled fiberglass container, the familiar color of jet among the psycho, mentats, buffout, medX and stimpaks. The tremors were so bad by then she couldn't even hold the brown bottle of imported root beer: *Sunlight Sarsaparilla*. Nick, so far and thank God, hadn't noticed. Too busy studying the box of cigars Kellogg favored: *San Fransisco Sunlights*.

"Hm, an unusual brand. Not many folks around here use it. I bet Dogmeat can sniff these out. That dog can track a scent for miles. How about we give him a whiff in the morning and see where he takes us."

"In the morning?" She sat in Kellogg's armchair, the scent of leather and tobacco-infused sweat enveloping her. She breathed it in, letting her rising nausea quiet the tremors, force them to stop. The jet called to her from the shelf, nestled on top of a heap that Nick had deemed "trash".

"Yeah. The morning. It's past midnight and I gotta feeling this is your second round going on your third. We find Kellogg now, and all you're gonna do is faint at his feet. Don't make it easy for him, Nora. Even desperate parents need some shut eye."

She didn't have the strength to argue and flapped her hand in agreement. Dogmeat nudged her palm, whining. Nick whistled low and Dogmeat padded over with a hopeful *woof*. "Hey, boy, need some 'me' time?" To her, he said: "I'll take him out to do his business. Sleep if you want, I was only kidding about charging ya."
"You chivalrous metal knight, you mean you'd really carry me all the way back?" Even exhausted and strung out, she could flirt. Sometimes she amazed herself.

"Sure, like a tender sack of tatos." He winked a bright yellow eye and strode out the door.

Alone inside a murder's hideaway, his scent all over her, his weapons and chems now hers for the taking. One in particular, a siren song that promised to ease the pain, make it all go away. But another voice nagged her, a promise given at the spur of a moment.

_I don’t want to see you dead…_

She squirmed, counting seconds. How long would Dogmeat take? Would she have enough time?

Her craving had that answer, and her hand as it wrapped around the jet, its capsule the color of candied apples and its contents like the softened warmth of fall sunshine.

_There ya go, honey._ Nate, the devil on her shoulder — or herself. She'd lost track of where he ended and she began. _Get that day back for minute or two. Pretend the war never happened and that I'm not dead. Pretend Shaun is in the other room, snoozing away, thumb in his mouth, dreaming sweet baby dreams. Go on, one more hit couldn't hurt._

Trembling now, but not with withdrawal. _Anticipation._

And then it was gone.

Those same nimble fingers that had entranced her so, plucked the jet away before her lips could even graze it. She spun around, her throat seizing. How had she not heard him? She shrank from his unblinking glare, sputtering: "You're supposed to be outside."

"Didn't want to miss this trip." Nick held the jet like a piece of rotting meat he could barely tolerate touching. He seemed to fill the doorway of the secret room, his presence a terrible, tangible thing.

"W-where's Dogmeat?"

"Sent him along. Didn't know how long this heart-to-heart was gonna take." Between his metal fingers, the jet turned in place like a spit, methodical and rhythmic. "You think I couldn't figure it out?" he said, his voice like gliding oil. It poured over her, melting away her defenses. She pressed her thighs together, her breath quickening. She focused on his scuffed oxfords, the ragged hem of his pants. If he saw her eyes, he'd see too much, and she wasn't ready to show him yet. No, no, not yet. "Hey, look at me, Nora. You don't owe me much, but you owe me that."

She did as he bade, but shrouded that part of herself under a veil of lowered lashes and welling tears.

"Your wits, your bat, and your dog," he said. "That's it. That's how you did it. All those men and all those machine guns. No...don't think so. I knew you were using something, and I'd thought — I'd hoped — it was only a one time deal. But...it never is, is it?"

"I'm sorry, Nick. I am."

"Said you don't owe me, so don't apologize. Part of this is my doing anyway. I shoulda been here for you, not holed up in a vault. You pegged Darla for what she was the moment ya saw her. I got a bat in the face before I figured it out, and two weeks of that harpy screaming for my head. And it takes some tiny gal from two-hundred years ago to spring me from the pot. It's a miracle you even made it to me at all, jet or no jet — and I'm grateful, Nora. If it hadn't been for you, I'd still be buried in that vault, waiting for Skinny to give in to his moll and knock me off." He closed his eyes as he sighed,
releasing her, letting her breathe.

The tremors spread through her entire body, denied the relief that spun lazily in Nick's hands. She would never be quick enough. Not with his reflexes.

"You want it even now, don't you?" He caught her with his glare again. "Do you even know what this is made from?" The jet jiggled between his fingers. "Well, do you?"

"No…Mama Murphy didn't tell me."

"Mama Murphy…that name's familiar. Where'd ya meet her?"

"She was with Preston and those other settlers I'd helped in Concord. They moved into Sanctuary, where Vault 111 is, where I lived before."

"Remember catching that bit between you and Ellie, but not much after. Was running diagnostics and calibrating a few things. You talking about Preston…Garvey? The Minuteman? Hm, these settlers weren't from Quincy were they?"

"Yes, the raiders wouldn't leave them alone."

"It was the gunners, first," Nick said, grim. "But that's besides the point. I know of Garvey. Chatted him up once or twice when cases took me to Quincy. He and I have the same opinion about chems."

"He didn't know."

"Of course he didn't. And I bet this Mama Murphy didn't bother sharing the recipe with you."

"No…" Tears slipped down her face. Steady and slow like a leaky faucet. "She was making it for herself, for the sight."

"The…what?"

"The sight. It doesn't work without chems, Mama Murphy said." How gullible she sounded, like Jack and his magic bean. "She wasn't lying, Nick. After she took it, she saw your sign, told me to follow it to Shaun. That you would help. She also knew things about Shaun. About me. Where I came from — **when** I came from. I never told her anything. She just knew. There's something to it, Nick. It's not a lie. It's not."

"And you'd thought if ya took enough jet, you'd see the same." When she nodded, he sighed again, lifting his fedora to rub the hairline cracks of his forehead. "Now, I'm not saying your Mama Murphy doesn't have this sight…thing. I've witnessed plenty of weird in this world to know better. It's possible she's telling the truth, but if she is, it's **her** truth. Not yours. The only thing chems are gonna show ya is an early grave."

"I was careful about it. Only a little bit."

"And now look at you. The shakin's a bad sign. You're going downhill, and fast. Dunno if it's because you're prewar or what, but you don't have the stamina for it, probably never will."

"Nick, I was going to quit—"

"If I had a cap for every time I heard that, I'd retire. You can't quit chems unless you get help. And out of all the ones you had to pick, it had to be jet, the worst of the lot. And ya wanna know why? It's feces, Nora," he said it like a blunt force. "Brahmin droppings to be exact. Sure, there's some
other odds and ends in there, depending on the maker, but cow shit's that extra special ingredient. That's what gets you high."

How…fucking…mortifying.

Her stomach lurched into full revolt. She grabbed a metal bucket just in time to vomit into it, Kellogg's tiny hidey-hole amplifying every moan and hurl. Oh god, what he must think of her now. She shook there on the floor, spitting saliva that just wouldn't quit, trying to get control, trying not to think about Nick witnessing her puking like that — a disgusting human who had addicted herself to cow shit.

"If you were any other client, I'd cut you loose," he said, adding to her misery. Unlike her, there was no pulling punches with him. "Let you go on alone. I've done my part, as promised. We're even-stephen now. Dogmeat has Kellogg's scent. You could find him easy enough. But any other client would know what jet was. What chems were. They'd understand this world and the dangers that come with it. They'd know the risks. You — " He stunned her with his touch, his hand on her back, a comforting pressure she would curl into like a kitten if she could. "Are all brand new. Naive and ignorant, like a little girl in the middle of a Yao Guai den, trying to pet the cute cuddly bears."

Her noise of confusion made him chuckle. "Yao Guai, you'll see 'em soon enough. And then you'll wish you hadn't. Can you stand?"

He helped her to her feet, but she evaded his attempts to catch her eye. He gave her purified water and a clean towel from Kellogg's secret linen stash. The merc seemed to have everything in this room. After she drank and wiped her face, the jet hovered under her nose, demanding her attention.

"I'm giving you a choice," he said, the gravitas in his voice mesmerizing. "You can go after Kellogg on your own, and I pray, take him down, find your boy. Or, we can go…together. Face him as a team, as…partners. We'll get some addictol in the morning, give you twenty-four hours or so to purge that garbage from your system. And don't worry about that inflated price tag, either. Good old Solomon owes me a favor or two. He'll be more than happy to donate as much addictol as you need." He paused, his human fingers under her chin, lifting it so she couldn't avoid him anymore. "I'll do it for you, Nora…if you're willing."

Stay alone, or be his partner. It was a no-brainer, the easiest decision in the world to make, but her hand seemed to disagree. Her fingers reached for the jet, not touching, not yet, not ready to give up that promise of bliss even though the real promise of bliss offered it freely — with a price. The point of no return. She didn't dare look at him now because he would see her soul, and maybe he would turn to stone from the horrors there.

She inhaled a shaky breath and nodded, her decision made.

The jet crunched in his fist, red pieces of plastic falling through framework fingers — like her life, in a sense, ever since waking from cryosleep.

She covered her face with her hands. All the death, the blood she had spilled in Nate's name, in Shaun's name, in her name — all had been excuses to numb the pain. To fill the void of loss. And the jet had been a window into the beyond, one that hadn't opened for her.

And now, it never would.

"Hey…hey, now," he said when she started to cry. She'd always been an ugly crier, not like Vera Keyes who had made crying into an art form on screen. No glistening silver tears or voluptuous quivering lips for her. It was all hitching and snuffling, mewling noises like a beaten animal, and
wiping the snot pouring out of her nose with the sleeve of her vault suit.

He hugged her anyway, hesitant and clumsy, giving her every opportunity to refuse him. She buried her face in his coat, this synth who had shown more compassion to her in the last day than most humans she'd known all her life. Nothing mattered beyond the nicotine and the ozone musk of his synthetic skin, like smoking after a thunderstorm, the charge still in the air, the damp heat of sun-warmed metal pressing against her. His words hummed in her ear.

"You're stronger than you think, Nora. Anyone else out of that vault, and they wouldn't have lasted a day in the Commonwealth. You've made it this far on your own, and you'll make it farther still. But you're not alone in this now. Not anymore."
Chapter Summary

Nora and Nick finally track down and confront Kellogg.

Chapter Notes

The non con warning comes into play in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The jet and the addictol fought over her body for three days. She'd slept during most of the war, waking to vomit and shake and beg for more jet — a plea denied by her yellow-eyed warden. All he would say was: "Remember your choice, Nora," and she would shut her mouth, suck it up, grow a pair.

Nick was the Tough Love, but Ellie was the understanding one, the tender hand rubbing her back when she moaned into the bucket; who helped her climb into Nick's bed when her legs were boneless and her arms were useless noodles. Ellie saying, "Don't worry, the worst is over. Just hang in there, sweetie."

Yes, she was sleeping in his bed and couldn't even enjoy it.

"Don't worry, Nora," he'd said when he had mistaken her elated noise for a protest. "I never lie in it, just on top. Mostly I rewire the old noggin, clear out unnecessary data, reorganize subroutines. And sometimes I just use it as a big, flat chair to think. Holmes had his violin, and well, I have my bed."

The blankets smelled like him, that crisp ozone scent his cigarettes couldn't smother. Did every synth smell like that? Maybe not the gen three's since they were supposed to be all human, but what about the other generations of synths? The gen ones's and gen two's? "A prototype," he had said. "Some missing link between the two's and three's. As far as I know, I've seen no other like me." So maybe the smell was his alone.

Toward the end, when the addictol's side effects loosed her enough to fantasize without falling asleep on herself, she masturbated shamelessly, hand wandering under the covers and stroking...stroking, eyes closing, breath coming faster and then snagging — stopping when Ellie shifted in her bed above her. Around the corner and out of sight, Nick grumbled at the desk and shuffled papers, oblivious to his role in her desire. But his voice, the rough melody of it, the rustle of his clothing, the slide-scrape sound of his metal hand against the desk, the distracted humming of whatever song played in his head.

She came without a sound, back arching, blanket and mattress wadded in her fist.

Ellie started snoring.

Nick's chair squeaked. Then the office door quietly shut.
Dogmeat's nose pressed against her dangling hand, her other, hot and slick, stayed safely tucked away.

And she slept.

On the morning of the third day, she got up without help and showered, washed the last three days of junkie hell away. No wonder people couldn't quit chems on their own. If it had been that bad ON addictol, what would it have been like without it? She pondered this as she emerged, dripping hair and a towel wrapped around her, to a clean vault suit, a plate of purple berries without a name and a tato omelet. A cup of coffee steamed next to her breakfast, that final, thoughtful touch. Ellie watched her eat and chatted away about The Dugout Inn, and how their food wasn't as bad as Nick said it was, and didn't Vadim make a mean omelet? Mirelurks were fearsome according to Ellie, but apparently their eggs helped with nausea. She didn't know what a mirelurk was, but figured she'd find out eventually, just like the Yao Guai.

A new issue of Publick Occurrences lay next to the coffee, her interview the front page — well, the only page. She read it, grimacing at every quote that had her sounding like a snooty tart. There were many. What a difference four days can make. Life changing differences. She wasn't that Nora anymore. Dogmeat lay under the desk and waited for scraps from her omelet, his head warm on top of her foot.

"I'm sorry," she said, pointing at the paper. "That was before I met…well, before I got to know you and Nick. And Piper."

"Oh, hon, don't worry about it. It's all true anyway. People just like to pretend it isn't. 'Praise the Wall' and all that hogwash. If it hadn't been for Piper, there'd still be a bookcase blocking a hole in their precious Wall instead of it being patched proper. No one likes to admit it, but Publick Occurrences is the reason for most of the improvements around town. Piper is honest. A little…zealous sometimes, but she really cares about the people of Diamond City."

"Yeah," she said, the ghost of Piper's hands on her shoulders. "She really does." Then, looking around: "Where's Nick?"

"Smoothing things with Mayor McDonough. Um…I guess you and his secretary had a little cat fight the other day?"

"Yes, when I was — dammit. He shouldn't be doing that. I should be," she said, rising.

"No, you sit down and keep eating. It's fine. You want my opinion, it's about time someone put that hussy in her place." Ellie leaned over, sharing a juicy secret. "Everyone knows she's screwing McDonough, the floozy. It's how she got the job and the house. Doesn't have to buy her meals - or anything, really."

"There's women like that in every town. Some would say she's smart."

"Smart maybe, but a loose goose never flies."

They laughed, two gals bonding over neighborhood gossip. Ellie said, "I know it's been rough, but you don't know how nice it is to have another woman around here. There's only one of him, and he still outnumbers me."

"Are you and he?" The question dangled like a carrot for Ellie to catch.

"Are we…what? Oh…oh, you mean are we, a WE? Oh no. Never. That is…not that I— " Ellie's cheeks went a blotchy scarlet. "Look, Nick is a great guy and a wonderful boss, has the biggest,
"Because he's a synth," she said it gentle, not judging.

"I know. I'm terrible. It shouldn't matter. But...it does. Trust me, I've thought about it. I mean, listen to him. His voice is sex. But I can't get past the metal and the wires. I just can't."

The Hallelujah Choir sang in her head. The gloves were coming off; Nick was all hers now. And she didn't begrudge Ellie the slightest. Some people couldn't handle the *uncanny valley*. When faced with it, they desperately tried to scramble out. But for her, it was degrees of attraction, not revulsion. Maybe she was wired wrong, but that was her life: everything just a little off kilter.

Ellie cocked her head, gave her a curious look that didn't need encouraging. "Why exactly, are you aski—"

The office door opened, the scent of cooking meat and dew-soaked wood wafted in with Nick. He wore a perturbed frown and a stony, faraway gaze. Dogmeat rose to greet him and earned an absentminded scratch behind the ears.

"Hello, ladies," he said, the frown easing up. His eyes swept over her, giving her what she had dubbed The Valentine Once Over. "Looking swell this morning, Nora. A lot better. You know, we can give it another day if you want, let you settle in some more, but if you're up for it — and I'm fairly certain you are — we can start tracking Kellogg as soon as you finish breakfast."

"The trail's still going to be there tomorrow, Nora," Ellie, said as if trying to talk her out of a blind date — one with a murdering mercenary. "Take all the time you need, get your strength back proper before you go after someone like Kellogg."

"No, I've wasted enough time already — yours especially," she said to Nick. "I know you had to clean up my mess with the Mayor. Not too sure what I did, exactly, but Piper told me it wasn't good. I'm sorry."

"I'm gonna start asking for a cap every time you apologize. It's water under the bridge, gal, and besides, you wasn't yourself. Course, McDonough's milking it while he can, but I've been under his thumb before. Doesn't take too long to wiggle out from under it, oily as he is. Just have to behave myself and play nice with security. They and I have a uh, love hate relationship."

"And who's fault is that?" Ellie raised her eyebrows and sipped her coffee. "Maybe if a certain someone kept his fingers to himself?"

"Hey, I had a lead," he huffed and leaned against the filing cabinet. "And if Danny Sullivan wanted to play good cop bad cop with his *friend* in the storage shed, he shoulda hung a Do Not Disturb sign."

She smiled into her own coffee and let them squabble in their affable way, the shared years in their voices, the easy affection. Being here with them, it almost felt normal, like the last two weeks — two hundred and ten years — had happened to someone else.

*Enjoy it while it lasts, honey, because you and your steel hero will probably be dead by sunset.*

She set her coffee down. Took a breath and let it out slow. Her inner voice was right. If they found Kellogg, she would end him or he would end her. There was no other way it would go down. And no happy ending because even if she did manage to kill him, Nate was still dead. Shaun was still missing, but maybe she would have some idea of where to look, and if he was okay. And whatever fate awaited her, awaited Nick too, but she couldn't do this alone. Dogmeat wasn't enough. Nick was...
right: one bullet in the right place would kill Dogmeat. With jet, it had been easier to protect her dog, but that option was out.

*We can face him ...as partners.*

As if he heard her thoughts, Nick nudged her empty plate and said, "Hey, these fancy cigars are burning a hole in my pocket. How about we air them out and see where Dogmeat leads us."

She had made her choice. And he had made his. Partners now. Till the end.

Their search took them west of Diamond City, out of the Fens and into the nuclear-scorched woods of the Commonwealth. The first stop was a pond and a lone patio chair, Kellogg apparently taking a little smoke break on the way to his destination, enjoying the sights of radioactive pond scum and nesting bloodbugs. Then they traveled to Mass Pike Tunnel West, an overpass littered with raider blockades and the mangled wrecks of cars. No raiders in sight except for a corpse shot in the head, and a turret in pieces. Kellogg hadn't come out of the fight unscathed. A bloody rag fluttered from a railing, Dogmeat sniffing and barking at it like an excited pup before bounding down the concrete steps and over the remains of the abandoned highway.

The Commonwealth itself seemed to resent their intrusion, throwing its lethal denizens at them every chance it got. Molerats, wild dogs, giant hermit crabs with shells of steel (oh, so *those* were the mirelurks), but besides the crabs and their tasty eggs, she'd seen and handled most before.

The ferals though, were another story.

She clambered on top of a truck to get away from the pack they had disturbed, her bat and pistol inadequate against their delirious rage. They targeted only her, giving chase as one entity, one mind — as if she was the sole reason for their madness. Dogmeat wrestled one by the neck, and Nick picked off the rest with his pipe revolver as they groped senselessly for her. Slobbering things, gnashing teeth and rheumy eyes rolling in their sockets, the stench of piss and shit so strong she gagged.

After they were dead, she huddled on the roof of the truck, unable to move; not even when Nick called her name. How could a human being become so monstrous? These had been people once like her. But there had been something alien in their eyes, some eldritch knowledge they had beheld during their transition from ghoul to feral, a truth they couldn't reconcile. And it had unraveled their minds and bodies, piece by piece, until only the rage remained.

"Nora, It's alright. They're dead, see? Let me help ya down."

His hand, warm and dry. Synthetic skin callused, but velvety, like fine sandpaper eroded from use. It pulled her from the truck and out of the benighted palace of her mind. Not many rooms left in there that hadn't been tainted in some way. Though in one, the sun still shone through the window, his name traced on the glass like a secret. An unspoken hope.

Dogmeat continued to lead them westward, their progress delayed by a Yaoi Guai that had decided the heated asphalt would be a great place to nap. It slumbered in the middle of the road, its snores like a sputtering car engine. There was no way in hell would she have "petted" this thing. It wore a patchwork coat of wiry fur and scaly skin. Boils of some sort crusted its nose and festered in the crevices of its hindquarters. It looked diseased. Deadly. Something that she did not want to wake up — ever. Dogmeat slunk around it, belly almost to the ground. She and Nick did the same, mindful of the dead grass and brittle twigs. It snorted once or twice, claws the size of her face scraping furrows in the pavement. Dogmeat's ears went flat; she and Nick did their best statue impressions. They all waited for that inevitable crack of its opening eye, the enraged roar.
The Yaoi Guai yawned — black gums and rows of yellow teeth — and rolled over.

Relief hurried them on.

Hours of chasing Dogmeat, Kellogg apparently on some vast journey to the west border of the Commonwealth. Where the hell was he going with her son? If Shaun was even with him at all. Given the perils they had faced thus far, she actually hoped he wasn't. Then Dogmeat switched direction, headed south and took a road through the small town of Forest Grove Marsh.

They heard the robot before they saw her. The automated voice babbled in truncated sentences, female in tone, but pitched low, on the cusp of androgyny.

"…Known Mercenary. Exercise…Extre…Caution..."

She lay in pieces, her head — a red-eyed cyclops in a coiled metal mask — had been propped on a silver storage container so she could view the parts of herself strewn in the street. The gesture was malicious and cruel — two of Kellogg's favorite things, as was the headless body of the robot's owner next to a shopping cart full of goods.

"Assaultron," said Nick as he reloaded his revolver. "They were around in our — er, I mean — your time, but chances are you never saw them. RobCo's gift to the military, but they all went AWOL when the bombs fell. Every Mister Gutsy too. Most of them have gone nuts, though. The Assaultrons can be reasoned with, or hacked rather, like our girl here. It's a damn shame what's happened to her, and to this trader."

"Our time...Nick's little slips had seemed accidental in the beginning: This main street used to have banners every spring for the Mayflower Fair; there was this little park here by the pond once, had a red swingset for the kids; damn train used to block traffic for hours, figures it would go kaput right in the middle of the road.

Like he knew, like he had somehow been there two hundred years ago. But that was impossible...wasn't it? Maybe the Institute had programed him with the knowledge, but how would they have known those details? Nick was a only century old, nowhere near prewar. And during their hunt for Kellogg, he had grown bolder with the "slips", blatantly stating what he shouldn't know, couldn't know, and each time she almost taken the bait — but that's what it was. Bait. Ask me, Nora, you know you want to, said his eyes, the tilt of his head, the quirk of his mouth. But this wasn't the time, and they both weren't ready yet. If he didn't trust her enough to confide in her, then she wouldn't do the work for him.

Never throw yourself at a man. Let him come to you.

"She can't be put back together?" she asked instead of "what are you trying to tell me, Nick?"

"No, she's just as dead as the human with her. No telling though when she'll finally go offline. Could be hours. Or days."

At her feet, the Assaultron's vice-like hand twitched, three prongs snapping at air. She picked it up, held it close. So curiously warm, even unattached. Alive. She stroked the hand, offering comfort. "I'm so sorry he did this to you."

"Error…System Corrupt. I can't feel my legs."

"I know, doll," Nick said, and put the Assaultron out of her misery.

The trail ended within the hour. Dogmeat stopped finally at what her Pip-Boy called Fort Hagen, a
formal masonry building of tan stone with tall recessed windows spanning its sides. The front, a wide, jutting facade standing upon a colonnade of three, the once dark red of its paint now a vivid vermilion. At its center and under a torn patriotic bunting, a strange metal effigy glowered at the world. It looked like a mask in power armor, or an alien helmet. Three tubes extended from the forehead and straight up. Such an weird design choice and she couldn't stop looking at it. Sandbag barriers lined the roof, hiding the tell-tale shimmy of turrets.

A skeleton dressed as a soldier guarded the main entrance, but someone else had blocked off the doors with wood and concrete barriers. They regrouped there, Dogmeat panting from exertion and Nick having what could be his last cigarette. No time for second thoughts, though. She gave Dogmeat some water and after he was done lapping it and her chin, she massaging his ears, murmuring "thanks" and "good boy" and trying not to cry. It seemed that's all she ever did lately.

"You're sending him along, aren't you?" Nick watched her, his eyes vibrant and sad in the shaded entryway. "That's…probably best."

"Yeah, I know." Sniffling, she pressed her forehead to Dogmeat's furry one, and kissed him there. He whined, tail drooping with understanding. "Go on, boy. Go home to Sanctuary, okay? I'll be there soon." She wiped her eyes. "Promise."

Dogmeat didn't believe a word she said, but after some coaxing, he reluctantly obeyed. His retreat broke her heart. Every few seconds a whimper and puppy eyes in her direction, as if he might somehow change her mind. He almost did. But it was better this way. He would be safer in Mama Murphy's company than in hers. And if she didn't come back…well, he would forget her. Eventually.

Dogmeat reached a line of shrubs. One last look of longing. One last chance to call him back. Then he was gone.

"I might never see him again," she said to the skeleton at Nick's feet. Its army helmet had fallen off in death. It seemed rude not to put it back on.

"Hey, if you go in there expecting to die, you will. I have every intention of surviving. Of you surviving. Kellogg's human, same as you. He can be caught. He can be beaten. We're almost there, Nora. Have a little faith."

"There's irony in there somewhere. You, speaking of faith." She meant it as teasing, but it came out bitter. Damn her voice.

He put his cigarette out on the railing, scattered the ashes with his breath. "Maybe there is, I guess. But I still have it. Doesn't matter what I am, it's what I feel. And if I have to feel it for the both of us, then I will." He straightened his fedora and cocked his revolver. "So, you with me?"

Yes, always. Instead she said, "Lead on, partner."

They entered through the parking garage, the door unlocked and unguarded. It didn't take long to understand why.

Synths. Institute synths. And every single one wearing his face.

"Dammit, Nora, they're not me!" Nick shouted over the hail of blue laser fire. Three had him pinned behind a desk. He had insisted on entering before her, and his fellow gen two's had pounced on sight, saying: 'Initiate Directive Sigma Omicron — Protect Kellogg," in cordial tones. They had puppet voices. Puppet strings. A puppet's jointed limbs. Their bodies were sexless and bare, torso
divided and fused in sections: chest, ribs, abdomen. Their eyes were stained glass; no warmth of light shining through.

At the top of the cement stairwell, she stepped over a dead Protectron, its head-casing bashed in, its limbs pulled apart. Even its pod was a disaster of sparkling wires and broken glass. Maybe it hadn't been Kellogg that had destroyed that Assaultron. It had been these…impostors. These vicious dolls. Then another thought, seeped in horror: *They would do it to him.*

As if to confirm her fears, a synth said: "*Hostile target, fellow synth. Consulting protocols… Anomaly. Unit suffering critical error. Terminate with extreme prejudice.*"

Gone was the polite formality. Now it sounded…*giddy.*

She whacked its head off before it could deliver its threat. Her bat, the tip now modified with twin circular blades — sturdier and deadlier than the razors and barbed wire — vibrated on impact. Its head smacked another synth in the backside. Now that she had their attention, the remaining two faced her with eerie fluidity, moving as one mind as the ferals had, but with a grace they would never possess.

She ran. They followed. Two more joined the pair shooting at her. Blue-white lightning streaked past her ear. Past her arm. Heat tore across her thigh. Ducking and weaving saved her life, as did the ruins of partitions and walls that shielded her from their weapon fire. Another synth appeared in the doorway ahead, blocking her. She swung, going for the home run. Its arm hit the wall in a splatter of frayed wires and shattering plastic — or whatever material used to fuse their skin to their metal frames. The synth gave her a blank stare, eyes dimming, "*I am the victim of violence,*" it said and groped for her with its other hand.

A bullet slammed it between the eyes before it could make contact. More shots behind her — not the burst of wild gunfire, but one precise shot after another. She turned and found her pursuers on the floor in various stages of death throes, thrashing from feedback loops and circuitry misfires, one synth stating matter-of-fact, "*Critically damaged. Kellogg will not be pleased,∗* before going still.

A small sun roasted her thigh. Her vault suit flapped open there and exposed a swathe of raw tissue, blue embers still smoking around the edges. No pain yet, but it was throbbing with her pounding heartbeat.

"*Nora, stimpak that.*" But she didn't move. So many broken puppets. Was this what he looked like under that coat? He said he was between them and the human ones. But what did that mean? Between their legs…androgynous, like angels. Was he…?

Then he was kneeling at her side, his hand unzipping her waistpack and then injecting the stim straight into her thigh. The medication seized the wound from the inside, and she buckled, bracing herself on his shoulders. Her thigh muscle fluttered like an enraged butterfly trying to escape. She shuddered, groaning.

"*Easy now. Give it a minute or two. That's one hell of a nasty burn.*"

He steadied her hips. Where his hands touched, her skin ignited. Fuck, his face was right…*there.* She brushed the top of his head with her fingers. He leaned back, eyes brilliant, his expression unreadable.

"*You lost your hat,*" she said. The butterfly in her leg found a flower to land on. She licked her lips. Thirsty now.
"Yeah, had the bright idea of gluing it to my head once. Damn thing kept getting knocked off during scuffles. Thought my skin would hold up, but uh, you see the results of that."

"Here?" She touched the cross-patch of scars in the center of his forehead. He nodded against her finger. Same velvety texture like his hand, and heated, as if blood flowed beneath. Must be some sort of temperature regulator.

"Yeah…there. But if anyone asks, a Deathclaw grazed me. So…you alright now? Try walking around."

She limped a few steps — opened her pack to chug down a can of purified water — and then walked the length of the room. He nodded, satisfied, and went to look for his hat.

Ten minutes later, after Nick had reclaimed his hat and had checked the dead synths for a mysterious item — an item he hadn't found, much to his dismay — they were in the elevator descending toward Fort Hagen Command Center.

When they stepped out, ready to pummel or shoot anything that moved, the speaker in the high corner of the wall crackled to life:

"Well, if it isn't my old friend the frozen TV dinner. The last time we met, you were cozying up to the peas and the apple cobbler."

What the hell? Was he twelve?

Nick snorted, "Classy, Kellogg." Then to her, "Don't let 'em get to you, he's just being a wise ass. We must be close if he's pulling this shit."

Three more synths charged down the tunnel-like hall, one with an electrical baton and the other two firing lasers. Nick made quick work of the laser wielders, and left Mister Baton to her.

She had some trouble with it, agile as it was, the synth seeming more interested in showing off how well it could evade her hits rather than attack her outright — until it bumped into an overturned cart. It faltered and she struck twice: its stomach for being a pain in her ass, and then its neck to finish the job.

Nick checked the compartment in its hip, and sighed when his hand emerged empty. "Dammit, all these synths and not one has it?"

"What are you looking for exactly?" she asked, but he evaded as usual.

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing, really. Just a…synth thing."

The speaker activated, the feedback whine making them both wince.

"Hey, hey, Valentine, still kicking, huh? You tough old synth. I'd rigged that lock to kill you."

Nick shot the speaker off the wall and glowered at the pieces on the floor. She mimicked his gruff tone: "Don't let 'em get to you."

"You hush." Then, under his breath: "Saucy dame."

After that, it became a pattern. The next section or room, and synths would charge at them. Then Kellogg would chime in using the PA system.

"Look, I get it. You're pissed. I don't blame you. But this won't end well for either of you. Go back to
"I'm not the one dying today," she told the speaker. They were in the residential section of the fort, skeletons everywhere: in beds, on the floor, in bathtubs, and one hunched over a broken window — as if the woman had been thrown through it. And she knew it had been a woman by the remains of her threadbare dress. Nick glanced at that body with pity when they went by it, then took out another synth when it entered the room. His aim was uncanny, elegant. One shot to the head and the synth crumpled saying: "Systems going offline."

She was inept by comparison, clubbing these things like a little girl angry with her dolls.

"I've had a hundred years or so to practice," he'd said when she complimented him. "And some nifty targeting sensors."

Still, he let her finish them off, or gave her one or two to play with. This tag-teaming kept them from experiencing anything worse than a cut or bruise — if he bruised at all. And she hadn't even had to use a stimpak.

"All right. You've made it. My synths are standing down. I'm just up ahead. Let's…talk."

The heavy security door swung open, but they didn't go through. Nick wanted to check the room for anything useful, and she wanted a minute to psyche herself up. This round office appeared to have belonged to the commanding officer of the fort. The furniture was fancier, the decor in lavish ruin. And Kellogg had added his own touch to the ambiance: a dresser so white it hurt looking at it. Several pristine tables topped with unfamiliar devices, rounded ammo containers the color of dark cherries, and a first aid kit the same color as the dresser. A bed in the center of the room like a hospital bed, clean and sterile. It was as if Kellogg had brought back alien artifacts from another planet.

"Yeah, called the Institute," Nick said, rummaging through the dresser, and then shutting the drawers with disappointment. "If we make it out of this with our limbs still attached, whatever we salvage will fetch a hefty sum of caps. Traders go nuts over anything Institute-made. A few Bunker Hill folks even collect the containers like Vault Tec lunchboxes. Anyway…suppose we've dawdled long enough. You ready to face him?"

The courageous expression she plastered on her face seemed to placate him, but inside she was a disaster of knotted guts and raw nerves. Even if she spent days in this room preparing to face Kellogg, it wouldn't be enough. It would never be enough.

Nick reloaded and nodded at her, *lets do this.*

At their appearance, fluorescent overheads came on in waves, illuminated what remained of Fort Hagen's Command Center. A long rectangular room, consoles and terminals with busted screens, overturned office chairs. Synths roamed between the partitions sectioning off old computers and desks, laser pistols lowered, but alert, jeweled eyes glittering. Two positioned themselves behind Nick, who gave them his profile and a wary "I know what you're doing" glare. She hesitated, in her mind seeing the crushed Protection, the decapitated Assaultron, but Nick assured her, "I'll be fine, go on."

Kellogg strolled toward her, arms up in mock surrender. He hadn't changed since she'd last saw him. Same jacket, same armor. Even the same damn pants, the color now obvious in the brightened room — olive green. The lights glistened on his bald head, but unlike other men his age, his thinning hair didn't diminish him. If anything, it completed the hardened mercenary facade, gave him that intimidating air of a man you'd run from if you had any sense.
And she didn't have a lick of it.

"Where is my son." This fierce growl couldn't be her voice. The old Nora wouldn't have dared use that tone on anyone.

Kellogg chuckled, weathering the storm of her fury like a toughened sailor. "Right to it then. I like that. Always get the ones who like to bullshit, or beg. Gets tiring after a while, the same old thing."

"Answer my fucking question."

"He's not here, but you already know that. He's someplace else, safe and loved. More loved than you can possibly imagine."

"I can imagine fine, you piece of shit. And I'm his mother, I'm the one who loves him. Why was he taken? Who's been taking care of him?"

"He's with the Institute. As for why they took him, and who's currently playing his nursemaid, that's above my pay grade. I'm just a pawn, like you, like everyone in the Commonwealth. But I'll tell you this, Shaun's not a baby anymore. He's a bit…older than you expected."

"He was the boy with you in Diamond city." Not a question. A confirmation.

"Yeah, I had the kid for a while. But then he went back to his real home."

"Why was he with you at all? What game is this Institute playing?"

"Ah, smart girl." Kellogg's smile reached his eyes this time, giving a glimpse of a younger, less murderous version of himself. "Now you're asking the right questions. But those answers aren't simple because nothing about the Institute is simple, the Old Man especially. I thought he was above grudges, but apparently not. Everything about this was planned by him: you waking up, me playing house in Diamond City. Then suddenly I get new orders to head out on some wild goose chase. It was all to get you and me together." The smile left Kellogg's eyes. "I almost disobeyed orders back then, killed you along with the rest. Now I'm thinking I should've."

"So you're the one, you son-of-a-bitch. Those were my neighbors. My friends. Everyone in those pods suffocated, you know that? They died horribly and slow. The computer said it was a malfunction, it said —"

"Technically, I wasn't the one who cut life support. The eggheads did because the Old Man ordered it. No loose ends. Except you."

"The backup," said Nick behind her in distracted wonderment, as if he'd stumbled on an epiphany. "If something went wrong with the boy, Nora would be used instead…question is, used for what? And don't tell me you don't know, Kellogg. Eggheads like to talk about how smart they are, specially around idiot mercs. There would've been chatter. Something must've slipped."

"You're not wrong, Valentine. Lots of things slipped. But I'm not going to tell you a damn thing."

Kellogg gave a flippant shrug, nope not sorry. "You know, I inquired about you, told the boys in the SRB some orphaned prototype was playing detective in Diamond City, asked if they wanted me to bring you in, or send a Courser. But well, they really didn't seem to care."

"A Courser…is that so?" The lethal note in Nick's voice got her attention, the golden ice of his glare something she never wanted directed at her. Kellogg flashed Nick a "hey now" grin, as if what he'd said was all in good fun.
"Don't you get riled up, Valentine. One word and those gen twos are gonna use your head for a pinata. I'm sure you've noticed by now their fascination with lesser bots — watching them get their hands on one is like watching a bunch of boys pulling the wings off a bloodbug. But to do it to another synth? Now, that's a rare party. And I'm wondering just how strong the Institute made you, Valentine. Question is, should I let your little partner watch while they tear you apart? Or should I let you watch as I put a bullet through her pretty head? Yeah, that's right—" No more smiles now. And while she'd been distracted by Nick, Kellogg had pulled out his gun, the same modded monstrosity that had killed Nate. "Our chat is over. You can't say I didn't give you a chance to walk away. I gave you and Valentine plenty. Not many get that in this world."

The large barrel pointed at her chest, the dark beauty of it as hypnotic as his voice. "But I admire your dedication. It's how a parent should act, how I would have acted in your place," he said, genuine in his regret. "And that's the truth. It couldn't have been easy finding your way to me, but that's okay. It's all over now. Your boy is safe and you can finally rest. You can finally be with your husband. Let it end here, girl. Just close your eyes...and go to sleep."

The mention of Nate slapped her out of her daze. She threw herself to the side just as Nick and Kellogg fired their weapons. Kellogg yelped, his fancy gun clanging to the floor. He clutched his shoulder as blood oozed over his fingers. He snarled a word and the synths leaped on Nick, the two behind him abandoning their lasers for the intimacy of their bare hands.

The rest of the synths joined in. Some firing lasers, but most going in with shock batons or fists. Nick's agonized cry tore right through her. The sound of metal snapping. Oh fuck, oh fuck no.

She rushed at the struggling pile of pale bodies, but Kellogg grabbed her arm and tossed her into a rotting cubical like a sack of trash. Brittle metal and glass from the terminal buckled under her weight, stabbed her healing thigh and backside. She swung the bat in a wild arc, and by providence managed to catch Kellogg in his bad shoulder. He yowled and drew back. Behind the partition, the hiss of a stimpak, and then his taunting chuckle.

"You want to do this hard and dirty huh? All right. I'm game."

Shit, she needed space, needed time, needed to get to Nick.

A synth grunted: "Lower actuators malfunctioning. Damage crit—" then cut off with hollow crack. Two shots fired after. Another synth babbled about its arm missing. He was still fighting, still in one piece, thank God —

Hands in her hair, yanking. Now it was her turn to howl. She kicked out and flailed, her bat hitting everything but Kellogg as he dragged her down the hall. "You're gonna wish I'd shot you, girl," he said, and shook her like a disobedient mutt. Tears streamed down her face and blurred everything. The bat slipped from her hands. She groped for the backup pistol in her holster, but found nothing. Sounds of fighting from the command center, synths calling out their distress and injuries, but no screams from Nick. They hadn't beaten him yet.

Kellogg slammed her on the Institute bed and flipped her onto her stomach. The pillow and her face crashed and fused as one entity. And then his hand shoved her further into it. Cloth in her mouth, the smell of new linen and antiseptic up her nose, burning her lungs. Can't breathe, can't breathe, can't —

"Everything they do to Valentine, he feels." His voice, husky in her ear, and his hands pressing down, down, down, everything going fuzzy and sharp, little slivers of light in a gray fog. Her heart thrummed in panic, locked in its cage, no way out. Her lungs swelled in their desperate search for air. Dying by a fucking pillow, by the bastard who killed her husband and her neighbors and now her.
And Nick too; he was going to be ripped limb from limb by his own kind, because of her, because he gave her a choice — because she'd chosen wrong again.

She heaved, all animal instinct and surging adrenaline, bucking Kellogg off long enough to suck one, blessed, lungful of air before he crushed her face into the pillow again. This time he bore down with his entire body, his erection digging into her back, his breath hitching in arousal. The scintillating lights vanished and the gray fog swallowed her world. She shuddered under him, her lungs give up, but her heart still unwilling to let go as it tried to pump air-deprived blood to her brain. Her hands clenched the mattress, a parody of the pleasure she'd enjoyed that morning.

"That's how the Institute works," he panted, shuddering with her, stroking her hair as she drowned in comfy pillow. "Making synths in our image, making them suffer, making them hurt. Because what kind of gods would they be if their creations couldn't scream?"

A booming noise and a rush of air, like a gong or thunder. Maybe both. The suffocating weight lifted from her. Yes, oh God, yes, thank you. Air, beautiful, glorious air. Her gasps filled the room and mingled with the sounds of a nasty brawl. The grayness receded and revealed a human and a synth locked in combat.

Nick…still alive.

"You bastard." Nick hauled Kellogg bodily off the floor and threw him into the wall. "You filthy sack of meat."

Nick could light the fucking room with how bright his eyes were. Kellogg snorted like a pissed off brahmin and head-butted Nick, the both of them staggering apart from the force of it, but Kellogg, amazingly, recovering first. He and Nick switched positions, Nick pinned under Kellogg's arm, squirming to get free from the hand plunging inside his neck, seeking to tear out those delicate tubes and wires. Nick twisted his body as desperately as she had bucked on the bed — and Kellogg cursed, pulling back, fingers bloody.

"Mind the sharp edges, asshole," Nick said, and raked his metal hand across Kellogg's face.

Kellogg screamed and reeled, his hand clamped over his unscarred eye. There was no stimpaking that. From the way the blood gushed between his fingers that eye was gone. And good. Good. He deserved suffering and hell for every second left of his miserable life.

"Fucking synth. Fucking goddamn you!" Something clicked in Kellogg's hand and it bounced a path toward Nick. Oh hell…grenade. They all scrambled for cover, her legs finding strength enough to stumble out the door and toward the Command Center. Where was it? Where was that damn —"

The explosion rocked the hall. The wall cracked on her right side and two-hundred-year-old plaster rained down, her lungs unhappy with the new intruder and expressing it with a choking fit. Her hand found the bat. It weighed a fucking thousand pounds but she dragged it back, not knowing what awaited her in that smoking room, only that Nick better be okay and Kellogg better be dead. And if he wasn't—

Fuck, he wasn't.

Bloody and covered in grenade dust, Kellogg straddled Nick's prone body, hand deep inside his throat and grinning like a maniac as he squeezed that fragile bundle of wires there. Nick strangled out a cry more synth than human, a metallic note of helplessness. Weakened by the blast, his hands pushed at Kellogg's chest, the metal one tearing cloth, but nothing else.
Do it now.

Their eyes met the moment before impact. One eye a oozing mess of flesh, the other surprised. So surprised. For Nate, she said in her mind. And for what you've denied me.

His skull cracked like the wall, the blades of her bat sinking deep into his brain and lodging there. The bat wouldn't come free. She tugged, and with a sickening lurch, his head followed. She let the bat go. His eye stayed on her, then slid back, and back. He convulsed like one of his synths, neurons instead of circuits blazing their last connections. He remained on his knees until his spasming muscles knocked him over. Then he seized twice, back bowing, facial muscles contorting. The bat hit the floor with a thump every time he jerked. This seemed to go on forever, her vindictive wish granted. She wasn't sorry.

Conrad Kellogg died too soon.

By then Nick had regained himself enough to claw to his feet with the help of a blackened Institute dresser. She moved to lend a hand, but her legs gave out. She collapsed in front Kellogg's corpse like she had outside Vault 111, shocked and senseless, the magnitude of what had happened too big to grasp yet. She had survived, again. Every odd stacked against her, and she had made it. For Nate. For Shaun. For Nick.

After all that effort to stand, Nick plopped himself next to her with a heavy grunt. Besides his ripped trench coat and missing tie, the tussle with the synths hadn't left any visible marks, and the torn parts of his neck didn't seem more damaged than normal, though a few wires looked bent and battered. Guess the Institute did make their prototypes out of tougher stuff.

He fished out a cigarette, lit it on the side of his metal hand — the side not coated with Kellogg's blood — and took a deep drag. They sat in silence for a while, both of them breathing in their own labored way. Her bruised lungs. His bruised throat. After a while she said, "You lost your hat again."

His laugh was hoarse, painful. "Damn gen two's knocked it off. Reckon they did it on purpose."

"They were probably jealous." She motioned for his cigarette and he passed it without hesitation. Her lungs rebelled, having enough of her shit today. She laughed and sputtered out the smoke. "Well, so much for that bad habit," she said and handed it back.

He took a lingering hit, ashes flaring orange. "Oh there's plenty more, doll. Always is. Starting to get the feeling I've discovered another one for myself."

"Oh, and what would that be?"

"Saucy dames."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Tree1138 for reminding me about Kellog calling both Shaun, and the director who predated Shaun the "Old Man". I'd like to give Bethesda the benefit of the doubt for once and say it was a red herring. That way the "big reveal" would be even bigger because Sole is expecting this jerk stranger who stole her/his kid.

Or, they wrote another plot hole.
Headcanon #1: Nick doesn't get his hand repaired despite numerous gen 2 hands lying around because he uses it as a weapon. Tapered metal fingers or not, those things could do some serious damage if used in melee combat. Kellogg found that out the hard way. There's also my take on his prototype body and it being incompatible with the older models.

Headcanon #2: Synths are really vindictive little shits. Got the idea from Arc Jet systems and the scattered bodies of the Protectrons there. It's too bad Bethesda never did anything with that. It would have made the synths hella more interesting. I wanted them more dangerous than the vanilla game. If you think they're bad here, just wait till the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Thanks for all the feedback! It's been really amazing :D
Brotherhood

Chapter Summary

The Brotherhood arrives. Nick reveals a secret.

Kellogg's terminal revealed nothing useful about the Institute or Shaun. The one log entered was cryptic and brief, a mention of a "renegade" as Kellogg's next target, but no location or name.

"You sure there's no file called 'my evil plans'?" Nick stared at the screen over her shoulder, then reached around her to poke a few keys with his metal finger. The terminal gave an ornery beep at his intrusion. "No? Damn. Guess that would've been too obvious."

"I would have thought even less of him if you'd found one," she said, fighting to keep her voice normal. Invading her personal space was a positive sign, or another baiting tactic, a test to see what she'd do, what buttons he could push and how hard. "Nicky, Nicky, you can push them all," a bolder version of herself would say.

In her mind, her mother warned: make him work for it. Then Ellie's words chased her mother's: a loose goose never flies.

Nick paused a moment more, leaning a little harder on her metaphorical buttons, then withdrew. The sweaty strands of her hair fluttered with her exhale. Now that he wasn't behind her, the buoyant rush of her arousal fizzled. As did her mood. "So I guess that's that then." She punched at random keys. The computer protested her abuse with a flashing screen. "Doesn't look like Kellogg left us with anything other than his ugly corpse and more questions. We're back to square one."

"Square two. Kellogg is dead at least." Then, after a moment of consideration: "Alright, fine…square one and a half. But at least it's something."


"Hey, I know the night just got darker, but we're not leaving completely empty-handed."

"You're not, maybe, but I'm glad you found that stuff you were looking for."

That stuff being three white tubes of something called BND-R. Brand new, seals unbroken. Nick had uttered a boyish cry of delight when finding them, like he'd stumbled upon secret treasure that only synths knew about. And after some verbal elbowing he finally told her that BND-R was like stimpaks for synths, but better. It bonded the silicones in their synthetic skin, healing cracks and small holes. "Only fresh injuries," he'd said, turning a tube over in his hands like he couldn't believe it was real. "Anything over a day or so and it just burns. Found that out the hard way when I tried patching this mug and this flapping excuse for a neck." Apparently he had come upon the stuff via a firefight with a small synth patrol, but that had been twenty years ago. What remained in his last curled up wad of aluminum could barely bond a fingernail.

His shadow fell over the terminal. "I'd trade every tube of it for a way to your son."

"I wouldn't want you to."
"But I would."

She gave him a watery smile. "Thank you, Nick. And I mean it. Thank you. I was rude not to have said it earlier. If you hadn't been there...gotten him off me..."

"You and your prewar manners. And while we're at it, thank you. You saved my neck, doll, literally." He cleared his throat, the sound raspier from either emotion, or whatever damage Kellogg had done to his voice modulator. "Now uh, if we're done blubbering on each other, let's get the hell outta here. These dead synths are still moving their eyes around. It's awfully damn unsettling."

"Okay, but before we go, I'm getting my bat."

"Nora —"

"He's not keeping it. I spent way too many caps on it."

"With all this Institute junk in our pockets, you can get a new one, or one of those rocket sledge things."

"No, I named it."

"You named it? Nora, it's a piece of wood."

"She's called Queen Buzzy."

"Oh for chrissakes. Fine, we'll get your bat. Just let me do it."

Okay, so maybe she hadn't really named her bat until just now, but seeing his eyes roll and hands fly up in the air was more than worth it. Some of the gloom and doom eased up, but that silver lining behind it still needed a good polishing. That meant not seeing Kellogg's corpse, or her handiwork that had put him there. She wasn't the hero in this tale of retribution. Killing Kellogg had killed the old Nora for good. Sure, she could rationalize it all day, tell herself it was in self-defense and in the defense of Nick, but it had been deliberate. No matter how righteous her motives, she'd killed a man not only because he deserved it, but because she'd wanted to.

It's always easier after the first.

A few minutes passed...Ten...Fifteen. Looked like Kellogg's skull wasn't giving up Queen Buzzy without a fight. Maybe she should stop being so squeamish and help him out. But when her tush slid off the chair, the thuds of Nick's footsteps approached. He held her bat in his metal hand, sans one blade, and his human hand held something red and...wet.

"Um...Nick, what the hell is that?"

"Kellogg's brain," he said with disturbing nonchalance, like it was the most normal thing in the world to be holding. "A piece of it anyway. Your Queen Buzzy sadly lost her throne — and a few screws."

"Never mind the bat, why is Kellogg's brain...blinking?" Blue filaments sticking out of the lump of flesh in Nick's fingers twinkled like a string of tiny Christmas lights. "Oh my god, Nick, it's moving. Why is it moving?"

"Cybernetics, Institute made. And don't worry, it's not alive, not in the traditional sense anyway. It has its own inner power source attached to all these little wires you see here. It's the electrical impulses that are keeping it...fresh. And this isn't the only implant. Found out Kellogg was full of them once I dusted off the old optical sensors and took a good, hard gander at his corpse. No wonder
he wasn't fazed when we clanged our bells. He was barely human."

"He didn't need implants to be a monster."

"True, but at least with this — " Nick wiggled it for emphasis, grossing her out on purpose — "We might have a way to your boy."

That got her attention. Now Nick wasn't holding a lump of pulsating meat, he was holding a lump of beautiful, radiant hope.

"Yeah, thought you might like that. This architecture though, I know it. It's similar to mine, particularly to my neural interface, and that puts this tech well over a hundred years old."

"So Kellogg was walking around with hand-me-down tech in his head, or are you telling me that he was over a century old?"

"Cybernetics can slow aging to a crawl for humans. It's possible he was even older."

"My god, and all that time doing the Institute's dirty work..." Her stomach quivered in disgust. A hundred years of killing, learning more efficient methods, honing his skills. Now their survival seemed even more miraculous.

"Which makes what we've done here practically a community service. Good riddance to that bastard. As for the Institute, they just left us a mighty big bread crumb. We should head to Goodneighbor. There's a place I know there called the Memory Den, run by a Doctor Amari. I don't know what kind of intel this implant holds, but if anyone can get a dead brain to sing, it'll be Amari."

"How far is Goodneighbor from here?"

"Boston, what used to be Scollay Square back in the prewar days. Quite a hike from this old Fort, unfortunately. But go ahead and grab a few winks in one of the beds upstairs. We could leave at dawn and be there by sunset."

Her Pip-Boy showed Goodneighbor's location when she searched "Scollay Square" on her map. Holy hell, Nick wasn't kidding on the distance. Sanctuary's marker blinked closer. It would still be a ways to walk, but it would make more sense to resupply and sell this Institute crap there. And then there was the other thing. The thing she'd been putting off since leaving Vault 111; The thing that seemed logical and necessary now that Kellogg was cold on the floor. To heal fully and put the past behind her, she had to get it over with.

"No, I can't sleep here. Not with him. I've spent a week out here chasing after prophecies and killers and shady organizations. I want a break — I need a break. One day that I'm not getting myself hooked on chems, or being attacked by ferals, or being smothered to death by a crazy man. I want my own bed under my own damn roof. I just... want to go home, Nick."

Nick searched her face, always seeing more than she wanted him to. "Say no more, doll. Sanctuary it is."

Another hour later — with their pockets and packs brimming with Institute goodies — they were riding the elevator to the roof. A comfortable silence settled between them. The memory of Kellogg and his synths was already fading like a bad dream. Not one she would recall with nostalgia or laugh about it later. Too many personal demons for that. But perhaps a version of this encounter could be shared with Ellie or Piper, or even become a thrilling tale to regale Preston and his flock of settlers. It may be two hundred years later, but everyone still loved a good story.
The elevator slid open, and the setting sun greeted them with all the shades of fire. Nick stepped onto the roof, and then drew up — sharp and straight — as if he'd run into an invisible wall. She bumped into his back and got a delightful noseful of old trenchcoat. "Nick, hey, what's the matter —"

Her bag slipped free, fell on her foot and stayed there. In the sky, something unreal. Something… impossible.

Silhouetted against the flaming roil of the sunset, a massive airship glided by, its appearance like a divine harbinger for a deity with conquest on its mind. The design, a streamlined cobbling of prewar tech and salvage, its tail divided into four sections by fins and propellers of a plane. Spotlights mounted on its framework underside swept over the Commonwealth like the eyes of God, judging and condemning all it touched. Prewar Vertibirds descended from docking arms like war angels, their dark forms showing no signs of age or neglect. Their rotary hum brought back that autumn day, Shaun crying in Nate's arms, their breathless waiting on the vault elevator platform, the blinding plume of the first nuclear explosion — her neighbor, Mister Able, stupidly holding his thumb up and choking back a cry when the cloud swallowed it whole.

From the airship, the booming voice of God himself:

"People of the Commonwealth, do not interfere. Our intentions are peaceful. We are…the Brotherhood of Steel."

Then Nick's voice, troubled and low. "Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing…"

When anyone quoted Poe, it was never out of joy. On his face, a distant gaze, seeing something beyond the ship, something that made the sprocket of his jaw turn and set. He looked at her with eyes of palest topaz, his brows knitted into a tight knot under his crosshatch scar. In the time she'd known him, Nick had taunted a mob boss and his goons, taken on a legion of synths without a thought, attacked a century-old mercenary without hesitation. But this Brotherhood airship had that metal hand at his side trembling…trembling.

Nick Valentine was afraid.

Already she hated them for that.

"Who are they, Nick?" She invaded his personal space as he had hers, distracting him the only way she knew how. Anything to wipe that fear from his face. "Why are they here?"

"The Brotherhood are remnants of prewar military," he said, staring at the sky as if expecting fire and brimstone to rain down. His metal hand balled into a fist. "But they've gone back to the middle ages, giving themselves titles like Knights and Paladins and some such nonsense. They're obsessed with controlling prewar technology, stealing it if they have to, and not giving a damn who they have to hurt in the process. And now they're here, swooping into the Commonwealth as if they own the place already. 'Our intentions are peaceful' — what a load of bull. The Brotherhood are here to start a war."

"Why? A war on who?"

"Anything not born and bred human. Super mutants. Ghouls. And…my kind, especially my kind."

"I don't understand. You're tech…technically. Wouldn't they want to keep you for themselves?"

"I'm an abomination. Everything that's wrong with technology. Machines can be anything to the Brotherhood, but they can't be a person." He snatched up the bag he'd dropped when the airship
appeared and stalked to the scaffolding stairs. He didn't let up his pace until they were on the street, the airship a cylindrical shadow in the darkening sky. Then the bag hit the ground with a thud and he faced her, squared shoulders, his face a mask of tempered steel.

"Alright, I'm just gonna say it. I haven't been honest about who I am. I'm Nick Valentine, but…I'm not Nick Valentine."

"Uh…okay?" She set down her dufflebag. The thing weighed a ton anyway. The warm breeze of evening lifted the back of her hair and carried the faint scent of decay and stagnant lake water. "This is about all those hints isn't it? The prewar details you keep mentioning and pretending you didn't say."

"So you did catch those. Was starting to wonder if you were just thick in the head, or ignoring me. And I know you're not thick."

"I wasn't ignoring you. Waiting, yes." He had a way of making her squirm without even trying. "But I wasn't going to be baited."

His smile, fleeting and fragile. "Will you let me reel ya in now?"

"Only if you promise not to eat me."

His smile became a laugh, short and humorless, then it faded under the gloom of his melancholy. The flickering flames of a candle in his eyes, his face cast in silvery blue from the luminescent mushrooms climbing the telephone pole beside him. "Don't worry, doll, was never one for sea food, not that it's an option now. I can count on my hand how many folks know about this. Ellie for starters…and Piper, and my last partner, Marty. Though I doubt he'd even remember the conversation, giving he passed out drunk halfway through it. Just figured since I've seen a fair share of your dirty laundry, you should get more than a peep at mine."

"You don't owe me anything, Nick, but you can always tell me anything. Anything you want. That's what partners do, right?"

"Yeah, but it's a two-way street and I haven't even bothered meeting ya halfway yet. And I'm sorry. It's just that…sharing doesn't come easy for me." He peered at the sky, searching for the ship he couldn't see. His burdened sigh carried more weight than all their bags combined. "A few years back, a Brotherhood Knight came through Diamond City. Not sure why he was alone, maybe got separated from his patrol and what not. Anyway, as my luck would have it, we ended up running into each other at Power Noodles — and lemme tell ya, it was some hell of a first impression. The fella took one look at me, and the next thing I know, his laser rifle's waving in my face and he's screaming about the Institute and I'm one of their filthy abominations. Woulda shot me dead on the spot if Diamond city security hadn't finally wrestled the gun away and thrown him out. Couldn't leave the damn city for a week because he was roaming the Fens. Security thought he'd try for me. They were probably right. He ended up disappearing soon after, but he made me realize something important that day. That I can wear the clothes, talk the talk, but when it comes down to it, I'm nothing but a damn machine pretending to be a person."

"No, Nick, you're nowhere near pretending — "

"Nora, let me finish. There's more. Somewhere between my activation and getting the boot from the Institute, they uploaded a human personality into me. A prewar cop by the name of Nick Valentine. His voice, his mannerisms, his memories, are all mine. All that I am…all that I ever will be. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm grateful. He was a good man, with good instincts. His memories kept me alive, but they're also a reminder that without him, I'm nothing. Just a metal shell wearing a
"Trenchcoat and tie."

"Nick, stop it. You're not a shell. You're —" How could she convince him? She ran her finger along the seams of his shoulder, over the threads that sloppily stitched a patch to the outer layer. "You're wonderful. And brave. And you didn't have come here with me, but you did. You didn't have to help me with the jet, but you did. Helping me find my son, taking on an old cybernetic mercenary — that isn't something a soulless automaton does."

"I'm a walking ghost, Nora." His eyes followed her fingers, then settled on her face. "What I do, Nick would do. That's all there is to it."

That frustrated warble in his voice was more than some algorithm or scripted subroutine. Even if she hadn't spent the last four days with him, that alone would have proved his personhood to her — and goddamned anyone who had told him different. No one had the right to judge what had a consciousness and a soul. Not everything in this world could be quantified so simply, especially now, when the line between man and machine had finally merged.

"I don't believe that. Everything is a choice." The ample material of his coat bunched in her fist. "What happened in Fort Hagen wasn't pretend. It wasn't some personality thing. It wasn't a ghost. It was you. Only you. And I may not understand your design or the tech used in your creation, but I've seen the faces of those other synth. I looked into their eyes and saw nothing. I look into yours and I see — " stuttering, saying too much again, "I—I see intelligence. Sentience. They don't even come close to what you are, and I think that's why they attacked you. They know. Deep down in their empty little skulls they know you're better than them. More alive. And they hated you for it. They're the shells, Nick. They're the abominations."

She let go of his coat and stepped back. He stepped with her — then stopped, trenchcoat swishing with the abrupt movement. The drone of insects hummed in the strained silence. There wasn't enough room between them. One step forward and her lips would meet his. It would be easy, so easy. But after a heartbeat, he moved away, creating distance, safety. For her or himself, she didn't know.

"You…are the most unusual woman I've ever met."

"You mean peculiar." She hid behind her hair, looked down at the street, at all the cracks and debris that had scarred it over the years.

"No, I mean refreshing. Rare." His gratitude drew her out again. "They sure as hell don't make them like you anymore."

His steel mask became pliable again, his expression animate. The taut line of his shoulders relaxed. Under the black dome of the sky, the incandescent mushrooms on the telephone pole dappled him in soft blues, his eyes like the stray rays of sunlight shining though dusk. A sudden and overpowering thought: I could take him right here, right now, right in the middle of the fucking street. And he would let me too. I know it. I see it in his eyes.

Instead she hefted the dufflebag over her shoulder and attempted her version of a proper prewar lady, what he perceived as a prim, grieving widow.

"We have that in common, Nick. We're both limited editions."

"Signed and numbered, eh?"

"And fucking priceless."
He laughed and picked up his dufflebag with ease. Already hers seemed to weigh the world. He winked at her stubbornness. "It's a long way to Sanctuary. If you want me to lug that for ya, I will."

"No, really." She wedged her fingers under the nipping strap. "I got it."

She got a mile up the road before she handed it over. He smirked and bragged he could carry three hundred pounds. So she gave him her waist pack, her broken Queen Buzzy (Kellogg's gun she kept. That sucker packed a wallop), a pipe revolver she could scrap for copper, a bunch of fusion cells from the synth laser pistols, a camera that still worked, a vase with pretty floral designs, two bottles of Nuka Cherry (minus the one she'd gulped down), a ball of pink frayed yarn, a trifold flag in a broken case, a bunch of cram from a hidden cupboard, a teddy bear missing a leg —

He finally drew the line when she asked for a piggyback ride.
Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

Nora buries the past and explores forbidden fruit.

They reached Sanctuary as the sun kissed the sky good morning. Dogmeat's familiar and welcome barking shook sleeping birds from their perches. Halfway across what was left of Sanctuary's quaint wooden bridge, his furry form plowed into her, slobbering her with kisses, her ears ringing from his shrill puppyish yipping. Dogmeat's exuberance almost knocked her into the river, but Nick grabbed her arm, laughing as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, and pulled her back to solid wood.

So much had changed in less than two weeks.

Gone was the open space of the street, now braced walls of scrap metal and wood enclosed the front of her town, a two-story gatehouse at its center. The blasted ranch houses past the now cleaned Sanctuary Hills sign, and before the new wall, had been scrapped to their foundations, and even their foundations were being eroded block by block. Turrets oscillated on small four by four platforms attached to the gabled roofs of the gatehouse, and the second story catwalk had several lookout points for guards. The single man on duty was someone she didn't recognize, even darker skinned than Garvey, but wore the same Minuteman uniform and carried the same type of laser musket. He whistled high and loud, causing Dogmeat to run around in circles, barking.

The gate opened its varicolored wooden doors, and Preston and Sturges emerged, weapons drawn. She waved and hoped to God they hadn't forgotten who she was. They waved back. Even from this distance Garvey's teeth flashed white and brilliant. Sturges cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted something unintelligible.

"Did he just say something about gnomes?"

Nick huffed a strained chuckle and trudged ahead with his loot and her "junk". "He said, 'Hey, boss, welcome home'."

Preston and the others held off their million questions at the sight of her haggard face. It was haggard because Codsworth told her so, politely and with a Mister Handy's maternal solicitude.

"Oh my word, mum! You're a fright to all three eyes. I simply must insist you nap at once!"

She slept away the morning and part of the afternoon, the clinking whir of Codsworth like a dream she kept leaving and revisiting, each time a different scene or location. Nick's voice laced these dreams together, talking low so he wouldn't wake her, every word a yellow bird she chased through an irradiated forest, or a golden fish she swam after in a sea of blood.

"We met at Vault 114. Got me out of some hot water, so I decided to return the favor."

"And you're partners, now? How wonderful. I was so afraid mum wouldn't make new friends. She's been most distraught with Sir and young Shaun gone. Quite surly, actually."

"It's been rough on her, Codsworth. Waking up to this world, to the shadow of what once was. I can more than relate to that kind of confusion and fear. And don't worry, I doubt she was ever angry
with ya. It was at the folks who hurt her and killed her husband."
"So... is he dead then? The one who... who murdered poor Sir?"
"Let's just say... he didn't end well."
"Good." Codsworth's mechanical snarl pierced her dreams. "I'm glad he suffered."

The rest of her sleep was deep and dreamless, save for the fragmented glimpses of yellow objects that always eluded her hands: a marigold that dissolved when she touched it. A topaz embedded in the head of Fort Hagen's effigy that she couldn't pull free. Flashes of imagery like lightening splitting the darkness — and that too, shone gold.

The fragrant aroma of coffee woke her. Where the hell was she? These were not the beige walls of her bedroom; Nate would've never let them get so corroded and grimy. Someone had taken out the drawers of their new dresser and scratched the hell out of the top. Her closet door was missing, as was their expensive Tabriz rug. These blankets clutched in her hands shouldn't be so worn and faded. Her window shouldn't be boarded up. It should be autumn outside. It should be...

Reality resolved itself, planted its feet in front of her and refused to budge. She sighed in surrender. Home sweet home.

After a lukewarm shower, and throwing on a plain teeshirt and shorts, she stood a while in Shaun's room, the voice of Nate in every corner, whispering over the toys she straightened on the shelf, the echo of him reading the You're Special book along with her. "Hey, honey, I fixed that mobile on his crib the other day. Why don't you give it a spin?"

It creaked and spun until the rocket ships rocked and the lullaby played one forlorn note.

"Mum?" Codsworth carried a steaming mug, the bottom blackened as if it'd been torched. "Ah, so good to see you up and about. I have your morn — afternoon coffee here, just as you like it. One hundred and seventy three point five degrees — eh well, minus a few or more. Sorry, mum, my flame arm isn't what it used to be."

She took an experimental sip. Hotter than Codsworth had said, and nutty and bitter. Not cocoa beans, but something similar. Creamy too. "There's milk in here? Where did you get that?"

"You got a brahmin. Two actually — well four if you count the heads. Garvey has them penned up in that playground area." Nick leaned against the side of the doorway, his teasing smile losing the tease at the sight of Shaun's peeling crib and the still swinging rocket ships.

But even with the fedora and synthetic skin, it was Nate standing there. Nate in his white shirt and dark bangs falling in his eyes. Now he'll say: "Listen, after breakfast, I was thinking we could head out to the park for a bit..."

Her eyes and throat stung and it wasn't from the coffee. She should have stayed in the wasteland. At least there her ghosts couldn't find her.

"Nora? Are you alright?" Nick stirred the air at her back, not close enough to touch, but close enough.

"No, Nick, I'm not. I—I won't be until I bury my husband."

"Oh... oh mum." Codsworth shrank into himself. With a grief-stricken hum, he left the room.
The brush of Nick fingers against her thin teeshirt, then the weight of his palm. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"I'll tell Garvey, and have a few of his men, uh…prepare a site while we got some light left. Whenever you're ready…come and meet us."

She spent the next hour staring at her vault suit on the bed, at all the gaping holes and tears, the scorch marks on the sleeves, the gold trim speckled with blood. It was ceremonial now, her rite of passage.

After tonight, there'd be no need for it anymore.

They waited for her at the small wooden bridge over the creek, in the shadow of Vault Tec's gaudy and now offensive billboard. Preston, Nick, and Sturges: such a trio they made, the startling contrast of a machine flanked by flesh, a synth between humans, a white rose between the red. On the billboard, the dimwitted line of people grinned at each other, oblivious to the nuclear explosions in the distance as they marched single file to their doom. The Vault Boy mascot led them like the Pied Piper of the Apocalypse, his vacant smile sinister in the failing sunlight.

*Have no fear, Vault Tec is here! Prepare for the future in our luxurious and spacious underground prisons, where we lie about keeping you safe and have absolutely no intentions of ever letting you leave. Any trauma you experience is completely intended and entirely our fault! Isn't unethical experimentation swell?*

Nate's body was heavy and brittle, an ice sculpture on the verge of splintering. They cushioned him with Vault Tec blankets. Wrapped rope to secure him.

It took all three men to carry him out.

By that time evening had drifted in on a tide of indigo sky, and the few who had settled in her home town — acquaintance and stranger — watched the somber affair from the safety of the sidewalk, this Poor Man's version of a war veteran's funeral procession. He should be buried with honors, given a final salute for his service by the folding of the flag, the playing of taps, the three volleys of rifle fire.

Nate didn't even get a casket.

The spot Garvey had chosen was behind a house they had torn down and replaced with a wooden fence. Beyond the fence, a spiked forest stretched toward the lake and the hills, where she'd met the crazy woman who had introduced her to blood and jet. In what would have been the backyard of Mister Baker's house, two graves lay side by side, the parched wood of the tiny crosses spoke decades, maybe more, since those souls had been laid to rest. And now another grave, a yard behind the others and hastily dug next to a copse of royal blue hubflower bushes. Two unnamed Minutemen stood beside the six-foot deep hole, silent and breathing hard. Sweat gleamed on their foreheads, their upper lips; wet patches of salt under their arms and around their necks. They bowed their heads at the sight of her, their militia hats held to their chests.

Garvey joined their line and did the same.

Sturges and Nick lowered Nate carefully into the grave.

Movement behind her. A nervous mutter and cough. Whether out of empathy or obligation, the others had come to pay their respects: The Longs, Jun and Marcy — Marcy supporting Mama Murphy by the elbow. The elderly woman took cautious, baby steps, as if afraid the ground would cave in under her weight. When Mama Murphy reached her, she patted her arm, *there there*, the
feather-light touch indistinguishable from the wind.

"Oh, dear…you poor dear. He was a good man, I know…I saw."

Her nod was stiff, automatic. Her nails dug into her palms, the ache grounding her. She had faced worse things. This was formality. This was moving on.

Jun shuffled forward, offering her a bundle of red, white, and blue with all the trepidation of a bashful child. "I-I found this in one of the houses, but…but I think it's better if he has it. Y—your husband. He's earned it." Now her eyes were on fire. Who had told him about Nate being a soldier?

Marcy came next, her perpetual scowl mollified by the flickering glow of the fire barrels along the fence. In her fist, a worn photo clenched like a life-line. Marcy, trembling and stiff, throat working but unable to say a word. She knew that kind of rage, that kind of grief. It had driven her clear across the Commonwealth. It had made her do crazy, stupid things.

She touched the sleeve of Marcy's flannel shirt, offering her own there there. "Don't say anything. You don't have to. I already know."

Marcy stifled a tiny, wounded noise and recoiled. On the shaking photo, a lopsided grin, a mop of shaggy dark hair. Too young.

Jun's gift folded itself like a piece of laundry, everything on autopilot. She lowered the flag bunting onto Nate's blanket-swathed form, and then with a teetering stretch, placed their wedding rings reverently on top. The edges of soft dry earth shifted under her knees, but a familiar grip steadied her. She didn't have to turn around to know who it was. Nick said nothing, but his hand remained. And she remained at his feet, suddenly uncertain what came next. Wasn't she supposed to say something now? Give some heartfelt speech in front of these strangers and her obsession? She wouldn't get past the first sentence.

"Mum?" Codsworth clinked and hummed into view. "May I-I say a few words?"

Beautiful machine. Such impeccable timing. "Yes, Codsworth, please."

The old General Atomics advertisement rhyme: Make a Mister Handy your butler or nanny! Eulogies weren't in their programing, but Codsworth delivered it with all the grace and sobriety of a priest. Heartfelt lines such as: "You were the best master this bot could've ever hoped for," and "the only human friend I'd ever had."

That stung more than her eyes, but it was deserved. In the end she'd been a stranger to them all.

Codsworth ended the torture with a sniffling farewell:

"Oh, Sir, you will be sorely missed."

They all looked to her then, expectant. She wasn't getting out of this after all. Expectation turned to pity as the silence stretched past the appropriate mark. Someone coughed. Restless shifting. Say something, say something, but she hunched there, mute and frozen.

"Nora?" Nick's fingers like a brush of bird wings across her back. The breath she'd been holding escaped in a sigh.

"I loved you, I did." Her last confession, spoken to the darkness of his grave, spoken so low it was barely a whisper. "But I know I should've shown it more. Not just to you, but to Shaun, and I'm sorry, so sorry. More than you know." Her fingers curled in the dirt. "I'll find him. I promise. And I'll
make them sorry for ever hurting us. Whatever it takes. Whatever…I become. I'll bring our baby home."

Then it was over. Formality completed. She stayed until the first thud of soil hit the blankets.

Rest in peace, soldier. Lover. Husband.

No more ghosts.

Back in her house, in the flipside of serene suburbia. Alice in her dark wonderland. There was no rabbit hole to crawl out of, no looking glass to smash. But all was not dreadful and dreary here. There was something pure. Something moral and right. Something now she wanted more than anything.

She slipped out of her vault suit, folded it like the flag and set it on the dresser. She'd burn it in the morning.

The cream chemise in her hands, a lucky find in Mrs. Whitfield's house, preserved in a trunk under an overturned desk. The material, sleek and smooth, running between her fingers. She laid it on the bed and put on the matching underwear. The chemise stayed. In the lantern light of her room, she waited.

She didn't have to wait long.

The way he walked always gave him away, his heavy, purposeful strides. Had the Nick of before walked that way? Had he had a lover, a wife? Surely he would remember seduction, would remember the thrill of the lure and the chase, would see her new wooden door, cracked open just so, teasing the glimpse of her bare back.

She reached for the chemise, pretended to consider it.

Outside her door, the floorboard creaked. Nate used to hit it every time —

No. Those wedding rings were in the damn ground for a reason.

She gave him her profile, the lantern-illuminated curve of her shoulder. Darkness obscured his form beyond the door, but he inhaled sharply — and held it.

The chemise fell to the floor.

Nick, please …please...

Another creak, quieter, closer. Her heart kicked against her ribs.

Yes, come to me.

Metal against metal, his hand on the door knob. And then a pause, a regretful sigh.

And the door clicked shut.

She sank to her knees, crushed the chemise to her face. Why? Why didn't he want her? Her muffled sobs, wheezy and broken. What was so wrong with her that even a machine would reject her? Damn him…damn him and his fucking mixed signals. Fucking man. Fucking synth. Fuck…fuck him.

Time was nothing. Meaningless minute after minute waiting for her front door to shut, waiting for him to leave, waiting for that final act of humiliation.
He never left.

She pressed her ear to the door. Another creak, this time of springs. Sitting down in that old armchair. What kind of game was he playing? *Go on, damn you, just leave. Just get out.*

Giving her hope like this. It was cruel.

She wiped her cheeks across her knee, and then stood and put on the tear-stained chemise. She got into bed. Moonlight streamed through the patchwork ceiling, streamed through her dark dreams.

His voice woke her. Speaking in fragments, a male version of the Assaultron.

"*Sorry, I can't...I...don't know.*"

Curiosity drove her, tiptoeing around that infamous floorboard, into the living room.

In the armchair, he lay sprawled as if exhausted from a hard day at the office, one leg propped on the ottoman, the other extended. His coat was slung over the couch, hat resting on top. His tie was still MIA from the synths ripping it off at Fort Hagen, so his dress shirt hung open at his throat, showing the scalloped lines of his collarbone.

"*Stop...digging. Stop. I can't help ya unless...tell me...will ya tell me what you want?*"

On her knees next to him, the heat of him intense, like a radiator set on high. His systems all thrummed to balance, the vibration like a tuning fork where her hand met his chest. He frowned but didn't stir. In the dim candlelight, his eyes swiveled back and forth under closed lids. Dreaming... how *wonderful*. Another reason he was more than a machine. And talking in his sleep too — if this was sleep at all. Maybe it was some sort of idle mode, conserving energy. Maybe he couldn't wake until the dream was over.

"*Nick?*

"*No.*" He jerked and she sprung back. His chest heaved once, twice, and then relaxed into a normal rhythm. "*Please...don't look at me like that.*"

Talking to her, or talking to this mysterious dream person? All his facial movements, micro-expressions fueled by air actuators. His lungs made sense now. A pneumatic system. That's why he could smoke and talk like a man. The Institute may be evil, but they were genius. Every quiver of his face was enthralling. The pressing of his lips, the roll his jaw, his brows pulling together and back again. At the edges where silicone met steel, the flesh stretched and flexed. How many actuators did he have? Hundreds? Her fingers hovered over his lips, giving him the lightest of grazes. He sighed, his breath hot against her palm.

"*Can't find it. You know I can't.*" Then in sorrow: "*I'm sorry, doll.*"

Her hurt at him evaporated. No, he wasn't talking to her, but it didn't matter. He had stayed when he should have left, and that meant something. Putting himself in such a vulnerable state, putting himself here where she could find him. *Explore* him. Now he was hers.

Her limbs in the empty spaces between his, she leaned over him, skimmed his arms, butterfly caresses over his shirt, his hands, then moving to the exposed silicone skin of his chest. Texture there less rough than his hand or forehead. Less exposure to the elements, like petting hardened charmeuse. He turned his head, but his eyes stayed shut. His breathing slowed, his dreamself walking away from whomever upset him and finding a better dream - one she created by her proximity and touch. Appraising him now, knee between his thighs, daring closer. Deep inside his
neck, movement. Where the steel tube of his throat branched deeper, a gyroscope rotated inside a clear plastic casing. A blue light blinked behind it like a slow opening of an eye. She could have watched it for days. Then behind more wires of his throat, the ones bent by Kellogg's mistreatment, a small walnut-sized chamber housed inside another clear casing with a tube extending from it. Inside, thick silicone gray threads like a web. They shivered with the soft noise he made when she pressed for a closer look. Vocal chords. He didn't have a voice modulator at all.

Enboldened now, lost in his heat, in the thrill of him. Her hand sought his inner thigh. All these exquisite details. What else had they given him?

His thigh shifted under her hand. Firmer than a human male, but with a slight give, like a cushioned prosthesis. When he settled again, her hand slid all the way home. Her breath caught.

I’m a synth, synthetic man. All the parts, minus a few red blood cells.

Well, well, all the parts indeed.

He didn't move and neither did she. Then his eyes resumed their to and fro. Their pace quickened with her hand, as did his breathing, as did his rising heat. He swelled in her grip, his breath snagging with pleasure, then in warning.

He grabbed her wrist.

Fuck! She bleated, tried to scramble away. He held her easy, eyes still closed, her wrist a brittle twig in his grip. When he opened his eyes: instant assessment. Judgment. She shuddered, hanging her head, tears welling. Caught red-handed in every sense of the phrase. Now would come the disgust, the indignation, the slew of how dare you's. Their partnership was over. He hated her now. He had to. And he would leave her, seeing what she really was, pitiful and desperate, the kind of women who gropes a man while he's defenseless. But he said nothing. The heat of him scorched like his eyes. Her free hand found purchase on his other thigh, freezing there when he made a throaty noise.

Now they were a tragic Greek statue: lovers or enemies, it was his choice.

The room filled with their breathing. There was no mercy under his gaze.

"Was I snoring?"

The question was so benign all she could do was stare. His hold gentled in increments, his thumb stroking her inner wrist. The heat of him lowered until she straddled a sun-warmed lap instead of a nuclear-fueled bonfire. This was another test somehow. This evasion. This refusal to acknowledge what she clearly had been doing.

Was I snoring?

There was a question beneath the question, the one he wouldn't ask — the one unwilling to ask.

Was I talking?

There was unease in his expression now, that same fear as on the roof of Fort Hagen. Not the Brotherhood this time, but a mysterious dream that had prevented him from feeling her groping hands, that had used his own voice against him.

"No," she answered with a lie, what he wanted to hear, and then added a lie of her own.

"Were you sleeping?"
Were you dreaming?

A slow drag of his thumb over her leaping pulse. "No."

Lies and the unspoken hung between them, more intimate than his hand around her wrist, or her hand on his thigh. They poised on the edge of this precipice, neither brave enough to take the plunge.

Muted light filtered through the skewed slots of the window blinds, the blushing pink of morning.

Dogmeat barked nearby, a high, playful sound.

A distant murmur of voices.

Sanctuary waking, little by little.

Nick released her. The moment broke.

Then came the awkward apologies, the hasty retreats.

She fled to Shaun's bedroom, and he to her backyard.

The light of his cigarette was a beacon she couldn't reach.

When he was finished with it, he lit another.

Then another.

It was going to be a long walk to Goodneighbor.
Chapter Summary

Cambridge

Nick contemplates his relationship with Nora. The duo meet the Brotherhood and go on a scavenger hunt with Paladin Danse.

Shutting her bedroom door had been the hardest thing he'd ever done, prewar Nick and him combined. The sight of her there, bared for him - for him - not Garvey or Sturges or any other human in Sanctuary, had been enough to tempt him into tossing his good sense into the gutter — along with his morals and inhibitions and whatever else stood in his way.

But then the old processor kicked in and flashed every reason not to do it. And then prewar Nick, snickering somewhere in his circuitry: *Quit fooling yourself, Nicky. Ya really think it's you she wants?*

Right. Who was he fooling? She'd just put her husband in the ground. She wasn't thinking straight. She wasn't reaching out to him, she was reaching for anyone. The dame wanted comfort, a warm body. While he could have given those things in spades, it would have been a one-time deal and a hell of an awkward morning after. Even more awkward than the one currently in progress. And then there was their partnership to consider. The long-term prospects of it — well, long term until she found her son. After that the boy would need his mother — and he...he would need a new partner. Again.

The story of his life.

Or was it? Later that night she had surprised him — no, shocked the hell out of him. Her wandering hands, Nora going all curious kitten on his lap, nuzzling and rubbing against him. The background data collected during his memory caching was enough to get his coolant pumping every time he looped it. And he'd looped it several times this morning already. The sensory records almost made him forget why he hadn't put a stop to it sooner. That damn piece of code he couldn't get rid of. Didn't matter how many times he defragmented it, parsed it, shuffled it to other programs, hid it in files he'd never open again, like a clingy old flame, it kept coming back for abuse. It would slither itself into his memory cache and wait until he purged all the unnecessary details of the day. It was rude, dammit. Cacheing was his "me" time, the only time he felt human. The only time he dreamed.

But that was when this bad code pounced and ruined everything. Warped his dreams to the same thing every time. A beach. An unknown town. Buoys hanging from derelict houses. Moldering docks and nets full of seaweed and fish bones. And a woman in a red prewar dress, digging in the sand. Frenzied, infuriated pawing, like a dog searching for a missing bone.

*Help me, Nick. Help me find it. It’s so dark here. I can't breathe.*

She always wore Jenny's face.

But she wasn't Jenny. Nowhere near Jenny. There was something in the dame's eyes that set off every programed instinct he had. Didn't want to touch her. Didn't want to even look at her. She was something ancient and mean. She was just plain wrong.
And she was probably why the Institute gave him the boot. Who the hell wanted a machine who dreamed about a creepy dame every night?

"Nick, let’s stop for a minute, okay?"

Oh, so she was finally talking to him again. It'd only been what, five hours?

Nora grabbed a can of purified from her pack and gulped half of it down, looking in every direction but his. They were by the town of Cambridge, in a secluded part of the woods where the dead trees were thicker and the hubflowers brighter. She had a fondness for those, her fingers stroking a closed blossom of a nearby bush as she sipped the rest of her water. In the haze of early morning, most buds were still clamped shut. But now that she touched it, the flower and probably the whole damn bush would burst into bloom. There was power in those fingers. Couldn't deny that. She had taken him from dreaming to hot and bothered in record time; systems he hadn't known he'd had overriding routine protocols and sending a flood of coolant between his legs, that part of him suddenly springing to life in every sense of the word.

So the damn thing wasn't broken after all. How about that. But how the hell would the plumbing work after a century of disuse? And not for lack of trying either — definitely not for lack of trying — but all it did and ever done was dangle there, a useless lump of aesthetics the Institute had decided to tack on, good for nothing but pissing out Vadim’s piss-poor excuse for beer. And the last time he played guinea pig, it had been neon blue, like he’d chugged a case of Quantum — and it had burned. That part of him had a ton of tactiles that wouldn't quit. Why the hell give him those if they weren't planning on him using them?

But oh look, surprise! One more thing to complicate matters — as if he didn't have enough to worry about with the Brotherhood breathing down his neck and Nora dancing around the elephant of last night.

And he didn't blame her. He had tucked tail and ran. There were a million other ways of handling that and he'd chosen the worst one. This ice between them was his own damn fault, and if it didn’t thaw soon it wouldn't thaw at all, and he wasn't losing another partner. Not her.

"Where are you going?" Her big blues wide and startled, like he was going to run off on her.

"Getting something. Stay there."

She stayed and watched him wade through the weeds. A glance back seared her image into his memory core: road leathers clinging to every curve, that plump cupid bow of her mouth twisting in curiosity, the loose tendrils of her hair blowing in the wind, a few gluing themselves to her rosy cheek. His frame hand twitched, already brushing those strands aside, then cupping her face, pulling her —

No, knock it off.

He gave his hand something else to do, waved it over the patch of delicate purple flowers. They puffed their poison at the motion, then swayed in the wind as if tuckered out. Four of the most vibrant and pristine of the lot, stalks woven together with tough sinewy grass. Hid them behind his back as he made his way to her. Nothing wrong with a little theatrics.

"What do you have there?" She craned her head, her impish smile widening. Already the ice was cracking.

With a bit of panache and flair, he presented them. "Found ya some rad daisies. A rare find in these
"Oh, they're so different. So purple now. Did radiation change them?"

"Yeah, like the thistles but smaller, and more deadly." He caught her hand as she snatched it back. She went still, her pupils going big and round. Lots of interpretations of that expression, and all of them opposites. "Don't worry, doll. I wouldn't give ya anything that could hurt ya. They got one poof in 'em and that's it. Now they're just pretty and harmless. And smell better than the old variety." She took a whiff, nostrils flaring and her smile came back, small and wondering.

"Oh, you're right." She inhaled deep, the petals pressing against her nose. "Like red roses. Amazing."

"Uh, if I may? He made the universal gesture for the question and she nodded, her niche of a smile never dropping. Her hair wound though his fingers, the texture fine and slinky — So different from Jenny's hair which had been thick and everywhere. "Got a bobbypin on ya?" Of course she did. And with a simple tuck and fold and the daisies had new home.

"There, wild flowers and leather. Best combination in the Commonwealth."

She touched them, the red in her cheeks rich and deep. Her wispy laugh tugged at more than his steel heart strings. Whoa, down boy, he told the new subroutine. Whaddya doing, making up for lost time? But now that he had her in a better mood, it was time to deal with the elephant.

"Nora, why don't we forget… about last night. All of it. It was… rough on everyone."

She stared past him, her good humor fizzling out. The tab of her purified water bent back and forth until it broke. "If… that's what you want, Nick."

Why do dames always say things like a trap ready to spring? "Look, you just buried your husband, and I—I didn't want to start somethin' we'd both regret."

"Technically, I started it."

"You ended it too."

The breath she sucked in made him wince. Her big blues went dark and shiny. "Nick, I know, I'm so sorry, I had no right. And I never should've —"

"Hey, hey, stop beating yourself up. There's nothing to be ashamed over. You were curious, me being your first synth and all. It's understandable that you'd wanna, uh, well, uh — " he grappled for the right concept. Explore? Tinker? Pet? He cleared his throat to cover the lull. "What I'm sayin', Nora, is no harm no foul. And I mean it."

"It was more than curiosity," she confessed in a whisper, looking down at his muddy shoes, then straight into his eyes. All his systems stuttered to a halt except for Mister You Know Who. And that damn thing was up and ready to go. Thank God for baggy trousers, but if he didn't nip this in the bud now, it was gonna get messy and complicated and that was bad for the both of them — bad because she was one of two people in this world that had a thing for his kind. The other was a kid of nineteen that had followed him Diamond City once like a pup, asking with a pair of doe eyes if he could "touch" his metal hand. Didn't have the blue onsie, but the kid had "Vault Boy" written all over him, probably an engineer or some science nut.

He'd had given in eventually, because hell, why not? And when the kid had caressed his hand — it had been with that same reverence Nora had shown him, like he was a walking hallelujah. They had
a name for it back in the prewar days, but they had a name for everything back then. Suppose it didn't matter now. The few in this world who thought he was "wonderful" didn't make up for the most who wanted him a pile of scrap just for existing. Which was why this — whatever this was — couldn't go on.

"You flatter me, doll, more than anyone I've ever met. And that's a century of faces and names and — and now I'm not saying no - which is what I should be saying — " nip it in the bud, right. No one better ever give him a pair of pruning shears. "— the fact is, I—I need to put a stop to this now before ya get hurt."

"And why would you hurt me?"

"Nora, we've been over this, I'm a machine —"

"Oh, shut up about that. It isn't true. Maybe on the outside, but on the inside? No. I watched you last night. You were dreaming and talking and don't tell me those were programs, or some set of synth protocols. You tell me not to beat myself up, but maybe you should take your own advice, Nick. Don't keep using that as an excuse. You're more than a machine, and I'm done telling you that."

Prewar Nick chuckled in the shadowy part of his memory space. Calling ya out now on your 'woe is me' bullshit. Dame has a pair of rocks bigger than yours. He gritted his teeth. "Fine, doll. But whatever I am, I know it ain't good for ya."

"I decide what's good for me." She cupped his chin and his mind blanked. Every sensor registered the slide of her fingers across the unbroken part of his cheek. The kiss was quick, no more than a peck of soft skin against silicone. Chaste in every way, but everything in him wanted to crush her to the nearest tree and finish what she started back on that old armchair.

There ya go again, thinking like me, like the man you pretend to be.

Jealous? he shot back. Prewar Nick had been a womanizer before Jenny, a new flavor every month. But those memories were blurred all to hell, faces and bodies running into each other like ink on wet cement. Only Jenny stood out, the ghost of her blond and willowy, all legs and bedroom eyes.

Nora had those same eyes. The same fire. The light of a passionate soul.

It was alluring and repelling. But what repelled him wasn't her, it was himself. What the hell could he give her? Children? No. And they couldn't grow old together. Death do us part didn't have the same romance when one of 'em couldn't technically die. But now he was getting ahead of himself, thinking like a fool, like he was more than just a novelty to her.

And that's all you'll ever be, synth.

Go back to being dead, Nick.

Nora walked back to her pack with a little more sway than usual, tossing him a coy smile over her shoulder. Saucy minx. And that smile of hers, never full on, always with that slant or tilt or curve to her lips, like she was plotting against him, or laughing at something on his face.

Falling for a dame who couldn't even smile straight. He was doomed.

And speaking of doom, a signal filtered through his processor, military frequency. He played it as Nora took a knee and reorganized her backpack. Then played it again, the Scribe on the other end somehow more frantic the second time around.
Well...shit.

"Nora, you getting this signal?"

She frowned at him, then at her Pip-Boy. She flicked one of the switches at its side. "Getting the alert for it, yeah. How'd you know?"

"Oh, I can pick up certain frequencies, one of the few bells and whistles that comes in handy once in a while. You gonna play it?"

"Who are they and what do they want?"

"Does that matter? Someone's in trouble. Wouldn't hurt to lend a hand."

"Why aren't you telling me who they are?"

"Nora, just listen to it."

She eyeballed him a minute before grunting in defeat. Her Pip-Boy sputtered and spat out the distress call:

"...This is Scribe Haylen of Reconnaissance Squad Gladius to any unit in transmission range. Authorization Arx. Ferrum. Nine. Five. Our unit has sustained casualties and we're running low on supplies. We're requesting support or evac from our position at Cambridge Police—"

Nora switched it off. "No."

"Nora," saying it like bad girl, you know better. "Sounds like they're in over their heads."

"I know who they are, Nick, and why you didn't want to tell me. Scribe Haylen? Squad Gladius? And broadcasting on a military channel? She's Brotherhood, and that makes her problem not our problem. With all these Vertibirds flying around, I'm sure they'll be found soon."

"By then it might be too late. This is happening as we speak. I know you can't hear it, but there's gunfire toward the Cambridge PD. This squad is most likely holed up there, and on their own for whatever reason. Brotherhood or not, they're gonna run out of bullets."

"Again, not my problem. And stop looking at me like that. I'm not a terrible person, I'm doing this to protect you, Nick. They'll probably shoot you on sight."

Worrying over him. What a sweetheart. But now it was on his head if she didn't help. "Not if I'm shooting at whatever's got 'em pinned down. Enemy of my enemy and all that. The Brotherhood's maybe strung tighter than a bundle of grenades, but they're not idiots — well, most of them, anyway. And besides, the Brotherhood will owe us a favor, a big one. And that's not a bad first impression to make." He was getting to her now. The slight puffing of her lips — stop staring at those — a subtle ease in her frown, the slide of those big blues away from him and to the road. Warring with her conscious now and good on her. Nothing was worse than witnessing a good person give in to the suffering of this world. To become the perpetrator of violence instead of its victim.

"Fine. But only because you asked me. And I'm going to tell them that, too." Hands on her hips, all sass. "That they owe their lives to a synth. But if they start shooting at you, if they even look at you wrong — "

"Probably won't be able to help that. This mug always gets the stares, though with the Brotherhood I'm expecting more of a glower. Maybe a sneer or two thrown in for fun."
"I'm not kidding, Nick. If they try hurt you, I'll hurt them."

The iron in her voice. It warmed his tin-man heart.

*Feeling's mutual, doll. Count on it.*

They made it to Cambridge in twenty minutes, but the rot of withering flesh hit his nose way before setting foot in the city proper.

"Get that new bat of yours ready, Nora. Looks like the Brotherhood is dealing with a horde of ferals."

Nora grimaced like she'd swallowed a sour tarberry and shot him a "You owe me big time" glare. Maybe he'll be creative in making it up to her — if they survived. Playing good Samaritan didn't always work out as planned. His poor excuse for a face could attest to that, but oh, such stories it could tell. Tales of bravery and stupidity, of saving folks who only spat on him afterward. No, the Brotherhood wouldn't thank him, but they wouldn't refuse the help either. And if it all worked out, maybe he wouldn't have to duck out of sight every time a Vertibird flew by. *Scratch my back, you steel bastards, and I'll scratch yours.* The tricky part was not getting his head blown off along with the ferals.

The area outside Cambridge PD was a war zone of bloody ash piles and smoking yellow bodies. The stench alone would have made him gag if he had the reflex. Nora blinked away tears of disgust, stumbling as she coughed into her arm. Ferals shambled out from under wrecked cars and blasted buildings like zombies from a prewar horror film, the blasts of laser fire drawing them toward the PD. They trampled over each other and over the barriers the Brotherhood had erected in vain to keep them out. None of those glowing eyes had turn on them yet, but once Nora started swinging and he started shooting, they'd be neck-deep in grabby hands and gnashing teeth.

They took cover behind a semi-truck that had jack-knifed in front of the station. Nora inched her way toward the end of the lopsided trailer, her heat-coiled bat ready to whack some skulls and set them on fire. Hopefully he wouldn't have to yank the newly dubbed *Fire Brat* out of anyone this time around. He crept behind her and took a peek through the axles.

Beyond the metal barriers and catwalk bridge, a lone Brotherhood soldier made his final stand at the foot of the PD's concrete stairs, his laser rifle burning ferals who flung themselves at him left and right. Well, color him impressed, taking them all on like that. The Brotherhood had to be high rank by the red insignia circling the arm of his power armor, his helmet either MIA or knocked off by an overzealous feral. Two more soldiers behind him, a man and a woman, but they were down and out of the fight. From the goggle-headed gear of the dame, she was probably the Scribe who called for help.

"Keep these drooling things off me, Nick, and follow me in slow. Let these Brotherhood people see you're fighting with me." Nora's breath activated every sensor in his ear. No hair there to raise, but holy hell was it distracting. As if his coolant wasn't surging everywhere already.

"Sounds like a plan, partner. Just watch yourself and that rad counter. You pull back if it goes too high — and I mean it. Pull back. I like that pert little nose of yours right where it is."

Her laugh, thready and excited. "Oh do you?"

"Just sayin, doll, would be a damn shame to see it fall off."

"Anything for you, Nicky," saying it all husky into his ear, sending his coolant pressure soaring. His
emergency regulators kicked in, but the rush was heady and sobering. Nothing like over a gallon of icy liquid to slap some sense into ya. Not into Nora, though. The crazy dame had thrown herself headfirst into the fray.

"Civilian on the perimeter, check your fire!"

The Brotherhood barked the command like he had a whole squad shooting with him. Nora took out a feral charging toward the soldier with a single swing, flesh sizzling and sickly sweet even from this distance. Nora's intrusion made three ferals on the overhead catwalk switch direction mid-flight. They dove at her like lumpy, infuriated pigeons. His pipe revolver took out all but one, Nora ending its raspy bellow with a hissing crack across its face, sending it burning into wall of sandbags.

Now he was in the front yard. Exposed. Every synth part of him glaring in the afternoon sun.

Two things happened at once, each registered and allocated to separate parts of his processor, one arm-wrestling the other for control.

The Brotherhood spotted him, the double-take almost laughable if it wasn't for that laser rifle swinging like an Assaultron's beam in his direction. Was it really surprising? Clothes couldn't hide what he was. An abomination. The enemy. A synth. And the Brotherhood saw this in every piece of pasty white silicone skin. Saw it in his beady yellow eyes under the shadow of his fedora. The eyes this Brotherhood soldier had been taught to hate — and with good reason.

Kill or be killed. Motto of the Commonwealth. His framework hand lifted, the glinting steel of a machine, and the glinting steel of his revolver as it aimed at the soldier aiming at him.

The arm-wrestle was over. Self-preservation won.

"No!"

A tiny blur of dark hair and leather rushed into the line of fire, her bat raised and quivering like her voice.

"He's with me, damn you! He's with me!"

A feral with terrible sense of timing decided right then to pounce on his back. Its hands wrapped around his neck, and whatever teeth it had left tried to gnaw his ear off. The seams of his coat split as it drove him to the ground. "Shit! Nora, get this damn thing off —"

Laser fire streaked by like a red comet. The feral shrieked and dissolved — all over him.

Shaking ash off his coat, glaring at the Brotherhood who glared at him back. Nora came over, bosom heaving, but not the titillating sort of heaving he might have appreciated any other time. She had his hat in her hands. No jokes from either of them when he put it back on. Her fingers brushed his sleeve, then his face — like she was making sure he was real. Couldn't lean into her hand like he wanted, not with the Brotherhood watching.

"Check your fire, we got hostiles." The Brotherhood jabbed the air with his rifle, and Nora was back to business. A wave of growling rolled in from the street, bringing with it the stench of death. Round two. Here they come.

She never left his side, nor he hers. They fought back to back, and when they needed to, switched positions with the ease of a well-oiled machine — pun completely intended. Nora and him, her bat and his revolver, flesh and steel working together. And every so often, the Brotherhood soldier would pause and watch, dumbfounded. And the two behind him also, the fella in particular
struggling to stand so he could get a better look, and the little Scribe pulling him back down so she could tend his wounds.

*Yeah, that's right, Brotherhood. You watch. And you learn. Not all of us are abominations. Not all of us need killing.*

It took another three rounds of ferals before the horde thinned to a trickle. Then nothing at all.

"Think that's the last of them." Truth was they probably flushed out all of Cambridge, College Square, and probably some of Lexington — alright, maybe not Lexington, but it sure felt like it. He reloaded and felt for his hat. Yep, still there. Nora inspected the torn sleeve of her right shoulder.

"Hey, Nora, you alright?" Before she could answer, the Brotherhood thunk thunked his way over to them wearing a scowl deep enough to climb into.

"Who are you, civilian? And why have you brought that abomination here?"

He sighed and grabbed a tortoise from the pack in his inner coat pocket. What was that old prewar saying? The more things change, the more they stay the same — and good old fashioned bigotry never died.

"Well, you're fucking welcome, sir." Nora's fuse was smoking and ready to light. Was it strange to notice the rad daisy still in her hair? Or that little pulse in the vein on her forehead? "We risked our lives coming here and helping you. We could have kept walking, and if it had been up to me, I would've kept walking. My abomination is the reason I'm even here at all — and his name is Nick, so call him that."

The look on the Brotherhood's face, priceless. That scowl swung over and up and down, taking in his fedora, his trenchcoat, his lit cigarette and the smoke curling out of his cheeks. Ashes mingled with ashes on the ground as he burned through his stog in one hit, his lung filters grousing at the workload. "Yeah, it's Valentine. Nick Valentine. I'm a detective from Diamond City."

"A detective?" The Brotherhood saying it like a bad joke he didn't get. "How the hell did they make you a detective?"

"Long story and a long time ago. Cliffnote version is I rescued a girl and brought her home. Her daddy was the mayor at the time, and it ain't hard to figure out the rest."

The Brotherhood came closer, meaning to appear menacing, but not quite making it there, even with his finger itching that trigger of his rifle. "So you infiltrated Diamond City. Tell me what the Institute wants there."

"No, we are not doing this." Nora wedged herself between them, the heat coils of her bat glowing under the Brotherhood's nose. "I said Nick's with me. We're partners. He's helping me find my missing son — who I should be looking for right now instead of being interrogated by some military wannabe. This is how you treat people? No wonder no one else bothered with you. I already regret wasting my time." There was a wobble under all that ferocity in her voice. Anger did that to some dames, and to Nora more than most. And as with most fellas, nothing backed them off faster than the threat of the waterworks. The Brotherhood had some sense after all.

"Whoa, calm down, civilian." The Brotherhood put his armored paws up in surrender. "We do appreciate your assistance, and you do have the Brotherhood's gratitude. However your companion is…unexpected."

"You mean unwanted," Nora shot back.
"I mean…" The Brotherhood rubbed the thin hood covering his head and sighed. "Never mind what I mean. Listen, how about we start over? I'm Paladin Danse, and behind me are Knight Rhys and Scribe Haylen, the last surviving members of my team."

A Paladin, huh? That explained a few things, namely the attitude. Nora didn't seem much impressed with the lofty title either. Next to the PD's double doors, the Scribe nodded at them as she patched up Knight Rhys, whose hard-eyed stare probably wasn't related to his injuries. It was tempting to get into a staring contest, but it'd be unsporting at this point — and unfair because, you know, glowing yellow synth eyes and all.

"If we seem suspicious, it's because we've been a target ever since arriving in the Commonwealth," Danse said. "We've sustained heavy casualties and our supplies are running out. We've been trying to send a distress call to our vessel at Boston International Airport, but our signal is too weak to reach them. The boost we need is a piece of tech located at a nearby facility called Arcjet Systems. I was on my way there when the ferals attacked. If you want to keep pitching in, you could accompany me. An extra gun would be gladly appreciated."

"Two," Nora said. She sheathed Fire Brat and crossed her arms.

"Come again?" Danse's scowl was back and deeper than ever. Betcha dames loved that manly scowl. Prewar, postwar, woman always seemed to flock to these rough and tough types. The gruff, stoic Paladin with a five-o-clock shadow that stretched for miles and the jawline of a comic book hero. Poor fella probably had to beat them off with a sledge.

"Two guns. We're partners, like I said. If you want my help, then you get our help. If not, then this is goodbye, Paladin."

The Paladin glanced back at his team and was met with a nod yes and a nod no - and bet ya ten caps who said "no". Well, Knight Rhys wasn't in any position to call the shots was he?

"All right," Danse sounding like he was agreeing to a pact with the devil, "If you can keep your synth under control, then…I'll approve its participation in this mission. But trust me, if it goes out of line — if it so much as twitches its weapon in my direction, I won't hesitate to destroy it."

"Ya know, it'd be a lot easier if you'd just call me a he…since well, I am a he," he said with a golly gee shrug and a smile Ellie had sworn was charming. "Just saying."

Add a lip curl to that scowl, and this was one damn irked Paladin. "You're a machine, synth, nothing more. Even if you are…unusual."

"That's the sweetest thing you've said to me yet, Paladin. Nora, I say help em'. The sooner these folks get back to their big fat ship, the better the Commonwealth will sleep."

Danse narrowed his eyes at that, but before there was a serious sass off, Nora stepped in between them again, lips quirked in that lovely, lopsided smile that disarmed the Paladin as swiftly and deftly as any trained opponent.

"How about you tell us what you need, Paladin Danse, and we'll do it. Just point the way."

The "way" was about a mile down the road, and along their stroll under the now bright afternoon sun, Danse fed them interesting tidbits of intel — that he'd have relocated his team by now if not for the energy readings Scribe Haylen had detected. Intermittent and transmitting at a frequency only obtainable with a high level of tech. Sounded like the Institute without a doubt, but no sense in blabbing that to the Brotherhood. Chances were this Elder Maxson fella already knew about the
Institute operating in the Commonwealth, and had flown his blimp all the way here for some sort of righteous confrontation. Or to be a general nuisance. Whatever the reason, the Brotherhood's presence would make it worse for his kind, every gen 3 killed just for having the misfortune of existing. Even the ones programmed to replace humans…it wasn't their fault. Puppets didn't have a choice who pulled their strings.

There were a few raiders along the way, a pack of wild dogs, but what day would be complete if they didn't put down one or the other? Nora didn't hesitate taking them out. Even gave the mighty Paladin a run for his caps. Seems that prewar shine was wearing off his Vault gal pretty quick. Not sure if it was a good thing. Better keep an eye on her, make sure she didn't start bashing heads when she should be sweet talking. The Commonwealth's claws weren't sinking into this one, not if he could help it.

They trudged up the hill to a grandiose block of a building with its logo hogging most of the front entrance. A tiny jet with an exaggerated J shaped stream trail cut off "ArcJet" from "Systems". Kinda cute, actually, but then Danse, power helmet on, grumbled at it before turning to them and saying:

"So here it is, ArcJet Systems. There shouldn't be any exterior security so we'll head in through the front. Now, listen up. We do this clean and quiet. No heroics and by the book. Understood?"

"This isn't our first rodeo, Paladin." Truth was, this hoity toity act Danse was putting on was wearing extra thin. "Fact, maybe you oughta get behind us. Wouldn't want all that weight you're throwing around to squash anyone." Danse's helmet swiveled in his direction and didn't budge. Nora's stifled her snort of laughter behind a cough. The rad daisy winked in the dark waves of her hair. Maybe it was an omen. Maybe after this fetch quest he'd untangle it for her; maybe dare to whisper a sweet nothing in her ear; maybe he'd —

"I'm offering tactical advice to your partner, synth. Not to you. Fact, I'd prefer you to bring up the rear. The civilian will be between us."

"What the hell is this? Why can't I bring up the rear?"

"This synth may be your partner, civilian, but the more space between us, the better."

"If I wanted to kill you, Danse, I'd use my hands." Particularly the one that gave Kellogg a new face.

"Okay, stop. Now." Nora's bat hit the cement with a ringing thunk. She scolded them like schoolboys misbehaving. "The sooner we get this stupid transmitter the sooner I can go back to finding my son. For the last time, Paladin Danse, Nick's not going to turn on you. He's a detective. He helps people. I know it may be difficult to grasp that he's actually a decent person — that he actually IS a person, but if you want my help you're going to have to deal with it. And fine, I'll stay behind you, whatever you want. But only because Nick has my back. There's no one in this world I trust more."

If he had blood, his cheeks would be redder than a sunburned albino radstag. Nora's impassioned speech seemed to work its magic on the Paladin, turning him into a less insufferable dolt.

"Very well, civilian. Until this mission in concluded, I will set aside my reservations regarding your synth, but remember what I said at the station, if it malfunctions, I'm putting it down."

"As far as the Institute is concerned, I've been malfunctioning since day one, but whatever you say, pal, just as long as no stray bullets find their way into my skull. Now, like my partner said, let's find this damn thing and be done with it."
Inside the building was more of the same as for any building in the Commonwealth: destruction and ruin and two hundred years of dust and rot. His lung filters kicked in with an internal whirring that rattled his lower teeth. The ceiling was intact so no mold or mildew. Which meant that one couch not overturned might actually be safe to sit on. There was even an intact Nuka Cola machine right next to it.

"Hey, while we're in here, wouldn't hurt to nab a few things for the road. There's a Nuka Cherry over there —" He brushed Nora's forearm as he pointed, all her fine hairs rising under his touch — and not from disgust as he would've assumed a few days ago. This was new territory. New ground. And damn it, what would be the harm in exploring it?

She's just curious, you idiot. She'll drop you first chance she gets.

Not Nick's voice. His. Which, yeah, was sorta was the same thing once you got down to it, but either way, it was annoying and deserved a toss into the shut the hell up folder.

"Could we focus, please? We're not here to scavenge." Paladin Danse, being a party pooper.

"Aren't we, though? This thing we're fetchin' for ya, it's considered salvage ain't it?"

"Splitting hairs, synth. We don't have time nor the resources to lug back every little thing we find. Ammo and weapons, yes. Medical supplies, yes. Things of value, yes."

"Nuka Cherry's my favorite, Paladin." Nora freed the bottle from its rusted metal cage and shoved it into her backpack. "It's valuable to me."

"All gloom and doom make Paladin Danse a dull boy," he muttered in Nora's ear. She snickered.

The Security Office was a wreck, literally. Protectrons littered the floor in pieces, half the poor bastards never making it out of their charge pods. Memories of Fort Hagen blinked in his mind, his system flashing image after image, his self-preservation protocols going from yellow to red. Didn't need another clue to tell who or what did this. His big brothers' calling card was always the same.

"It appears the facilities automated security has already been dealt with," said Danse as he surveyed the damage. "Damn it, look at this mess. There isn't a single drop of blood or spent ammunition casing in sight. I've seen these types of attacks before. These robots were assaulted by —"

"Synths, in this case, gen two's." The Paladin clunked around to face him, the lip curl not in sight, but there in spirit. "Guess your tech is on the Institute's shopping list, Paladin, meaning it's already theirs and we're the thieves coming to steal it. Hope you brought enough ammo for that fancy rifle of yours. The gen two's tend to swarm a target."

"And what about you, synth? Will you kill your own kind?"

"They ain't my kind, Paladin, thought I made that clear."

"Boys, piss it out later. If the gen twos are still here, they could anywhere," Nora said from behind a security terminal, her face aglow in rad green. "There's also turrets we'll need to deal with unless the synths destroyed those too. Seems like ArcJet increased security before the bombs fell. They were working on some prototype booster engine, hi-tech and dangerous. Killed a member of the press."
Over her shoulder, he read the rest. Same old tale of corruption and greed. "And of course being caring, decent folks, they covered it up."

"Yep, sure did," she said and closed the file. "Gotta love old corporate America."

"It was corporations like this that hammered the nail in the coffin for mankind," Danse said, going all lecture hall professor on them. "Exploiting technology for their own gains and ignoring the damage left in their wake. And what did it do? In the end, it destroyed the world, and almost destroyed humanity. Now it's up to us to reclaim it, to keep this technology out of the wrong hands. The Institute won't win. Their synths won't win. Not today. And not under my watch. Both of you, follow me."

Danse clunked his grand exit. They stared after him, then at each other.

"Well, amen," he said.

Brotherhood or not, Paladin Danse was starting to grow on him.

Outside the hall, Danse waited for them to play catch up, then they made their way past the office graveyards of dead terminals and files so fragile they'd crumble to bits if you stared at em' too hard. No gen 2's yet, but they were around. His steel bones felt it.

The offices opened into a lab area, with two intact terminals waiting to spill their secrets to his nimble — oh, wait. Forget it. Already accessible. What the hell? Increased security, his ass.

Nora found a holotape with two eggheads whining over being drafted and talking in vague terms about the booster engine. The Lab Analyst terminal spat out an automated password. Was everything going to be handed to them? Maybe if they just waited long enough, the transmitter would fall into their lap and they could go home.

The password opened a door to yet another lab with a large engine-looking thing squatting in the middle. The only thing exciting about this room was the sudden and violent barrage of laser fire from a group of gen 2's who seemed to have appeared out of thin air.

"We got hostiles! Check your fire!" Danse didn't seem to be checking anything as he bombarded the synths in red beams as the gen 2's bombarded him with blue. Seeing multiples of his own face still startled him sometimes, made him a little slow on the draw — a mistake that could cost him one day if he didn't have allies to pick up his slack. Danse made short work of most with his rifle, and Nora finished off the rest, hitting them so hard she took their heads clean off. A synth skull bounced past him and hit the wall, flying apart in a mess of fizzing wires. None of his big brothers had noticed him either, which was a little disappointing. Was always fun to see the puppets get pissed at the one who didn't dance to their tune.

He fiddled with his revolver, pretending to reload. "Coulda saved one for me, doll."

"I'm not letting them near you."

"Oh, stop. They just want a hug."

"Nick, they want to tear you apart." Nora looked at Danse as she said it. Danse inspected a dirty beaker like he'd never seen one before.

"What can I say? They miss me oodles."

"Civilian, if you're done coddling your synth, I suggest we move on."
Didn't he say Danse was growing on him? Yeah, well, never mind.

They went through a hole in the wall past some crusted piping no one was meant to see, into another room with two levels, collapsed staircases and more gen 2's spouting their typical hello's with laser fire and polite promises of annihilation. This time he clocked three before Nora had a chance to swing, while Danse obliterated the others charging toward her.

"Hey you guys," she said, shaking ashes from her hair, her saucy glare warming his circuitry.

"Ain't letting them near you either, doll."

That earned another bucket-headed stare from Danse, who muttered something to himself and clomped up the makeshift ramp of what was left of the second floor. More offices, synths, and turrets later, they found the CEO's terminal. Didn't have to hack into that one either, which was a shame — and embarrassing for the so-called heightened ArcJet security.

He and Nora read the files on the Mars Shot Project while Danse stomped around and complained about delays. Seems the CEO wanted to put Arcjet on the map with that experimental XMB booster engine they secured with the military. Even started working on it before the deal was made. Then they secured some big wig scientist from the military to help out, yadda yadda — then in file three, a mention of the deep range transmitter. By then Danse was hovering behind them, being a backseat reader.

"Search for more intel about that."

"Don't you have a perimeter to secure or something?"

"You're not getting rid of me that easy, synth."

"I can dream, can't I?"

"Boys, don't make me get out of this chair," Nora said, smacking the enter key until she highlighted the last file. And the gist of it was the CEO wasn't happy with the way the war was making his contractor nervous, and had to rely on the Deep Range Transmitter for revenue. No mention of where it was stashed though, which made Danse grunt in irritation and say:

"It must be with the engine or somewhere near it, but I think I know where that is. Follow me."

No synths on the way to the engine test room, and still none once they reached it. All this quiet was suspicious as hell. The calmer it was before the storm, the worse the storm would be. And the storm on the horizon was looking to be a doozy.

In the test room, high concrete walls on all sides, catwalks that'd seen better days, and in its center, a massive thruster that ArcJet had yanked off a rocket and stuck to the ceiling. Burned a prewar photographer to ash so the files had said. Wouldn't catch him standing under it, not even with it powered down. Just looking at it gave him the willies. Of course Danse wanted the power back on — for the elevator to the room above it. The prize was up there, supposedly.

Danse waited in the main testing chamber while they explored the maintenance tunnels. A secure control room lighted by emergency power was their destination, one that Nora took her time in getting to.

"Didn't want you to be alone with him," she said low and urgent, once they were out of Danse's grumbling range and deep into the concrete and gloom.
He chuckled. Now she was mothering him like Ellie. "Afraid he'll whack me when you're not looking?"

"It's not funny, Nick. He keeps looking at you weird."

"He has his helmet on."

"You know what I mean. He stares in your direction. A lot."

"Probably afraid I'll whack him."

She stopped and nudged him toward the large tubes of piping. The vibration thrummed through his coat. Something still ran through the old pipe, and the machine part of him calculated several possibilities of what while the rest of him relished her closeness, the rad daisy entwined in her hair, the scent of her body: leather and sweat and the organic sweetness of flesh. Didn't matter male or female, human skin always had a cloying quality to it. Some folks were more pungent than others - a few downright repulsive, but Nora had the right balance, like hubflowers dipped in honey. And honey he only knew by memory. Prewar Nick had eaten it on his toast, his muffins, even in his coffee. It wasn't the same, no, but it was the closest thing — the only thing, that matched her.

But this wasn't a lover's embrace. She was too frantic for that. Her fist held tight to his sleeve, bringing to mind that street outside Fort Hagen, to the moment that almost was, and frankly, should've been. What a coward he was. Even now, even after she'd crawled onto his lap, after she'd put her hands on him, after he'd stopped her, like the fool he was, stopped her when he should have grabbed her right then and there and carried her off to the bedroom. No wonder she'd been pissed at him. He was pissed at himself.

"When we're done here, we're done with them," she said, tugging his coat to emphasis her point. "The Brotherhood. Paladin Danse. They way he's treating you is disgusting. I'm never doing this again."

"If this goes well, Nora, we won't have to." Amazing how controlled his voice sounded. Sometimes being a machine had its perks.

"Why? What are you thinking?"

"Remember I said they'd owe us? We get this transmitter thing, and maybe they'll turn a blind eye when we pass a patrol. Keep a Vertibird flying on instead of shooting at us. Leave us be so we find your boy in peace."

She let go of his sleeve, her big blues going wide. "You're forcing them to leave us alone on principle?"

"Damn right I am. We do them a solid, and they do us a solid."

"What if they don't honor that?"

"The Brotherhood is built on inflated honor. It'll be bad form on their part. Danse may be a pompous soldier boy, but he'll do what's right. He'll tell his Elder what happened here, and he'll be honest. That's what I'm counting on."

Nora stepped closer, kissing distance, every dark lash in detail, the wisp-thin streaks of brown and green in her blue eyes. His breath hitched, and his system bleated a warning to resume normal respiration.
"And what about the synths? What are they doing here? Do you think they're following us? Maybe the institute sent them after us for what we did to Kellogg."

"Oh uh, like Danse said, they're probably just after the tech." Damn, got his hopes up for nothing. Then again, their first real kiss — if there was to be such a thing — shouldn't be in the middle of an old concrete tunnel with a Brotherhood Paladin lurking nearby. "They were already here before we arrived, and for who knows how long. Maybe they're after the engine, or the that transmitter. Since the Institute is a greedy bastard, I bet both." He cupped her shoulder with his human hand gently, letting his fingers linger. She made a soft noise that went straight between his legs, to that new part of him as mysterious as she was. Her eyes, unblinking and huge, drew him closer. Deeper. Drowning. This was humanity's power over his kind. Over him. He was a broken Adonis to her Aphrodite. The created yearning for the love of the creator. But it seemed unreal, her wanting him. Her lusting for him. If he wasn't touching her now, she'd be a mirage, a dream, a fantasy never fulfilled.

Down the tunnel, Danse called out: "Civilian, is there a problem? Why isn't the power on yet?"

Trust the Brotherhood to ruin a moment. His hand dropped and he sighed. Nora backed away, step by reluctant step.

"Getting right on that, sir!" Nora shouted with a fake let's go get em' voice and then echoed his sigh. "Come on, let's get this elevator powered up and find this stupid thing before the Paladin has a rad cow."

"Doll, it's called a brahmin."

"You know what I mean."

"Sure, sure."

They found the terminal to activate the auxiliary generator, and to Nora's delight, a fusion core for her power armor back at Sanctuary. See? he had told her, not a bad haul after all. But that storm he'd been dreading thundered in the moment they turned on the generator, and after the mainframe computer said, "Thermal Engine fueled, primed and ready for your command," the test chamber buzzed with the monotonous drone of the gen 2's.

"Hostile identified. Brotherhood. Termination required."

On the other side of the control room window, Danse opened fire on the synths as they swarmed the levels above. Where the hell were they coming from? Wave after wave tossed themselves from the catwalks like a bunch of crazy synth lemmings. Some lost their legs, and those that got up disintegrated under laser fire. Blue bolts of energy streaked from the upper levels, some of the gen 2's getting smart and shooting from there. Vertically flanked, Danse was outnumbered and outgunned. Now the synths that fell got up and stayed up, and launched themselves at their target. They latched onto the Paladin's shooting arm, dragging him down, piling on, yanking at Danse's power armor like a bunch of impatient brats.

"I'm sorry," a gen 2 said with sincerity as it tore at the hoses of Danse's helmet. "Your attempts at resisting will end in failure."

Paladin Danse may be Brotherhood, but no one deserved to die like that.

Nora snatched at his coat, hauled him back before he could be brave and stupid. "No!" Her face whiter than laser dust, the blue of her eyes turning dark. "The engine, remember? It's still functional. We can use it."
"You'll kill him, Nora."

"He's already dead!"

In the test chamber, pale metal fingers dug under Danse's helmet. If the Paladin had a chance in hell of surviving the engine blast, that helmet needed to stay on.

"Then do it now. He's buckling out there."

Nora flipped random levers until the automated voice of the computer began counting down the launch sequence.

"Command accepted. Commencing five second countdown."

Not sure if Danse had even that.

"Five…"

"Do anything! Anything!" Danse shouted to them, words coming muffled and pained. Nora couldn't hear it, but that power armor was coming apart with every yank and pull, the synths desperate to get at the good stuff. Humans didn't break clean like machines, but maybe that's why they were so eager. They had a chance to make a mess for once. *Come on, Danse, hang on.*

"Four…"

One of the synths wasn't playing with the others. It spotted them as they watched the man verses synth chamber fight like helpless spectators. Outside the control room window, dead yellow eyes focused on Nora, then met his. They widened —

"Three…"

And narrowed. It was the only time these empty puppets showed anything resembling emotion. Whatever they saw in him, it sparked such a hatred. Such loathing. Give him a ranting Brotherhood any day of the week.

"Two…"

The gen 2 started pounding in the window, attracting several others. They all sneered at him, the mad puppets honing in on the aberration, the freak among them. "Nick!" cried Nora, *Fire Brat* in her hands, her face going even whiter. The window cracked.

"One…"

"Fellow synth identified. Anomaly. Terminate — "

"Engine firing."

The thruster roared and the chamber lit inferno red, the energy shaping itself into a burning hourglass that incinerated the synths in an instant. The ones at the window were the last to go, still pounding, still threatening, their eyes going dead for real. By the flaming hourglass, Danse looked like a martyred saint, hunched over and kneeling, his power armor ablaze.

"Do you think he'll survive? Will he — " Nora whispered behind her hand.

"Guess we'll…we'll find out." This whole affair went from fetch quest to life or death way too quick, but that how it was in this world. Let your guard down for one damn minute and you paid the price.
Let's hope Danse didn't have to pay the highest.

The thruster sputtered off, the chamber scorched black from floor to ceiling, and lights spraying sparks before going out for good. The computer said with pride: "Test firing completed with an efficiency rating of ninety-six point seven percent."

They rushed to Danse, Nora touching his still-smoldering helmet without thinking, crying out and cradling her fingers. That was going to need a stimpack. Danse groaned, telling them he was alive.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" Nora was hovering too close again which prompted another intervention on his part. She gave him a wounded look when he pulled her back, not understanding.

"Give him space, Nora. He's still breathing."

Danse unlocked his helmet in jerky motions and threw it to the ground. Then the skin-tight hood came off, revealing a plastered head of sweaty dark hair. All that hair, damn, how the hell had he managed to fit it under there? Danse hunched over again, panting. "Thank you..." he said, and inhaled deep, seeming to rally himself. "I'm alright. My power armor took the worst of it."

"Need a stim?" Danse nodded, a look on his face that was hard to pin down. Humility, maybe? Regret? Whatever it was, it was a little less Brotherhood, and a lot more human. And that was okay in his book.

Since everyone that mattered was alive and kicking, it was time to move on — after looting the synth corpses of course. No BND-R, but didn't expect any. The average gen 2 wasn't important enough to repair. Danse grabbed the fusion cells from the Institute pistols and barreled toward the elevator like a super-charged Sentry bot.

Thank God that elevator ride was brief. Imagine being stuck in a tiny closet with an enraged man-shaped tank and you'd have something close to those sixty seconds.

When the doors opened, Danse laid waste to the entire room. Almost felt sorry for the gen 2's. Didn't even have time to bleep their annoying one-liners before they were pieces of scrap on the floor. Nora mouthed "damn" with enough awe for the both of them. It might be best to lay off being a wise ass until Danse cooled down — which thankfully, was soon after finding the Deep Range Transmitter in the goodie bag the synths had been gathering. Several other bits of salvage in there too: ammo, weapons, tech - you name it. Danse said it was worth this "disaster of a mission" which made Nora give the Paladin the stink eye, and she didn't let up until they took another elevator to the surface and into some fresh air.

Glad to be rid of the stench of that place. Vault 114 ruined any love for the underground, not that he had any to begin with. Sensors registered a balmy seventy-two degrees and what was left of the silicone on his face tingled under the sun. A beautiful day in the most deadliest place in the world, and he was alive. Nora was alive, and yeah, Danse too.

Time for a cigarette.

Nora leaned against a broken fence dividing an ugly blue storage trailer from the ArcJet building and toed the corner of a rotting crate with her boot. She frowned at Danse as he knelt and organized his bag of precious tech.

"I thought we did good," Nora said, her stink eye finding a voice.

"It was sloppy." Danse appraised the transmitter one last time before setting it like a fragile artifact into the bag. "We were caught unprepared more than once, and don't get me started on your lack of
following orders. I said not to be a hero."

"Hey, solider boy, we did fine," he said, flicking ashes in Danse's direction. "You got what ya came for, didn't ya?"

Danse flashed him an unfriendly look and said, "Yes, we did. Which is why this mission, despite its rough patches, is a success. I'm impressed with you, civilian…and with you, synth."

"Did hell freeze over and not tell me? Cause that sounded like a compliment, Danse."

"Don't push it, synth." Not a flash this time, but a fixed, pointed glare. He shrugged to show how intimidated he was and went back to smoking. The glare swung to Nora and eased back, shifting from angry Paladin to proud brotherly mentor. "But speaking of compliments, I have a proposition for you, civilian…"

Nora of course said no to joining the Brotherhood, but did so with every bit of her prewar charm and manners. Danse took the rejection like a champ, saying he understood Nora's hesitation, because it was a grand, life-altering decision that would tip the cosmic scale of the universe. Okay, so maybe Danse didn't quite put it that way, but these Brotherhood types really needed to cut back the drama.

"She's not joining because of you," Danse said when Nora went salvaging inside the storage trailer.

"She's a grown woman who makes her own choices, but yeah, can't say that I'm sorry." On his third cigarette now, his filters whining at him to knock it off.

"She's making a mistake."

"By not joining a bunch of bigots? Doubtful."

"We protect people from the Institute, from your kind. You even killed them yourself."

"I kill those trying to kill me, or those I care for. I don't kill folks for the mistake being made. They — we don't have choice. And your Brotherhood doesn't seem to understand that."

"What I don't understand is you, why they made you this way. You're too…human."

"Careful, Danse. That's two compliments in a row. I'm startin' to think you like me.

"I suppose you're…tolerable, Valentine."

His name for once. Not synth, not abomination. His name. The surprise alone knocked him speechless.

"I'll inform Elder Maxson of what happened here. All of it. I can't make any promises…but perhaps your journeys throughout the Commonwealth will be a little easier."

"Well, uh…damn. You knew what I wanted all along, didn't ya?"

"That your motives for assisting me were less that altruistic, yes. But, we completed this mission successfully, and you helped…save my life. I…owe you. And her. I won't forget what you've done for the Brotherhood today.

"Did it for you, you big lug. Cause you asked so nicely."

A hint of smile at that, then it was gone. Nora emerged from the trailer, waving another Nuka Cherry in triumph. Danse went all stoic and somber again. "Godspeed in finding her son, Valentine."
"And godspeed back to your fat blimp in the sky, Danse."

That earned a good-natured chuckle and a shake of the Paladin's head before he clunk clunked over to Nora to say his goodbyes. Didn't bother to augment his auditory for the exchange. It was warm and heartfelt, and on Nora's end, a little relieved. Danse made his disappointment clear in his slow trudge down the road, the way he turned back and watched them a moment before continuing on.

"Think we could make it to Goodneighbor before sundown?" Nora looked after Danse with a wistful smile.

"Sure you don't wanna join the Brotherhood? Sail the skies on that ship of theirs, shoot down every freak in the Commonwealth. It'd be swell fun, won't it?"

She punched his arm, her wistfulness turning playful. "Stop it. Not going near them again if I can help it. So, should we find a place to camp, then head out?"

"Up to you, doll. I don't need to sleep or eat or anything like that. But you do what you need to."

"Right, you don't sleep," she said softly, last night in her eyes and on the tip of her tongue, a question in particular she seemed dangerously close to asking. Nope, not going there. Not going anywhere near that dream and its strangeness — at least…not yet.

"But yeah, yeah, we could make it," he said, heading her off before she opened that can of worms. "If we don't stop to sightsee, or play good Samaritan again. And I know, I know, this one was on me."

"I'm glad though. We did a good thing." She hoisted her backpack over her shoulder, wiggling under it to get comfortable. Her playfulness changed to a sly glance at him from under her lashes. "Did you get what you needed out of Danse?"

"Maybe. Guess we'll find out the hard way when we pass a patrol or a Vertibird."

"The hard way seems to be the way with us."

"So it is." He waved toward the road. "And so is the way to Goodneighbor, but we'll get there, and we'll get the answers you need."

"Hope so." She gave his arm a squeeze before heading off in the opposite direction Danse had gone.

He followed, smitten. Hopeless. A lovesick fool.
Nick and Nora arrive in Goodneighbor, make new allies, and test newfound feelings.

She and Nick entered the front gate of Goodneighbor, huffing and puffing from their clash with the local Super Mutants. Damn mean greens had conquered most of the Financial District, their blood bags and nets of gore hanging from what used to be reputable banks and luxury shopping centers. Nick didn't have to tell her what they ate, or why they pursued with taunts of SNACK TIME! Their shopping carts full of human parts said plenty of what they would do if they caught her.

"You okay?" Nick's hand steadied her as she swayed from sudden dizziness. Shit, when was the last time she ate? Her mind came up blank, and by the way her hands shook, probably not since Nick put the rad daisy in her hair. That sweet, heated memory revived her a bit, enough for the shakes to settle, and brought this strange town into focus.

Goodneighbor, more like Ghoulneighbor. Never had there been so many ghouls in one place and not trying to kill her. Curious black eyes turned their way, giving Nick and her a cursory once over before going about their business. But some noted their state of exhaustion and gave them sad, rueful smiles as if to say, yeah, sorry about the ugly green welcoming party. The few humans wandering about paid them little mind, except a man reclining on a park bench, his sunglasses locked in their direction, and a beefy guy leaning against the tall barbed wire wall, eying them like wounded prey he wanted to finish off. Nick paused at the sight of Mr. Sunglasses, stiffening as he had when the Brotherhood airship had flown over Fort Hagen.

"You know him?"

"Uh, yeah, I do. Into some shady business, though. Best if we steer clear."

"Oh? Is he a chem dealer?"

"Depends on his mood and what day it is. Trust me, it's uh…it's hard to explain — " Nick broke off as the beefy guy started toward them, his leathers more weathered than hers, his shaved head greasy under the hanging strings of lights. Nick groaned in exasperation and muttered, "First Super Mutants and now idiots," before unsheathing his revolver. The guy paused long enough to smirk at the gun, and kept on coming.

No sense of self-preservation it seemed. She didn't bother getting out Fire Brat. Nick had this handled.

"Look, pal, whatever you're peddling, we're not interested. We're here on business." The revolver hung loose at Nick's thigh, metal fingers lax, but a bullet could split this guy's brain in half in less than a second. A part of her wanted Nick to get it over with, save them the time and hassle of exchanging useless threats. The sooner they went to the Memory Den, the better. It was well past sundown, and Kellogg's brain wasn't getting any fresher.

"Institute business, eh synth?"
"No, you jackass, I'm on a case. You've seen me here before."

"Yeah, yeah. Pretending to be a detective or whatever. Ain't fooling me, synth." Mr. Jackass took an exaggerated drag of his cigarette and appraised her. "She one of you too, or some new dick-in-training? Whatever she is, she's easy on the eyes. Guess that's somethin'."

"Just shoot him, Nick. Please?"

"Hey, don't be like that. Gotta be careful who we let in this town. We protect our own here." The cigarette sizzled under Mr. Jackass's heel. "And if ya want the same protection, lady, you gotta buy it. Insurance, you know, so 'bad' stuff don't happen to you."

"Bad stuff is gonna happen to that empty skull of yours when my gun goes off." Nick aimed his revolver, but his attention shifted, his brilliant eyes on a fancy-dressed ghoul now swaggering toward Mr. Jackass. The ghoul's outlandish ensemble: a tricorn hat on his bald head, a faded red frock coat, an even more faded blue waistcoat underneath, and a dingy ruffled shirt poking through the collar and sleeves — then to top it off, an American flag for a belt. What did this ghoul do, rob the old State House museum?

"You ain't gonna shoot me, detective. I go down and the good citizens of Goodneighbor will use your bits for scrap metal." Mr. Jackass chuckled. "If ya even got bits. Now how about you empty those pockets of yours, or —"

"Finn…Finn my man, what are you doing?"

It was like flipping a coin. Mr. Jackass, aka Finn, went from cocky to cowering, stammering, "Oh, uh, Hancock. Hey, man. Didn't know you was around."

Hancock grinned and motioned for his bodyguard — a scrappy redhead with half her head shaved — to remain where she was. The woman nodded with a hard smirk, and settled herself against the brick wall of a store called Kill or be Killed, or its more blunt sign: GUNS GUNS GUNS (gee wonder what they sold there?). An Assaultron with all her parts intact and a voice that belonged to a woman who might enjoy giving a good spanking to someone blindfolded and tied up, manned the store counter, but she stopped calling to patrons the moment Hancock stepped into view. Next door at Daisy's Discounts, a ghoul she assumed was Daisy herself, shooed a trader away to watch the show.

"Oh, I'm everywhere, Finn," Hancock said, the grime and grit of his voice somehow coalescing into a pleasing throaty resonance. Crazy outfit aside, there was something sanguine about him, a kind of lewd arrogance that appealed to that part of her that had once found flesh and blood men interesting. Hancock was…sexy. "And if I'm not, my people are. And what my birds have been tweeting in this hole I have for an ear is damn disappointing. You haven't taken our little talks to heart, Finn. You've still been husslin' folks when they roll in, pulling that exhortation crap. Had to see it for myself, and what I'm seeing…I'm not liking."

Though wiry and slighter than Finn, Hancock wielded his "ghoul" like a weapon. Finn shifted back as Hancock's stalked closer, black eyes narrowed and the charming thin-lipped smile taking on a razor edge. "Nick Valentine makes a rare visit to my town, and you're hassling him and his friend?" Then as if suddenly remembering his manners, Hancock tweaked the rim of his tricorn at Nick, "Good to see ya again, Nick."

"Hancock." Nick nodded and returned to her side. The knuckles of his human hand brushed hers, and her stomach forgot all about food, and the B movie drama playing in front of them.
"All that big talk about the Institute and synths, and ya let one just walk right in, have its run of the place. It ain't right." Not cowering anymore, but emboldened, defiant. Finn seemed to remember he was bigger and tried to use it. Hancock laughed as if Finn had done something cute.

"Valentine and whoever runs with him is welcome anytime. What ain't right is the disrespect you're showing your mayor, Finn. Now, what am I to do about that?"

"You're mayor until someone takes it from ya, Hancock. You're going soft, and I ain't the only one who sees it. You let these wastelanders walk all over us. And now this synth and his bitch."

Nick tensed, but she grabbed his arm. **Hey, hey, down boy.** Finn was already teetering on the edge of the plank.

"You know what, man? You're right. Absolutely fucking right. And you know what else? I'm gonna retire right here. Right now. Me the mayor, what was I high on? But hey, before I pack up my chems and head for Far Harbor, there's just one last thing I gotta do —"

Swift, darting, like a hawk striking a sparrow from the sky, Hancock stabbed Finn in the stomach three times — Finn doubling over, spewing blood, eyes bulging in stupid surprise. Finn slumped to the ground, and Hancock plucked a rag from his breast pocket, whistling *Yankee Doodle Dandy* as he wiped off the blood from his knife and his hands. Then he stepped over Finn's convulsing body and extended that same hand in polite greeting, his grip hot and dry, like sandpaper in the sun. "Sorry about that, sister. Let me give you a proper welcome. John Hancock, mayor of Goodneighbor."

So John Hancock took the name along with the clothes. He smelled of old leather and parchment, of age and comfort. Not repulsing as expected, but magnetic, a weathered Don Juan whose virility had never waned. Hard to resist that pull of charisma, even if it didn't have hair…or a nose. "I'm Nora, Nick's partner.

"New partner, eh? Had you pegged for a client."

"She's both, actually." Nick nudged Finn's corpse with his shoe. "A little excessive, Hancock?"

"Nah, Finn was on my To Do list today anyway. Just hadn't got around to it yet." Hancock, his hands like a cage around hers, a warm, strangely pleasant cage. Nick cleared his throat, but Hancock didn't take the hint. "Like I said, sister, I don't dig folks taking advantage of other folks just trying to survive out here. Goodneighbor is for everyone and anyone. Of the people, for the people, you feel me?"

Kinda hard not to feel him when he wouldn't let her go, but Nick bristling next to her was too much to pass up. "Quoting Lincoln now, are we?" she purred, easing toward him. "And what did you steal from his display mannequin? That black tall hat, or the fake beard?"

Hancock belted out a laugh that shook them both. He leaned forward, confessing his crime into her ear. "I took both, sister. And that fugly suit too. I just don't wear cause it ain't my style. Besides, I dig this hat, and the red coat brings out my eyes." And keeping those dark eyes on her, he said to Nick: "I like this one, Valentine. Sassy and sexy, and a hell of a improvement over your last dead weight — what was his name? Melvin, Marvin?"


"Yeah, yeah. That guy. Last time he was here he puked his guts out in front of the Third Rail, which by the way," his hands clapping tight, his voice lowering into a rough, intimate whisper, "no visit to Goodneighbor's complete without hearing Magnolia sing. Voice of an angel and a body to match,
"My partner wants her hand back. Now."

"Alright, alright. Screws a little tight there, Nick? Maybe you should pay Irma a visit. She's been asking after ya."

Irma… who's Irma? Now the green-eyed monster snickered in her ear.

"Irma's still around, eh? I'll be sure to say hello. We're headed to the Den right now, actually. Getting Doc Amari's insight on a piece of Institute tech."

"The Institute?" The flirt went out of Hancock like an exhale. He set her free and frowned. "Nick, have you finally fried your circuitry? Why are ya poking that stingwing's nest for?"

And so it was back to business, and back to that twang of guilt every time she lost focus. Playing coy damsel when Shaun should be her priority. Shitty Mom Of The Year award goes to her once again.

"They took my son and killed my husband. And what's left of the man they sent to do it is in a cigar case in my bag. That piece of him is going to help us find the Institute."

Hancock's black eyes doubled in size as he looked her over, seeing her again, hearing the ruthlessness in her voice. He whistled in approval. "Well look at you, sister, taking the fight to them, the Big Bad Institute. You got bigger balls than me. Nick, where the hell did you find this girl?"

"In a Vault," Nick said softly. His tone drew her back to him like a caress. In that moment, something passed between them, unspoken and poignant. The memory replayed and the rad daisy slid through her hair again, his fingers so gentle and adept. This was a connection, of finding a kindred spirit. It didn't matter that she was human and he a synth. This was her soul saying hello to his for the first time. Hancock swung his gaze between them, bemused, as if not understanding how he'd lost their attention. Then an ah hah grin spread across his careworn face.

"Just partners, huh?" Hancock said, grin turning sly. "That's not the vibe I'm feeling here, Valentine, but sure, man, yeah, whatever you say. Hey, why don't you two drop by the State House after the Den and fill me in on the details?"

"If we have the time. It depends whatever Amari finds out," Nick said, still looking at her. The throb in her cheeks spread to her neck and lower.

"Any dirt on the Institute, Nick, and you tell me. I mean it. I'll start callin' in my favors if I have to. You owe me."

"Keep your pants on, Hancock… if that's possible. I'll share my intel with ya. Just let us get it first."

"Whatever you need, Nick. My town is your town — and your town too, sister," Hancock said with a wink to her. "Maybe I'll meet ya both at the Den later. Feeling a little nostalgic all of a sudden, and nothing beats a trip down Memory Lane riding on a Mentat high." He tipped his hat and rejoined his bodyguard. They linked arms and strolled out of sight.

Hancock's departure left behind a few minutes of awkward silence, Finn's body like a heap of garbage no one wanted to clean up. The bystanders pretended to go about their business, except Mr. Sunglasses who did a terrible job pretending to read a copy of the Synthetic Truth (did Piper have delivery boys?), his eyes visible above the frames and burning in her direction. But was his problem with her, or with Nick? Before she could ask, Nick said:

"Hey, we should get going. The Den is open late, but I don't wanna have to drag Amari out of bed."
"Sure, yeah. Let's go." She threw Mr. Sunglasses a glare before following Nick down the narrow street.

The night and Goodneighbor embraced each other like estranged lovers, darkness clinging to every corner and curve, shadows filling the alleyways between brick and stone. Scollay Square had lost most of her luster, buildings that once belonged to the elite now sheltered drifters, fire barrels providing the only heat source on this chilly evening, soiled mattresses the only place to sleep. Crude advertisements for the Third Rail and the Hotel Rexford were nailed to dead telephone poles and street lights. Light bulbs hung from black wires anchored to buildings and swayed with the wind, but the lone working streetlight did most of the heavy lifting in illuminating the main street.

Guards dressed like Skinny Malone's boys sauntered past, most giving a friendly nod to Nick and a "we're watching you" frown at her. She didn't take it personally. She was a stranger here and Nick wasn't. And it was nice to be someplace that didn't treat Nick like garbage — besides Finn, of course, but where was he now?

They passed the entrance to the subway beneath the State House, the sign overhead marked The Third Rail with the "I" in Third divided with glowing horizontal lines and lightning bolts charging it from the outside. The solid metal door made it look more like a vault than a club, but maybe that was intended. It seemed many buildings in this world served dual purposes. The Third Rail may double as a shelter if Goodneighbor was attacked. It was clever, actually. On the second story of the State House and above the entrance to the Third Rail, Hancock stood alone on the balcony, staring at the scattered row of empty park benches. His fingers tapped the railing without rhythm, but paused long enough to give them a wave as they walked by. Even from the street, his wink was unmistakable.

"Seems you two hit it off rather well." Nick, not even bothering to hide the innuendo — or irritation — in his voice.

"Just friendly conversation, partner." His jealousy was adorable, and a relief. Jealousy meant the rad daisy wasn't just to smooth over the disaster of the night before, but maybe a subtle, more careful attempt to woo her. And the "almost kiss" in the maintenance tunnel of ArcJet wasn't her wishful thinking. He was getting bolder…maybe. He so damn hard to read sometimes. She bumped him with her shoulder. "And after what happened to that Finn guy, I wanna be on his good side."

"Don't think you gotta worry about that…sister."

"Oh stop it. He was nice to you too. And he seemed to know you pretty well. How far do you boys go back?"

"Quite a ways. Mayor McDonough's his brother, you know."

"What, really? Politics must run in the family, then. Why isn't he in Diamond City?"

"He and McDonough had a falling out before Hancock went ghoul. After Mayor Roberts died, McDonough ran for office and his campaign got messy. Promised to rid Diamond City of its ghoul population, and the one thing about McDonough — he always keeps his promises. A lot of people were tossed out for no damn good reason. That didn't sit well with Hancock, or me for that matter, but I stayed and Hancock came here. Goodneighbor was a real rough town back then, even rougher than it is now. Lots of nasty types. Not sure the details, but Hancock took out the main goon, Vic, and his cronies. The folks here were so grateful, they made him mayor. But then idiot went and got himself irradiated. Says it was some sort of chem. Hancock has a problem with them, if you haven't noticed. Always has."

"I noticed, but only from him mentioning it. Couldn't tell with his eyes being so dark. And his hands
were rock steady."

"He's a functional addict, but that's why I never settled here. He has the Neighborhood Watch, sure, but he lets the chem dealers run wild, and turns a blind eye to Marowski's dealings in Hotel Rexford. And don't get me started on the riffraff squatting in the warehouses. Doesn't stop Hancock from trying to lure me to the wrong side of the tracks, though. Ten caps says I'll get the 'C'mon Valentine, set up shop here' speech before we leave."

"That's kinda sweet, Nick. Maybe he just wants help cleaning this place up, to make it better for the people, like you made Diamond City better."

"Piper made Diamond City better. I'm just a glorified toaster that occasionally finds missing folks. But, yeah, I've thought about it. Plenty of times. Ellie used to live here, though, and won't touch this place with a thirty-nine-foot pole. And since I actually like my secretary, moving the agency isn't an option."

"Oh..." she said, not responding to Nick, but to the sight of the Memory Den. What used to be Scollay Theater dominated the corner of the street, shimmering like a scuffed jewel. An ornate scalloped archway dominated the facade, the letters missing from its last show titles — and most of the metal beads along the scalloped points. On the cracked windows, new posters were plastered over the old, all of them promising the wonders of reliving your best memories in safety and comfort. Even in her time, they didn't have such a thing, so where did this technology come from? Was it stolen from the Institute and rigged to mess with your brain? That seemed the very opposite of safe. Then again, nothing in this world was truly safe. If it was, or promised to be, then it was a trap.

Her trepidation must have shown because Nick slowed with her and took out his screwdriver to fiddle with the joints of his mechanical wrist. Her reluctance was stupid. There was no explanation for it. She had Kellogg's brain in her bag and Nick by her side. And soon, if everything worked out, she would have a way to Shaun.

So why was her stomach a nest of knots?

"You ready for this?" Nick opened one of the double doors for her. Such a gentleman.

"Suppose I'll have to be. Ready or not."

Inside the Den matched the outside, a beautiful ruin that time had forgotten: opulent drapery the color of red wine and worn by neglect, checkerboard tile floors eroded to the foundation, and a ticket booth with a still functioning, but tarnished cash register. Leaflets detailing the wonders of these mysterious memory machines lay scattered on the floor as if someone had dropped them, and a few hastily gathered piles sat on the ticket booth counter. No one greeted them, but Nick didn't wait for an invitation. He continued around a corner and motioned for her to follow.

Her dread grew.

"Well, well, Mister Valentine, it's been ages. I'd thought you'd forgotten about lil' ole' me."

Sultry voice, the kind she would never have in her lifetime even if stricken by a chronic case of strep throat. The bitch was probably blond, too. She hurried around the corner and — yep, bleach blond, and lounging on a ratty chaise in the center of the theater stage as if she owned the place. On the floor, thick tubes snaked around the chaise and connected to a variety of consoles that formed a loose ring around the woman. Those consoles then plugged in to large power outlets jutting from the peeling walls. The tattered drapes hung in decorative arches over the stage and small auditorium, ovoid pods spaced beneath them — like her cryopod, but smaller, more streamlined.
And in the back of every pod, a circular cut out, and slotted white lights revolving around a head-sized sensor contraption. Cushioned seating softened the intimidating tech, the refurbished monitor screens playing silent white noise and a Please Stand By logo. All memory pods were empty, hatches raised, except one, the skinny woman inside prone and still, her vacant gaze riveted on the monitor.

"I may have walked out on the Den, Irma, but I'd never walk out on you."

Nick had flirted before, but he'd never spoken that way to her. His tone was sensual, seductive, and fucking wasted on this — this floozy — all dolled up in her sleezy feathered dress with holes in the stockings, her over-sized lips slicked with too much lipstick, and her hair curled in a fat victory roll on top of her head. Definitely a bottle blond - even through the last bottle of hair dye was probably dust by now. Lemon juice then, or...something.

Irma's gaze flickered to her, skimmed down from her hair to her toes, penciled brows arching with elegant dismissal. No surprise, there. Can't be a bimbo and not be catty to some degree. Irma returned her attention to Nick, cooing: "Amari's downstairs, you big flirt. Go on down, the door's unlocked."

"You're a peach, Irma. Why do I stay away so long?"

"Then stop leaving me, sweetheart. We have an extra room. Stay as long as you need to."

"No promises, doll, but I'll think about it."

"Oh, Mister Valentine, you tease."

Oh she was gonna puke. "Thanks, Miss Emma, but we'll be going now."

"It's Irma, dear."

"Right, Thelma, sorry. Come on, Nick." She yanked him to the door that led backstage, getting him away from Miss Bedroom eyes and back on the damn case. Nick let her manhandle him, chuckling all the while.

"What? It's just friendly conversation."

She socked him in the arm and he stumbled down the hall, snickering. "Keep it up, Mister Valentine," she mimed Irma's sultry tone, "and I'll throw that precious hat of yours to the ferals."

"You wouldn't," he said in mock horror.

"I would, and when you least expect it."

"You have a cold, cold heart, doll." Still tittering, he opened the metal door to a large room with red and white tile. Two memory pods angled toward one another at its center, hatches open and idle lights spinning. At the far wall and her back to them, a brunette woman in a lab coat bent over a monitor, fingers furiously pecking at the keyboard.

"Mister Valentine," the woman said in a tone that was nothing like Irma's. "I take it this isn't a social call. Not being savvy on accents made it hard to place this one. Indian? Iranian? Somewhere in the Middle East for sure.

"We need a memory dig, Amari. Problem is uh...the perp's already cold on the floor."

"What?" Amari faced them, her mouth pinched, and the corners of her dark eyes creasing. Even
dismayed, she was an attractive woman, one of those lucky few who carried the years like a regal mantle upon their shoulders. But under the fluorescents, the rich warm tones of her skin appeared sallow, and the dark circles under her eyes deepened. Doctor Amari could use a good night's rest. She could relate, given the pathetic excuse for a nap she'd taken in an abandoned warehouse before coming to Goodneighbor.

"These machines require living brains to function, Mister Valentine. Even if I put aside my reservations and...defiled this corpse, all you'd see on the monitors is static."

Between her sawing Kellogg's skull in half and Nick digging out the implant, his corpse had been pretty defiled already. "What about cybernetics? Would that help you see what we need?" Unlike Irma, Amari's appraisal was clinical and swift, lingering on her face a moment before saying:

"Yes, cybernetics could certainly aid in the preservation of the connected tissue or organ." Amari took a doctorly stance: crossed arms and a contemplative frown. "But there would still be a small amount of degradation depending on what the device was preserving. And I'm assuming since you or Mister Valentine aren't dragging a body behind you, the brain we're discussing is...in your bag?"

"In a cigar box, actually."

"Oh my, is that all that's left?"

"The rest of him's at Fort Hagen, rotting where he belongs," Nick, saying it like he wanted another go. Amari threw him a quick, stunned glance.

"I...see. Well then, let me have a look."

Out of the box, and into the doctor's hands, and trying not to cringe when Amari probed and manipulated the lump of gray matter. That used to be a person, a murderer, but now he was wires and flesh, a key to finding Shaun. And this damn implant had better work. It needed to work. This was all she had left. Her lip folded under her teeth, and she bit down, using the pain to keep from screaming at Amari to hurry the fuck up and tell them yes or no.

"This implant is the most advanced I've seen yet. Almost no degradation, and the structure is still intact. In the very basic sense, this part of the brain is still alive."

Her relieved sigh filled the room. Finally, some good news. "So you can plug it into your machine, see what's on it?"

"It's not a data disk, Ms...I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"It's Nora. So what the hell then can you do with it?"

"She can hook it into me," Nick said, easing himself out of an armchair he'd settled into. "It's the same tech, same interface, right, Doc?"

"Are you serious?" Why did she bother asking that? Of course he was. "You never said anything about hooking that...thing into you."

"Would've have done it myself had I'd known what I was doing. Couldn't risk it though with just you and I on the road. Needed an expert, someone who knows how I'm wired, literally."

"And how exactly does this woman know this about you?" The green-eyed monster bounced gleefully on her shoulder.
"Mister Valentine comes to me for...check ups," Amari said, using the tone doctors use for temperamental patients. "Or tune-ups as he prefers to call them. I'm familiar with synth technology, enough to know how to keep Mister Valentine in good health."

"How do you know so much about synths? Did you work for the Institute?" God, was she channeling Danse now? Even had his same accusatory tone.

"No, dear, I despise them. For what they do, for the fear they cause. For the poor synths they abuse and abandon. The Institute wants to create, but they don't want to take responsibility for their creations. So someone has to."

"Oh...well...okay." Open mouth, shove in foot. Blood throbbing in her cheeks, she said, "But what happens to Nick if you connect him to...that."

"Hopefully we find your boy, or at least a clue on where to go next." Nick hopped on a stool in front of Amari and removed his hat. Amari took the cue and approached him, Kellogg's modified piece of brain like a scalpel in her hands.

"Wait...Wait, dammit. What if something goes wrong? What will happen to you?"

"If I start cackling like a grizzled old mercenary, just shoot me."

"That's not funny, Nick! Doctor Amari is this safe for him?"

"The interface should work. They are, theoretically, compatible. Once I connect them, Mister Valentine will attempt to scan the implant for the relevant information. The only complication would be if the implant is encrypted."

"What happens if it's encrypted?"

"It..." Amari paused to choose her words. "It's hard to say. I've never performed this sort of procedure. He might experience discomfort if the connection is stressed or compromised. Worse case is if the implant generates a feedback charge. Depending on the severity of the charge, it could damage or...even destroy Mister Valentine's brain."

"Destroy his brain? Kill him? No. I said no. Get off that chair. We're not doing this."

"Nora..." Nick, using that same warning tone when she first refused to help the Brotherhood. That admittedly, was being unreasonable. This wasn't. This was being his partner.

"I don't care what that thing has on it. It's not worth ruining your mind over." She went to him and Amari backed off. He stared up at her, the yellow of his gaze turning platinum under the bright lights of the room.

"It's worth it if we find your boy. I'm way past my expiration date anyway."

"Stop saying things like that. Stop saying you're worthless. You're not. I don't care if they tossed you. They're idiots. You don't even know me, Nick. Not really. Yeah, I'm your client, but what's my son to you? Two weeks and you're going to risk your life for me? I'm a stranger." Fuck, there goes her voice getting all thick and stupid again. Eyes tearing up for no reason. Couldn't she not cry for once? He wouldn't budge from the stool, and the undamaged planes of his skull caught the light as he caught her hand.

"Nora, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. You got me out of a tight spot, and even if you didn't have this case, I owe you." He sighed at her shaking head. "Yes, I do. And not just that. You've
shown me the worst of yourself, and the best. You're my client, my partner, and…much more. Let me do this. I want to do this. For you, please."

"My client, my partner, and much more. The "much more" part was debilitating, a gentle snare she couldn't escape. If he wanted this, truly wanted it, what right did she have to refuse him?

"Promise me you'll disconnect him if the implant's encrypted, or if anything goes wrong." Amari nodded, watching their interaction as a doctor would a display of unusual, but benign symptoms.

"Of course, you have my word."

She stayed away as Amari connected the implant to the two nodes on the back of Nick's skull. The whole procedure was unsettling, a reminder of how alien this world was. Ghouls as mayors, memory machines, synthetic beings, secret organizations intent on dominating the world — and now a piece of one of their agents was attached to her partner's skull like a bloated leech.

"Keep talking to me, Mister Valentine, any change in your cognitive functions could be dire."

"There's…flashes…static…nothing is making any sense, Doc."

"Damn, I was afraid of that. Seems it's encrypted after all."

"Disconnect him then. You said you would —"

Nick jerked, startling them both. His chin dropped to his chest, shoulders twitching. "I can't…I can't…I can't…find —"

"Get it off!"

Amari plucked the implant free, wires retracting as if the disgusting thing had been feeding on him. Nick groaned and righted himself, rubbing the back of his neck. "That's going to smart for a while."

"Are you okay?" She handed him his hat, but he didn't put it on.

"Right as Rad rain."

"So does that mean…no? Or yes?"

He laughed. "Doll, I'm fine. Just a headache…and maybe a faint sense of queasiness."

"I think I might have found another way past the implant's defenses." Amari tapped the side of the implant with the tip of her fingernail. "This is attached to a small piece of the hippocampus, the part of the brain that forms memories. I could connect it again to Mister Valentine and through my loungers, sync his mind to yours. He'll act as a host and give you a chance to break the encryption. The human brain isn't as vulnerable to feedback loops as a synth mind is. The only thing you'll have to worry about is getting past the firewalls around the information."

"Not thrilled about that slug being attached to my head again, but if it could work…" Nick set his hat on a console and walked to the far lounger. "And don't you start fussin' over there. Two heads always are better than one — just ask the brahmin."

So much for her protest speech, but she'd take any alternative to forcing Nick to go at it alone — and the prospect of being connected mentally to him? That was a level of intimacy that went even beyond sex — and she hadn't even kissed him properly yet. "What should I expect when we sync or…whatever. Will I see Nick in any…compromising positions?"
He raised his eyebrow, his husky tone sending a shiver between her legs. "If you see me, doll, then I'd better see you."

Amari cleared her throat. "Ah, probably not, since your focus will be the implant's data, but I suppose anything is possible when merging minds. This is another first for me and these machines. Everything from here on is conjecture. I can create a simple simulation for your minds to bridge, but after that, it's up to you."

"Does it matter that his mind is…is synth?"

Amari's smile warmed the ice forming in her veins. "Not at all. From what I can tell, the Institute used the human brain as a model for the synth processors. They are quite similar in both construction and implementation. Which means you and Mister Valentine perceive and retain information in a similar fashion. Now please, sit down and try to relax. I'll begin synchronization when you're ready."

She should have a motto about not being ready. Never was, but had to be. Nick gave her an encouraging smile.

"Come on, doll, you, me, and a dead merc's brain. It's gonna be one hell of a ride."
Nora explores the memories of both Kellogg and Nick. Answers are revealed, but new questions are asked - and Nora and Nick reach a turning point in their relationship.

Canon deviation...starts now.

She climbed in the lounger as she would a rollercoaster car with no seat belts. Nick grimaced as Amari connected him again, but laid in his lounger without incident. He wiggled to get comfortable, and gave them a thumbs up signal.

The hatch came down, the monitor spitting white fuzz behind its logo. Damn thing seemed enormous now, the glow permeating the small space like a spotlight set on blinding. Everything white, white, white, like blowing snow. A hum began in the back of her head. Spinning lights whirling around her like she was inside one of those old toys — what were they called? The ones that you peered through a slot and light made the pictures move.

The hum grew and grew, droning on like a big lazy bee. And where were all the bees in this world? Extinct, or mutated like everything else? Mutated and ruined. If there were bees still left, they probably had two heads — two tiny bee heads and a fat fuzzy body. And they would fly over empty fields and through dead trees, make giant hives of bone and skin. Their queen would have black wings and seven eyes and would lay thousands and thousands of eggs. And when they swarmed, they would block the sky for miles. No hubflowers or rad daisies or thistles for them. Instead of flowers, they pollinated humans.

"You poor thing, so tired. You're already dreaming. Wake up, now. I need memories, not dreams. Focus on a happy one. Something from your childhood."

But her childhood was lonely. No one wanted to play with her and she didn't want to play with them. Dolls didn't talk like a Mister Handy. Buttercup couldn't trim the hedges and make her tea. Mommy and Daddy wouldn't buy her a Mister Handy no matter how much she begged. They knew, they knew, they knew she was wrong. Her parent's voice tumbled over one another, a tide of shame on you's rising in her mind.

Why don't you have sleep overs like all the other girls? Get your nose out of that catalog and date a boy for once. Stop obsessing over robots, it isn't normal. Robots aren't people, they're tools. They're machines. Machines can't love you, don't you understand that? Machines can't love, can't love, can't love.

They have no soul.
"I don't understand." Amari's voice filtered through her turmoil. "These memories are... they aren't from now. They aren't from this time at all. This is impossible. You're not a ghoul... you can't be prewar."

A soldier at the fence. He was armed and angry and scared. The Vault Tech rep ran away from him, vowing to report him for drawing his gun. Such a meaningless, petty threat. No one cared anymore. The soldier read off the list, hands shaking. Explosions in the distance. Sirens like screams. "Okay, you're cleared. Two adults, one infant — go, get to the platform! There's another inbound, it's going to hit — "

In a plume of cloud and poison. Everyone's thumb pointed at the sky. Too big. Too close. Shaun was wailing in Nate's arms. Here, here, let me hold him —

The Vault elevator malfunctioned. The cloud roared through them, not over them. They all became dust. Ashes, Ashes, we all fall —

"Nora! Please try to focus. I need to anchor you. A happy memory. Try to think of one. Something wonderful, your husband -"

Fucking tell me the truth! Are you cheating? Is that why you won't let me touch you?

"Alright, not your husband... your child - "

Screaming, screaming, why won't he be quiet? What am I doing wrong?

"You're out of control, getting lost in your own mind. I can't sync Mister Valentine if you won't —"

"Does my heroine have a name?" Nick Valentine, smiling, doffing his hat to her in formal greeting.

Such eyes. Inhuman and beautiful. Sunlight captured in glass.

"Ah... I see." Amari sounded pleased. "We'll use this then. Concentrate on the memory, the details. Every moment of your first meeting. Yes, that's it. Good. Anchoring you now, and syncing with Mister Valentine. I'll be measuring your vitals from here. Good luck to the both of you."

Inside the dark Overseer's office, the memory of Nick remained in place, smile paralyzed, eyes fixed on her face. Her hand traced his cheek, the broken edges of it, trailing down to his exposed throat. Couldn't see that little gyroscope, but it was there, spinning between his metal tendons and tubes. If she unfroze him, he would go to the Vault door, telling her they needed to get a move on because Malone's boys would come looking for Dino any minute. Dogmeat would bark and run ahead, and they would follow. But not now. Not this time. He was hers to explore, and he wouldn't wake up and grab her wrist. He wouldn't lie to her.

She brushed her lips against his. Softness and a slight give. She pressed harder.

He grabbed her shoulders. She gasped, squirming as his metal fingers dug past the padding of the leather and into her arm.

"So, this is your kink, huh? Can't say I'm surprised. You seem the type."

Kellogg.

Nick's face morphed into a human one, scar over his left eye, bald head undamaged by her saw blades. Trenchcoat darkened and became leather, armor on the shoulders and forearm. She jerked herself free from his grip, the ghost of Queen Buzzy in her hands. The Overseer's office changed into the VIP room at Fort Hagen, bed linens on the floor, sounds of struggle echoing, her voice, begging...
"But I never begged, you bastard. That's your wishful thinking."

He shrugged. "You would've begged if he hadn't shown up. Your knight in a shining brown trenchcoat. He can't help you now."

"You can't hurt me here."

"I can, and I will."

"Kellogg's dead. You're just a figment of the real thing. You're —" Then it dawned on her. "You're the encryption…aren't you?"

"Ding, ding." Kellogg gave her an ugly smile and a slow clap of approval. "We have a winner. And what prize will she choose?"

"I'm not playing games, Kellogg. Show me what you know. Show me the Institute. Show me Shaun."

"Oh, but you'll be so disappointed. Trust me, girl, let this sleeping dog lie."

"I'll take my chances."

"Sorry, can't let you in. I've got protocols to follow. And unfortunately for you, sweetheart, now I have to fry that pretty brain of yours. It's nothing personal. It's all part of the pro—"

He paused in mid-sentence and drooped like a synth going offline. Then he shuddered. Kellogg's features reverted to a familiar form, his yellow eyes a welcome sight.

"Nick, are you…you? Or a memory?"

"I'm the real deal, doll. I stalled the encryption for ya, tangled up the code so it loops indefinitely. Now all you gotta do is go through the door and find this bastard's memories."

"What door? I don't see an exit."

"Oh, heh...I mean me. I'm the door. The bridge, the way in."

"I don't understand. How do I go through you?"

He spread his arms and grinned. "Just give me a hug, doll."

How could she refuse that invitation?

She melted into his embrace, relished the feel of his arms enfolding her, drawing her closer, deeper, and then she passed through him, finding herself in a rundown apartment, a child sitting cross-legged on a stained mattress and reading through a pile of wrinkled comics. A radio on a table broadcasted propaganda about some group called the New California Republic. A woman sat in an olive armchair next to the bed, her face full of harsh lines and eyes that had grown small and hard from weathering years of abuse. Not sure how she knew this about the woman, but she did. It was innate, as if she'd spent years contemplating this moment and its meaning to herself. But she wasn't herself. She was Kellogg. His knowledge, his mind bleeding through hers. It had rained today and that's why he'd stayed home. He hated it here. Outside the bedroom door was a man who got angry if his stew wasn't warm enough, or his boots weren't where he'd left them. He beat momma until she cried and bled and couldn't even get up.
He hated him. Hated him more than anything.

"I don't want to see this," she said to the motionless woman and her son, her son that would one day become worse than his father ever was.

The boy looked up from his Gognak comic and stared straight at her. He said in Kellogg's voice: "But Momma said I had to be the man of the house. Gave me my first gun. Then Daddy killed Momma so I shot him in the head. I'm not sorry."

*I'm not sorry.* Isn't that what she said when she'd killed him? The boy's dead eyes bored right through her. She couldn't look at him anymore. Couldn't breathe. She opened the door and fled into a —

Lindy Hop. Music jaunty and wild. People everywhere swing dancing their hearts out, skirts flying, ponytails bouncing. The band on stage played an enthusiastic cover of "Put A Lid On It", and the couple in the middle of the fray: a stocky ginger-haired man and a willowy woman with long blond hair commanded the attention of everyone else. He wore suspenders and she wore a blue sleeveless dress. There was something familiar about the way he moved, even kicking up his heels in frantic Charleston swings. He swung out his partner and she lindy-swiveled back to him, the ease and sensuality of their movements bringing the heat of envy to her cheeks.

This moment...this was from *her* time. The dances in downtown Boston every Saturday night. Nate was fighting the war back then so she never went, but the man...the detective —

Nick Valentine. The *human* Nick. And the woman, she was —

*Jenny.*

The moment the name sighed into her head, the blond woman stopped dancing. Nick continued on as if he hadn't noticed, as did everyone around him. The woman, Jenny, stared as Kellogg had, her eyes penetrating and...*cold.* There came an eerie sense of intrusion, of being scrutinized by something predatory and dangerous.

*I see you.*

The words slithered through her like dripping oil. Jenny's smile was all teeth.

She turned and stumbled over sand. A beach? Dead fish piled on the shores, the froth of sea foam thick and bloody. On and on stretched the dead sea life, whales and dolphins and all manner of sea creatures.

*Help me find it, please?* Jenny's voice sweet in her ear.

"Get away from me!"

She ran again, barreled through another door that appeared out of nowhere. Kellogg sat at a kitchen table, his wife on the other side. His baby girl cooed and babbled inside a crib in their cramped living room. This was a perfect moment. Marital bliss suspended and preserved. Layers of nostalgia in every detail of the tiny home and in every freckle on his wife's pert nose.

Sarah and Mary. Mary and Sarah. They were his world.

But something had gone wrong. Something had gone wrong and they were dead. Never shoulda signed up with the Shi. They had enemies, and he had done his job too well. Killed the right people for the wrong reasons. His family paid the price, and now Mary was...she was —
My girl, my baby girl.

Their loss cut to the bone, a wound that reopened with every memory of Sarah's laugh, with every birthday Mary never saw. She followed him, wiping her traitorous eyes as Kellogg stalked down a long hallway, a phantom of a man's voice taunting every step.

They died like dogs, Kellogg. I made them suffer. And the little one, how she screamed!

The hall went red. Kellogg kicked down a door and opened fire.

Momma gave me a gun so I shot them all dead.

Faceless victims. Shadow people. One man against an army. Why hadn't they killed him? A stray bullet, a quick twist of the knife - anything. Anything. But they were no match for his fury. No one was. Denied relief. Denied peace. No amount of blood could fill the hole in his heart, in his soul.

Damn you ... you're supposed to be a monster.

At her thought, Kellogg vanished and a street appeared, the bleak afternoon sun washing out the details. A sub shop at the corner with a blurred name. Mirages of street signs and buildings. The human Nick on his knees in the middle of the deserted street, cradling a dying Jenny in his arms. Blood coated his white dress shirt, Jenny's hair, and spread onto the pavement.

He was weeping, his entire body heaving with each pull.

Oh, Nick, oh dear Nick, I'm so sorry. Tears in her own eyes, she began toward him, but the other Jenny stepped in front of her. No blood on her dress, no toothy leer, but in her eyes, a doll-like malevolence. She cringed under Jenny's hand as it touched her cheek. Clammy and hot, the bloated finger of a corpse.

Find it.

"Find what? Who — what are you?"

FIND IT.

Jenny's mouth didn't move, but the command roared in her head as did the sound of the ocean. The sea pounded the shores, her body. She spun away and staggered into Vault 111. Kellogg strolled down the dim isle, his Institute chaperons in tow.

No, no, not again.

She wouldn't stay, wouldn't watch Nate's brains being splattered and Shaun being ripped from his arms again. No.

"Damn you," she seethed and charged past Kellogg and the scientists. "Goddamn you all."

She went through another door and into another apartment. This one from her time, the disarray caused by neglect and grief, not by the ravages of a nuclear fallout. Instead of pictures of art or loved ones on the wall, a white board with newspaper clippings, articles and pictures of rough-looking individuals with red lines connecting them to a central picture, a mugshot of an older man with graying hair and a greasy smirk. Scrawled in bold black marker above the mugshot was the name EDDIE WINTER, with a line drawn to an obituary of Jennifer Lands. A recent picture of Jenny had been tacked over her article, as if attempting to hide the horror of its reality.
The human Nick sat in his chair, head in his hands, his red hair a mess and a weeks worth of scruff around his square jaw. Empty whiskey bottles surrounded him on the floor and coffee table. He hadn't bathed or changed his clothes in days. The old Nora wouldn't have looked at him twice: too short, too ginger, too human - but knowing what he'd become in two hundred years, that some part of him would survive in a construct of metal and synthetic skin, a being with the same heart and soul as the original — it made her ache for him, to put her arms around him, to cradle him to her breast as she had Nate in the park all those years ago.

*I'd love you as much as she had. I'd love you more.*

He looked up, but not at her. His eyes, red-rimmed and sunken, focused on the phone sitting on the table behind her. Was it ringing? Yes, now she heard it, warbling and distorted, like a call from the grave.

He answered on the eighth ring. "Yeah, what is it?" Nick's voice, rude and exhausted, spoke from a human mouth.

*"This is an automated call reminder. Please meet with your CIT representative at one pm for your Neural Transference consultation. All cancellations and reschedules must be requested two hours prior to appointment. Please be prompt as our time is just as valuable as your time. If you have any questions, please call —"*

Nick hung up and swiped the phone off the table. "Fuck you," he said, and pawed at his eyes. He sat there, slumped over, big hands dangling over his knees. "I'm sorry, Jenny," he said to his feet. "But I can't do this anymore." He snatched his keys from the kitchen counter, and his trenchcoat off the back of the couch. He bullied it on, cursing when he realized it was inside out. His movements bordered on panic, like he was afraid if he stopped for an instant he'd change his mind.

He glanced one last time at Jenny's picture, her face angelic, pure — his layers of nostalgia painting her into a saint — and then he was gone.

The same door that took Nick to the CIT, took her to Kellogg's Diamond City apartment — but wait, the boy reading comics on the dusty rug, was that Kellogg? No, a different child, this one with darker hair, more angular features, a similar jawline to…

She rushed over, her heart like a skipping stone. The boy continued reading his fifth anniversary issue of *The Unstoppables*, unaware of her.

"Shaun?"

He wouldn't answer because he was a figment, a shade. Her hand hovered over his dark head, trembling. Was it him?

A jolt of lightning struck to her right, leaving behind a man in a black leather coat. What the fuck? The boy kept on reading as if people appearing out of thin air happened all the time. Kellogg came down the ladder, gun in hand. The man in black, sunglasses hiding his eyes and with skin the color of dark toffee, gave a stiff, formal greeting. "Conrad Kellogg."

"You Coursers keep popping in on me, and one of these days you're gonna get your head blown off."

The Courser tilted his head as if perplexed by the threat. Despite the armored coat and intimidating stance, there was a childlike quality to him, as if he wasn't accustomed to social cues, or perhaps, didn't recognize them at all. His mouth and tone stayed straight and flat. "Minimizing our exposure to
"civilians is the Institute's priority."

"Yeah, whatever. What do you want this time?"

"I have new orders for you. One of our scientists has gone rogue, and Father wishes him… contained. We believe he's hiding in the Glowing Sea. This file has all the intel you need to locate him."

"Doctor Brian Virgil?" Kellogg scanned through the file and grunted with bored interest. "One of the top Bioscience boys, eh? Guess he finally got tired of the food pellets you keep throwing at them. So, what's the end game? Drag him back screaming, or in a body bag?"

"Doctor Virgil's research is crucial, but not Doctor Virgil himself."

"Okay, body bag it is, and I assume you'll be taking the kid?"

"Yes, Father has requested his immediate removal."

"You're taking him right this second?"

"Finding and eliminating Doctor Virgil should be your only concern."

"But I thought I had…ah, forget it." Kellogg sighed and threw the file on his desk. "It was nice while it lasted. Hey, kid, come on, your taxi's here."

"What's a taxi?" Shaun (because he had to be Shaun, he just had to be) yawned and stretched in that exaggerated way children do when they want to delay an unwanted activity. He tugged on his shoes, tying his laces as if they were puzzle he suddenly didn't know how to solve. Shaun kept sneaking glances at the opened page of his comic, unable to read and tie at the same time.

"Come now, Father is waiting," the Courser chided.

Who the fuck is Father, and who the fuck are you? Those sunglasses revealed nothing. Eyes, yes, dark eyes to match his dark skin, but there was nothing human in them. This gen 3, Courser, puppet was some advanced doll the Institute wound up and sent tottering off to do their dirty work. Kellogg had been right. He was a pawn, same as this Courser. One was a slave to his programming, the other a slave to his demons. And this Father person pulling the strings, what did he want with her son? Was he grooming him for something, some sort of experiment?

"Stand close to me and hold still." The Courser waited until Shaun trudged over and pouted in place. It was stupid to try keeping him there, but her hand passed through Shaun's shoulder anyway, pins and needles tingling at the contact between memory and observer. "X6-88, ready to Relay with Shaun."

There it was, confirmed. Her baby boy a baby no longer. The bastards had stolen ten years of his childhood from her. Ten, fucking, years. She stifled a sob as the lightning took Shaun away. She hunched over, her hands on her knees as Nick's had been, the love of his life pinned to a whiteboard, existence summarized in a newspaper clipping — as Shaun existed as an imprint of a memory, barely there, barely real.

"I'm so sorry, Nora," said Doctor Amari from the black space above the room, "but that's all the memory I could find in the implant. It's time to come back now. I'm unsyncing you and Mister Valentine. Go to the monitor and I'll pull you out."

"Think you can leave? Just like that?"
"Amari?" She backed away from Kellogg who advanced, not a memory anymore, but aware and pissed off. The monitor was right behind him on his desk, the Stand By logo indistinct fuzz. "Hey Doctor Amari — " Panic pitched her voice high. "I need you here, this simulation isn't stopping."

No answer. Kellogg cornered her, smiling like the Other Jenny, all teeth and malicious intent. His hands squeezed her throat, her feet flailing as he lifted her off the floor. *How can I be choking if I'm not really breathing?*

Kellogg sneered in her face. *Because I said so,* he said in her mind. Then his features rippled and smoothed out. Feminine softness replaced the scar and rough cheeks: a perfect slope of a nose, lush lips, and ringlets where her hair framed her face.

The ocean pounded in her head and water flooded her lungs. Sea foam poured out of her mouth in a coppery gush. Sputtering, coughing, fighting for breath she shouldn't be needing. Her mind screamed, *Stop it! Stop it!*

Forehead to forehead, the Other Jenny's skin feverish, scorching.

*Everything I loved is gone.*

Her own words thrown back at her. When she had wept outside Vault 111, wept in the dirt like the scared, lost little girl she really was. She had no control here. She was alone. Years. Centuries. Wasted moments rooted to a world not her own. Buried in the dark, endless space of nothing nothing nothing. She had to find it. Find it. FIND IT.

Then gasping, frantic. Lights stabbed her eyes and Amari stabbed her arm with something thin and sharp.

"Nora, calm down! You're safe! You're out. It's over now."

"Where'd she go? Did you see her? She tried to kill me!"

"Who? I saw nothing on the monitors. You were alone. The implant has been offline for the last five minutes —"

"No, that's not right. She was there. Jenny. She was choking me." The other lounger was empty, Nick nowhere in sight. Another round of panic bloomed. "Nick? Where is he? Where did he go?"

"Easy, easy now." Amari, talking to her like she was a skittish horse. "You were taking longer than expected to wake, so I sent him upstairs."

"He's okay? Did he say anything?" She flinched at the injection of another stimpak. Amari massaged the spot in apology.

"No, just expressed so much concern for you that he was getting underfoot. I had to shoo him off. Now, listen to me. For the next six hours you're at risk for dehydration. I need you to drink plenty of fluids." Amari gave her a can of purified water, but didn't let her drink it. Amari wrapped her hands around hers, her voice going stern. "I want you to know, I would have never put you in that lounger had I a choice. You're a poor candidate for the memory simulators. Recent trauma and an extremely imaginative mind. Those two factors combined and you have an unstable environment for these machines. Dreams become memories, and you cannot distinguish what is real, and what is fantasy. Do you understand?"

"You're saying I made her up. You're wrong. She was there. I felt the ocean…" Amari's eyebrows knitted into one. Okay, time to shut up. Just…shut the fuck up. It would be pointless trying to
convince the doctor that whatever wasn't on her monitor was real.

"It wasn't all for naught," Amari saying it quiet, her voice personifying the silver lining of all this. "Your son is alive, and the Institute has tipped its hand. Teleportation. It's ingenious, really. No one can find the entrance to their facility because there physically isn't one. Though, I suppose knowing this that only helps so much. You'll need to find a way in. Perhaps this Doctor Virgil can assist you in some way?"

"The Glowing Sea? Where is that, and what is it?"

"It's...a highly irradiated stretch of land. They say it's where 'it' detonated, the nuclear bomb you narrowly escaped in the past. There are stories of that place, and if you were to believe even a fraction of them..." The heat of Amari's hands turned up an uncomfortable notch. "All I know is the radiation there can kill a man in seconds. This Virgil is either desperate or mad for hiding in such a place, and if you intend to find him, you'll need either a hazmat suit or power armor. I don't recommend dosing with Radaway. Like the stimpaks, it causes dehydration, and out there, you can't afford the side effects distracting you."

"Thank you, Doctor Amari." Her throat went raspy and she drank the whole can of the water in three gulps. "Without you, we would've never known where to look next."

"You're very welcome. And take the rest of the water from my shelf. I'm getting a shipment tomorrow from Diamond City." Amari hesitated, a flash of girlish shyness erasing twenty years from her face. "I — I want to thank you as well."

"Why, what did I do?"

"You showed me autumn. The trees. I've always — " Amari broke eye contact and busied herself with an already organized stack of files. "I've always wondered what autumn looked like."

"Oh, I...you're welcome, doctor."

"Find your son soon, Nora."

There was a tightness in her chest she couldn't identify, it stayed with her up the stairs and into the hall. So many questions dangling in the space of her mind, a space that felt raw and mistreated by the memories that had invaded there. She knew who Jenny was, but what was the Other Jenny? A leftover memory given life? Or was she a glitch of some sort, a piece of code that manifested from the sync itself. Maybe she was a facet of Nick, some repressed part of him, his fears or anger. And how the hell was she going to talk to him about it? Hey, Nick, the creepy dead lover of your previous life tried to strangle me. Yeah, that would go over well.

"No, Deacon. I don't think so. We got enough on our plate as it is."

Nick's voice carried down the hall, and though Doctor Amari had said he was fine, hearing the evidence relieved her. This Deacon person replied, his tone and candor giving the impression of that kid in class who never took anything seriously. "Aw, come on, Valentine. I'm asking as a friend, a pal, a homie. If she hangs with you, then I know she's kinda trustworthy. Put in a good word, man. That's all I'm asking."

"If conversation goes in that direction, I might - might - mention you. Maybe."

"I'll take maybe over no any day."

She entered the main room, and Mr. Sunglasses made a hasty retreat to a nearby lounger. Deacon.
So, Mr. Sunglasses finally had a name. Irma hadn't moved from her sunning spot, and didn't acknowledge her as she passed. The name game must have really pissed her off.

"Hey, you alright?" Nick rose from the waiting bench, the straps of her backpack loose in his metal hand. He had been saving her spot with it. "Doc said you were having trouble coming out of the simulation."

"It was rough, but I'm in one piece."

"Well, you shouldn't be. You should be dead like me. But that's what I get for following orders."

Kellogg's voice out of Nick's mouth. The same piercing stare. Then Nick blinked and frowned at her, his confusion giving way to alarm. "Nora, you're as white as a prewar sheet. What's the matter? What is it?"

"Kellogg... he — "

Nick reached for her and she shrank back. He halted in an awkward stumble. "Nora, what - "

"You spoke like Kellogg. You said I should be dead."

"I only asked if you were okay. And you said yes. That's it."

"No," step by step away from him, and every one like losing a piece of herself, "just now. It was just now."

"Oh... shit." He seemed to deflate with the realization. "Doc said there might be some mnemonic leftovers from being attached to that slug for so long — but that's all they are, Nora." He came toward her slowly, hands out to catch her if she bolted. "Kellogg is dead. We killed him. If I said anything, it's, it's just an echo. An echo."

He moved toward her when she bumped into a closed lounger. She warded him off, shaking her head. No, no, I can't. His arms dropped in defeat. Every actuator under his skin twisted with her rejection, as her heart twisted at the loss of her trust in him. Because how could she again? If even a shred of Kellogg remained in him...

"I would never hurt you," Nick said it as if he'd heard her thoughts. "You know this. I would never..." Whatever her expression was, it finally made him give up. He retreated to the bench and sat there like the memory Nick had on his couch, lost and grief stricken, throwing sad glances at her, willing her to see reason. See him. Nick. Her partner. A walking embodiment of all her dreams as a little girl and her fantasies as a woman. How many nights did she pine for something like him? Daydreaming and touching herself and crying because it would never come true. Well it was true. It was sitting across the room waiting for her to stop being a fucking idiot. She didn't bury one ghost just to have another one haunting her, tainting what happiness she could salvage in this world. No, he wouldn't win. Fuck Kellogg. He wasn't ruining this.

Nick wasn't the only one watching as she came to him, step by step again, gathering up those pieces of herself, gaining back that trust. Deacon hadn't bothered to get into his lounger. Irma made a hmm noise of interest. And Doctor Amari had entered the room at some point, her typing like a bird pecking quietly at the keyboard.

She put her hands on his shoulders. He exhaled but didn't speak. He seemed afraid to. They both didn't blink, didn't move. "I have to be sure," her voice quivering, teetering on tears, "if we stay together, Nick, I have to be sure. Kellogg destroyed my family. Everything."
"Not everything," a minute shake of his head, emotion thick in his words, "not us. I've learned, Nora, what you humans say is true. We're our own worst enemy. Sometimes there's a part of us that just won't quit making it hard. It gives a voice to our fears. It tells us to feel ashamed. It tells us we don't deserve happiness, sabotages all hope and dream of it. That's what you heard, Nora. Not Kellogg. Not me. You heard yourself."

There was nothing to say to that. No words would do. So she did what she'd been wanting to do since the moment she met him.

She kissed him.

Right there. No warning. No holding back. Her mouth smothered his cry of surprise and then his hum of elation. His lips, dry and velvety like the rest of his skin. Alien and wonderful and now claimed as her own. Mine, now, and forever. She knew it somehow, an instinctive shift in her body, and in his — a syncing of a different sort. His hands covered her own, slid over them and up her arms. Rising, not breaking contact, tugging her against him, his mouth now hungry, insatiable. His tongue flicked, testing her, the texture moist and not quite human — and his saliva, a bittersweet tang she devoured because it wasn't human, this creature she held, this perfect constructed being that wouldn't let her breathe, wouldn't let her go. Not for anything.

"Oh, hell yeah."

Hancock, King of the Ghouls and rude interruptions ogled them from the hall archway. His bodyguard openly stared, her mouth slack with shock. Hancock wiggled his lack of eyebrows and whistled low. "Was gonna give you two shit for missing my grand speech out there, but never fucking mind. And don't stop on my account, you sexy rad bunnies, keep going, please."

Nick pulled away, leaving her cold and wanting. "Hancock, impeccable timing as always."

"Never seen this side of you before, Valentine, but I like it. I like it a lot. And it's about damn time. Even a tin man detective should have his femme fatale." Hancock elbowed his bodyguard. "Told ya, Fahrenheit, there was something going on between these two. You owe me fifty caps."

"Damn it." Fahrenheit started fishing through her ammo pouches.

"Hey no worries, Red, you can pay me later tonight. I'm suddenly feeling in the mood."

But the mood had left Nick completely. "Nick? Hey, where are you - " He evaded her attempt to snatch his sleeve.

"Meet me outside when the sideshow's over."

"Aw, Nick, don't be like that — " Hancock tried to slow him down, but Nick shoved through, almost knocking Fahrenheit over.

The Den's doors slammed shut.

Hancock sighed, and lifted his tricorn hat to rub at his ruddy forehead. "Well, shit. Sorry, sister, never pegged Valentine as the sensitive type."

"It's fine. It's all just…new. To us, I mean." She grabbed her bag and struggled for composure under their scrutiny. Deacon seemed the most unaffected, arms draped over the lounger casing, chilling there like he'd seen it all before. The others, though, Irma and Doctor Amari — and some new ghoul standing in the doorway of the side room, dressed in a hat and an old tan suit, eating gumdrops one by one — all gaping at her like she'd done something appalling and gutsy at the same time.
"It's like episode fifty-five when the Mistress of Mystery and the Silver Shroud kissed for the first time," said the unknown ghoul, his face innocent and sweet, his eyes glazed in reverie. "But she's the one who ran away, leaving the poor Silver Shroud all alone and yearning for her touch."

"I have to go," she said to no one in particular. Hancock blocked her graceless exit, his hold on her arm like a fur-lined iron cuff.

"Wait a minute, sister, I need to know somethin'," saying it friendly, but he had used that same tone with Finn. "Nick and I go way back, back when Diamond City wasn't the sheep farm it is now. We've got our differences, sure, but he's like a brother to me, and I always look out for family. I wanna make sure you ain't in it for the thrill, you know, getting it on with a synth for kicks. Nick may be bolts and screws, but he's got a heart. And I don't wanna see it broken, you feel me?"

The threat was real, buffered maybe by her gender and looks, but it was there. And unlike Finn, she wouldn't tempt fate, or this ghoul's anger.

"I feel you." She forced herself to meet his eyes. Hancock searched her a minute, then nodded, believing her.

"That's good, sister, real good. Now, go get em'."

She made her escape, leaving their judgment behind. At the Den's double doors, Hancock spoke again, but this time to Deacon.

"Leave em' be, Railroad. They don't need you creeping after them all damn night. Get your ass in that lounger and stay there."

Railroad? Now, what was that all about? Then she shook her head and opened the door. Whatever, let it be. Like Nick had said. They had enough on their plate.

Outside, Marjorie Hughes crooned "One More Tomorrow" from a radio on a patio table. Drifters clustered by fire barrels, and the Neighborhood Watch roamed the street with machine guns in hand. Nick stood gleaming under the streetlight, his back against it, a cigarette in his metal hand — probably on his fourth or fifth one by now. The taste of it would be in his breath, on his tongue. Bitterness and smoke, but with a hint of sweetness in the aftertaste, his synth saliva masking the nicotine, purifying it.

Her shadow joined his. A furtive glance at her from under his fedora. The cigarette blazed and died.

"I'd ask you for a light, but coughing fits aren't romantic."

"Neither is being possessed."

She rested her head on his shoulder, trailed her hand up his arm. He tensed under her touch. "I know you're you."

"Because the magic kiss said so?"

"You thought it was magic?"

The cigarette flared once more, then hit the ground.

"These lips wouldn't know."

"Then...let's teach them." She tipped his chin down, caressing a fine crack under her thumb. The
noise he made, a mewling hum. It begged to be swallowed.

*Never throw yourself at a man ...*

*Yeah, sorry mom.*

If their first kiss was bliss. This was nirvana. His rainstorm scent, his hands kneading her back, the gentle pressure that became urgent and needy. Their shadows became one.

*Find it.* That voice again. Her own worst enemy.

His hands moved down her back, daring lower, and lower still. He was shameless in his desire.

*Find —* The Other Jenny's voice left her entirely.

The radio went silent. The weight of their eyes crushed against her like his mouth, his body. It didn't matter.

Let them stare.

Chapter End Notes

If my fanfic was a movie: Doctor Amari would be played by the lovely Shohreh Aghdashloo. I feel she practically embodies the part. And Jenny/Other Jenny is Rachel Wood as she appears in Westworld - sans the prairie dress.

And if you haven't seen Westworld. Do it. Now. It's like the Institute realized for HBO. And even Bethesda has acknowledged the similarities. Different plot and such, but the questions are the same. Sentient machines, Bicameral minds, who's really human? The hosts or the guests? Even the character Dolores Abernathy? ABERNATHY. I mean, come on. It's like a straight shout out to Fallout 4.
Chapter Summary

Nick and Nora track down Doctor Brian Virgil in the most dangerous place in the Commonwealth. Nick discovers a stunning revelation about his past.

Chapter Notes

Lots of stuff in this chapter. Canon deviations galore, RadAway highs, panic attacks, and the Children of Atom. Oh, and dirty talk.

Not necessarily in that order.

Happy Valentine's Day :D

They took a room at the Hotel Rexford. Hancock offered board at the State House, but Nick refused out of ego, or maybe it was his passive aggressive way of punishing Hancock for gawking earlier. Undaunted, Hancock insisted on paying for their room, and wouldn't take no for an answer. Nick didn't fight him on that.

Then again, maybe she'd kissed all the fight out of him by then.

They talked all night. Okay, until she passed out - which was pretty quick since the only sleep she'd had in the last day was under a stinky tarp next to a bale of disintegrating hay. Nick had been her guard, her sentinel, as he was last night. His presence comforted her, his shadow thrown on the wall, his quiet mutterings as he leafed through an old Robco magazine, his eyes on her, even in her dreams.

She slept like the dead.

And then came dawn and the awkward dance of morning pleasantries, her with a fuzzy mouth because she hadn't drunk enough water, and Nick keeping his distance as if afraid the night before had been a dream. She showed him it wasn't, clad in her black prewar bra and underwear, tasting his night of cigarettes and brooding, taking off his hat, unbuttoning his shirt. He caught her wrists, shaking his head.

"Not yet, doll. Not here."

The irony. Nick, the blushing virgin. But she'd wait. As long as he was hers, she'd wait forever.

She hadn't told him yet about Jenny. No time seemed the right time. Kellogg, the Institute, and Shaun, yes, he insisted and pressed her for every detail, and then made her repeat it. The Institute parts had Nick enthralled, everything about the Courser: his appearance and his words. And Father; they speculated about him together, who he was — the leader of the Institute, obviously, but what could he want with a ten-year-old boy? And why Shaun? Plenty of orphans in the Commonwealth,
why not choose one of them? What made Shaun so special?

"Maybe it's because he's prewar," Nick mused by the boarded window, blowing smoke between the slots of wood and into the gray morning. "That has to be the key. They raided your Vault specifically for your boy. And they needed a baby for...what? What would a prewar baby be to the Institute? Taking on all his care like that, raising him for ten years, and then giving him to Kellogg for a month or two before taking him back." The sprocket in his jaw glinted as it turned. Fuck he was sexy when he brainstormed. Every bit the detective of his previous life, worrying a case in a dark room filled with cigarette smoke and a half-naked client on his bed.

Sensing her stare, his eyes fell on her, lingered on her state of undress, followed her bare leg as it slid slowly down the mattress and back up. His cigarette smashed into the sill. He came to her, yellow eyes burning like his hands on her outer thighs, the metal one a thrilling mix of steel and sharpness, lightly grazing, bringing an excited sigh from her lips.

"You're one in a million, doll," whispering it against her neck, nuzzling there. Against her stomach he was hard, and shaking — barely contained. That was a part of him she wanted inside her, every sculpted inch of it. Then her leather jacket pressed against her breast, his gentle reminder of what was more important. "But if we're heading into the Glowing Sea, we'll need to get these lovely legs in some power armor."

She kissed his nose and sighed. He was right, her lust could wait. Shaun came first.

But damn, did she take her sweet time in getting dressed.

When they checked out, they met another ghoul, which in itself wasn't special, but the coat the ghoul wore stirred unwanted memories of that fateful morning, the Vault Tec rep knocking on her door, his fake cheery smile.

"No...it's—it's impossible! It can't be you."

They faced each other in the hall, Nick and her frowning, and the ghoul's eyes huge and...tearing up? Oh hell, this poor thing was going to cry.

"Who are you? I...don't—"

"You don't remember me, do you? I'm Vault Tec. I came to your house that — that morning."

The coat was the same. The rumpled hat. The lines of his face warped under the ravages of radiation. Then to convince her further, the ghoul drew up and smiled, wide and beaming, as he had at her door all those years ago. "Well hello there, Vault Tec calling," he said in perfect — if somewhat raspy — imitation of his customary greeting.

"Oh my God...it's really you, isn't it? You've been here all this time?"

The Vault Tec rep (for some reason he refused to give her his real name) told her a little of his post war adventures, which were more like Tales of the Miserable Salesman as he tried to settle in one place after another, only to be turned away because he was ghoul. He'd come to Goodneighbor for obvious reasons, but couldn't find work.

"No one wants a ghoul with two hundred years of sales experience," the Vault Tec rep bemoaned.

They were already going to Sanctuary, so why not bring him along? The Minutemen could use an experienced trader, and they had plenty of room.
The Vault Tec rep did start crying then. *You mean it? I can stay in Sanctuary?* Wringing his hands and blubbering. She hugged him, yes, and *I'll even lead you there myself.* The Vault Tec rep sniffled his gratitude into her shoulder, and Nick shook his head as if they were too adorable for words.

"Can't stop being noble, can ya, doll?"

All three of them headed out Goodneighbor's front gate. Hancock met them there, and during his lusty farewells, handed Nick a small brown bag, which Nick tucked away in his trenchcoat.

"What's that? A goodbye present?"

"Of a sort. Some extra RadAway, potent stuff. Works quicker than the pills."

"That was nice of him, but hopefully we won't have to use it."

"Hopefully," said Nick, his face darkening as Goodneighbor's gate closed behind them.

The Super Mutants were either sleeping in or too lazy to give them any grief, their hulking green forms absent from rooftops and scaffolding platforms. Their trio slipped through Trinity Plaza without incident, save for the Vault Tec Rep almost blowing himself up by stepping on a frag mine. Sales smarts doesn't equal street smarts, it seemed. It was amazing he'd survived this long. No sign of the Brotherhood, but Vertibirds droned in the distance, the umbra of their airship ominous against the dawning eastern sky.

The trek to Sanctuary took a detour to Diamond City, Nick checking in with Ellie and buying a new plasma rifle from Arturo. Seeing the lethal green energy coils of the high tech weapon gave their journey to the Glowing Sea a sense of foreboding. Nick, abandoning his trusty revolver for a bigger and meaner weapon. This was serious business. She followed suit, saying goodbye to Fire Brat and hello to a rocket-powered sledge and a small plasma pistol with a modded kick. *"One shot with this baby equals two. Twice as many conductors and narrower chambers for more pressure, see?"* Arturo, displaying his craftsmanship with a proud grin. *"Melts through combat armor like butter."

"Gonna name that one Double Trouble?" Nick asked once they were back on the road. He laughed at his own joke, but his eyes scanned the Southern horizon like a wary hawk. The further from Diamond City they went, the tenser Nick got. Even the Vault Tec Rep noticed, but had the decency not to bring it up. Instead the Rep amused them with stories of his prewar days, going door to door, dealing with all kinds of the rude and the weird: the creepy bachelors, the angry housewives, the vindictive children, and being chased away by family pets - not all of them dogs. It did distract for a while, until the walls of Sanctuary (bigger and longer now) came into view, and the mystical and terrible Glowing Sea stuck like a radioactive burr to her thoughts.

_Swarms of feral ghouls, thundering radstorms, Deathclaw Matrons, glowing radscorpions - the latter apparently the size of ponies. All of these wonders of the Glowing Sea coming from Minutemen and settlers eager to share every rumor, every horror they'd heard about. Preston had even paled when he discovered their destination, and wasted a good hour in her living room trying to talk her out of it._

"*Just you and Valentine? That's more than risky, that's insane. We need you here.*"

"*You don't need me at all. Look at you guys, you're thriving.*"

"*It wouldn't have happened without you, Nora. All that Sanctuary is. All that the Minutemen are doing now, it's because of you. Don't you see that?*"

How he looked at her then, all big brown eyes and brotherly concern. Doubt crept in, but so did
Shaun, his little head bobbing as he tied his shoes. His little wave goodbye at Kellogg. That beam of energy that took him away. Took him to Father. That bastard who stole her family. He led an Institute of thieves, taking from the Commonwealth whatever he pleased, whenever he pleased. Shaun wasn't the first, nor would he be the last. She could spare another mother the grief of losing a child. Save another father from a desperate search. Save the countless lives that would be ruined by this goddamn evil organization. It had to stop somewhere. Someone had to finally stand up and say no more.

"I'm saving my son, Preston. And while I'm at it, I'm going to save the rest of you too. There won't be a future for anyone in the Commonwealth unless the Institute is stopped."

"I can't believe you're doing this. Taking on the Institute…it's — " Then Preston's expression changed, seeing something in her own that suddenly inspired him. He drew up, chest out and back straight, his nod militant and formal. "Ma'am, if I can't talk you out of it, then I'll give you all the help I can. The Minutemen are at your disposal. Anything you need. Supplies and weapons. Sturges has been upgrading that old suit of power armor you left behind. You're welcome to it. I'll even send a team to escort you to the border of the Glowing Sea if you need it. The Minutemen have your back, General."

"Wait, what? General?"

But Preston shot out her front door, almost knocking Nick over as he was coming in. Nick stood with her and watched as Preston met Sturges on the road. The two men bent heads, their conversation urgent by the amount nodding and pointing, and then they hurried across the street to her neighbor's garage. Dogmeat trotted into view and trailed after them, a stuffed bear hanging out of his mouth.

"What was that all about?"

"He called me General, Nick. Isn't Preston the general of the Minutemen?"

Nick hid his smile behind his human hand. "Ah, so Garvey finally sprung it on ya, huh? Well, about time."

"What do you mean? You knew about this? What's going on? I'm so damn confused."

"This is a good thing, Nora. Trust me." Nick took her by the shoulders, rubbing them before enveloping her in a deep, impulsive kiss. For a moment, the world and its strangeness went away, and only Nick remained. His mouth and body and hands. This, yes. This was heaven. She snuggled her face into his dress shirt and inhaled cigarettes and synth.

"Oh, uh, hi there. Sorry — "

They broke apart as the Vault Tech Rep came from what used to be her laundry room, refurbished now as a guest bedroom. He squirmed in place and crumpled his yellow hat in his hands. "I, uh, only wanted to say thank you again. For letting me stay in your home. It's real swell of you. I—"

"Think nothing of it, sir!" A blithe Codsworth swooped in the side door carrying carrots, tatos, and mutfruit in all three arms. He dumped them on the counter, switched hand attachments from the compartment in his round head, and started slicing and dicing with inhuman speed. "It's so lovely to have guests to cook for again, isn't it, mum?"

"Yes, Codsworth, it's wonderful." She pressed her face against Nick's chest and sighed. Nick kissed the top of her head.
"Like I said, you just can't stop being noble…General."

She groaned. Bad enough she screwed herself out of…screwing. Can't seduce a synth out of his clothes with a ghoul and a Mister Handy underfoot. But now Preston and his antics. Making her a General on a whim? Who does that?

Suddenly the Glowing Sea didn't seem half bad.

She didn't sleep much that night. Nerves and lust wove her dreams into a chaotic tapestry. Nick's body spooned hers, his metal hand tracing circles on her hip, then slipped under her thin nightgown. She parted her legs, sighing, welcoming the intrusion. Her back arched as he glided two fingers past her folds, and deep into the core of her. Not sharp. Not cold. But warm, so warm —

And she opened her eyes, the dream dissipating. But the heat between her legs, that was real, that was — aw shit. Her own hand. Nick was in the living room, running full diagnostics, preparing, he'd said.

*Everything I loved is gone.*

Was he dreaming of the Other Jenny? So mournful and frustrated, wandering her blood-soaked shores. A ghost of a ghost. What was she?

*Find it.*

She sank into dreams uneasy and dark.

The next morning passed in a blur of activity. Sturges met her in Rosa's old garage, which he had transformed into a mechanic's paradise. All sorts of salvaged equipment and crafting stations. Weapons, armor, you name it. Her power armor stooped at its station and wore a new coat of Minuteman Blue, their white stars and musket symbol on its breast plate. Though dry, the new paint scent gave her a headache. Preston must of had him working all night. She thanked Sturges with a hug and a peck on the cheek, his overalls smelling strongly of oil. He flushed and darted a look at Nick, who was right outside buying some last minute plasma ammo from Trashcan Carla. Carla flicked her cigarette as she haggled, her voice grating, her careworn face hard on the eyes.

"Don't worry, Sturges, Nick won't kick your ass over a hug." The rumor mill had been in full production since she'd kissed Nick in her living room. Not sure who saw what, or who told who, but her ears were on fire from the amount of tongue waggling going around town. And speaking of fire, Sturges looked like he needed a hose right about now. His flush bloomed from his sideburns down to his neck.

"Aw, I know that, General. It's all good."

"No, Sturges. Don't call me that. I'm flattered, I really am, but I can't be the Minutemen's general. Don't you see how silly that is? I was a housewife — "

"Who kicked some raider ass — "

"I don't have any training. I'm not a soldier — "

"You killed a Deathclaw in a one on one — "

"With a minigun and power armor and — "

"And a damn kind heart. Not many folks in the Commonwealth would stick out their necks like that.
Not for complete strangers anyway. You could have passed us by."

"I almost did."

He nodded, unfazed by her blunt honesty. "But you didn't. And that's what matters. There were five of us three weeks ago. Now there's over thirty, and there's more coming every day. Course, we have to build more housing, and set up that Vault Tec ghoul of yours with a trading post. Once we get him situated we'll have two traders to generate caps, and more caps means more resources, weapons, ammo, the works. We got Abernathy up the road there trading his tato crop for our mutfruit. And Tenpines just joined up after some of our boys cleared out that old Corvega plant for em'. And there's others: Finch Farm, Country Crossing, Oberland Station, the Slog - I mean, damn, we get big enough we might even start luring those snooty traders over from Bunkerhill. What I'm sayin' is, Sanctuary is finally becoming a sanctuary, and none of it would have happened without you, boss - no, none of it. And you can shake that pretty head of yours all you want. You saved our lives. You saved the Minutemen. Hell, to be honest, Preston started calling you General two weeks ago."

"What if I don't want it?" She sounded like a bitch blurting it out like that, but this was getting ridiculous. She wasn't a leader. She wasn't anything. Sure she'd said some bold words in the heat of the moment, but that's all they were. She had to get to the Institute first to make good on them, and she wasn't even halfway there.

Sturges got quiet and contemplated a moment. Then he said with a slow spreading grin, "Well, if you won't take General, then it's gonna be Founding Momma. I mean, you were technically in Sanctuary two hundred years ago. And the other settlers think it's a hoot, you looking so young and being so old. Some gave ya that nickname after the last time you visited. So, boss, either it's Founding Momma or General of the Minutemen, pick your poison."

She admitted defeat and climbed into her power armor. With her plain jane outfit - a gray tank top and black jeans - the frame was pretty roomy. Outside, Nick finalized the trade with Carla, who beamed at the amount of caps he handed over. Guess plasma cartridges weren't cheap.

"All right, Sturges. Your "General" wants to know what kind of bells and whistles you gave this rusted tin can."

And it turned out, quite a few. She tested out the targeting scanners on the way to the edge of the Glowing Sea, everything with a heartbeat or energy signature glowing red. Nick, radiating by her side, laughed at her description of what he looked like. Then he returned the favor.

"Kind of wondered myself what you'd look like as a robot. Not too shabby. Though", he knocked on her arm as they walked, the sound ringing hollow, "you're a lot more sexier out of that rust bucket. Don't think I didn't hear you last night, you naughty girl."

Her pulse spiked and a heart icon started blinking on her HUD. "Oh really? You could have joined in any time you know."

Nick considered a plywood sign stuck to the remains of a truck (TRN BAK NOW U DUMFUCKS), before moving on. "There was a little matter of our guest to consider. Besides, I enjoyed listening to you. And it wasn't the first time I've...eavesdropped."

"What, what do you -" Oh right, his office. That third night of her jet withdrawal. God that seemed ages ago. "You heard me? But I swear didn't make a peep."

"Hm, synth ears, remember? Every panting sigh and whimper." His voice went husky. "You make this little hitching mewl when you come. Can't wait till I get to hear it up close."
Her mind blanked. The heart icon flashed in warning. Nick chuckled as her gait faltered, all smug and satisfied with himself. All right mister sexy synth, the dirty talk was on.

"You know what I can't wait for...Valentine? She purred his last name, the distortion of her helmet adding to the effect. "When you're finally out of that trenchcoat and between my thighs. And I'm not gonna let you go until I'm thoroughly satisfied."

His eyes blazed. "By the time I'm finished with you, doll, you won't be able to walk."

There was a flutter down there no sensor could translate, but her power armor tried anyway with a combined set of heart and BP icons. "I wonder what sounds you'll make when I go down on you. How many did they program? Hmm?"

"I wonder how soft you are, Nora. I'm gonna use my fingers to find out. See how many you can take."

She clenched her thighs as if his fingers were inside her already. She bit her lip, her helmet unable to hide the breathless want in her voice. "I'm going to lick every beautiful inch of you. I'm going to light every sensor on fire."

"I'll make you beg, sweetheart." He glided closer, his movements on the verge of predatory. "I'll make you scream."

"How many times can a synth come, Nick?"

"Get out of that power armor, Nora, and we'll find out."

The intensity of his eyes awed her. So brilliant. So aroused. Wanting her right then and right there. Right in the middle of the fucking street with the green-tinged sky above and the matchstick trees on all sides.

And she was ready to obey. Her hand hovered over the ejection node under the side plate of her suit, but then thunder rolled, strange and reverberating, like God was bowling down a warped tunnel. The wind picked up, and though her air scrubbers filtered most of it, the faint scent of rot managed to sneak in. Nick bore the worst of it, his face pinched in disgust. He glared at the clouds roiling over them.

"Damn cock blockers."

To her, he gave an aw shucks smile, "Ya got me all riled up, doll. Forgot for a minute where we were. The Sea's close judging by the stench." He made another face and a gagging noise. "Goddamn Institute, couldn't give me an olfactory off button could ya? Shoulda brought nose plugs."

"We can take turns in my power armor if you want. I have enough RadAway and Rad-X."

"No, doll. Keep that on. I mean it. I'll be fine. Gotta program that recycles my favorite scents. It won't block it all, but it'll take the edge off."

"Wow, really?"

He gave her a wink reminiscent of Hancock. "Yeah, and guess which one is at the top of my list?"

Unfortunately, that was the last flirt from Nick for a good while. They passed under the "edge" of the Glowing Sea - a massive line of broken chunks of highway, or skyway as she used to call it back in the prewar days. It used to terrify her to drive so high up, so she always made Nate take the wheel.
Now cars piled at the bottom of fallen concrete slabs like discarded toys. Support columns that once bridged one section of road to another, stood as lone, blasted towers, metal framework like spears left behind by a besieging army. It was sobering passing under the overpass, a reminder of how devastating the initial blast had been, and the fate she had avoided by timing and sheer luck.

They were close to ground zero. The grass had disappeared long ago and spongy ground had taken its place. Pockets of yellow fluid leaked through the dirt, as if the earth itself was fighting off some exotic infection. Her heart icon reappeared when the green tinge of the sky went full blown absinthe. Since her thaw, she'd been lucky enough not to see a rad storm. Heard of them, yes, whispers and warnings spoken by settlers who all said the same thing when one rolls in: run inside quick. Nick had done his best to prepare her, but talking about it and experiencing it were two different animals.

Her Geiger counter flipped out, crackling as bad as the thunder that shook her power armor frame. A haze descended in a nauseous shade of green. Visibility cut in half, the wreckage of buildings blurry lumps in the distance. Lightning split the sky with neon forks of dazzling white-green light. A croaking howl rose from somewhere to the east, raising every hair on her neck. A higher croak answered to the west. Nick aimed his rifle, scanning the murk. She outweighed him by a thousand pounds, yet she hovered behind him like a tank behind a soldier. "What is it? What's out there?"

"Deathclaws. That was their mating call."

Great, everything was getting it on but her. "Okay, well maybe they'll be too busy to eat us."

"Depends if she wants gifts."

"What do you mean?" Even though it was pretty clear what he meant.

"Deathclaw males give the females fresh meat to...butter them up."

"Shit, Nick. Are...are they close?"

Nick lowered his weapon but didn't holster it. His body was a taut wire. "No, but we should get out of their path. Stay close to me, and keep an eye out for any signs of recent fortification of buildings. The Glowing Sea is nasty, but only a couple of miles wide. We'll find this Virgil fella eventually. In pieces maybe, but eventually."

Two hours, and three Deathclaws, a nest of furious stingwings, a glowing green radscorpion (yes, the size of a pony) and numerous packs of ferals later, and still no sign of Brian Fucking Virgil. Not even pieces of the bastard. Why the hell had he gone running in this hell hole? This stinking, nasty cesspool of radioactive sludge? What the fuck had they been thinking — and no, not her and Nick and their foolhardy scavenger hunt for a rogue Institute twit — but the prewar world. The Chinese. The Russians. The Americans. All those damn fools who pushed the button and released hell on earth. All of them were bastards. All of them were selfish, spiteful, ignorant fucks.

Her eyes stung. Her hands shook. Damaged plating on her right leg and both arms had her power armor frame exposed, her rad exposure steadily increasing. Nick gave her the side eye, his movements the most synth-like she'd ever witnessed. That hawkish posture, the smooth pendulum gestures as he swung his rifle from left to right, the avian crane of his neck as he monitored the distance for enemies. Uncanny valley for certain, but also beautiful. He used everything the Institute gave him to survive - or perhaps it was the human Nick, those old bloodhound instincts that gave him the edge he needed out here. And here she was, a clunking, clanking troglodyte who practically pissed herself when that radscorpion had burst from the ground.

"How are you doing, Nora?"
"Shitty, Nick. Real shitty." Her tears wouldn't stop leaking down her face, under her chin. *Drip drip drip* — had to let them fall. Just when she thought the Commonwealth had wrung her dry, it gave her this hideous scar, this festering, oozing stretch of land that spread to the searing green horizon, its rolls and hills like the sloughing tissue of a cancerous beast. She walked on bones. She walked on the ashes of corpses. How many had died? How many souls obliterated in an instant? Lightning scissored across an alien sky, the world below a mass grave — and demons roamed, horned and scaled. Ghouls danced on the dead. On a hill in the hazy distance, a figure twirled in slow motion like a ballerina in a jewelry box, the music winding down, down, down —

*Stop.*

The pus of the earth sucked at her boots, oily swirls eating away the Minuteman blue. Bare metal toes. Oh God, her power armor. If it was melting, then what was it doing to Nick? Sensing her alarm, his yellow eyes turned her way, shimmering, reflecting the poison around them. Muck caked his shoes, but they were intact. Okay, okay, good. He was good. Better than her. She sank another inch, the mud squelching and hungry. Warning lights flashed on her HUD, multiple icons lighting up as her breathing went erratic and her shaking turned into tremors — the Jet kind of trembling that went bone-deep and further. Her power armor was a cage getting smaller and smaller. Strangling her. Suffocating her. She had to get out before it crushed her into dust. *Get out, get out, get out* —

All HUD icons flared red.

"What are you — Nora, no!"

Didn't remember pushing the `eject` button, but she was free, the acrid air hitting her lungs and face in a blast of charred ozone and ammonia — and some other stench, like brackish water stagnated and thick with scum, bloated fish floating belly up —

Lining the shores, the foam pink and thick and -

*Everything I loved is gone.*

That phantom whisper sent her running, stumbling, crying toward the skeletal remains of an unmarked office building.

"Nora, damn it, the rads! Get back in your power armor!"

His footsteps behind her, heavy and clumsy, the earth eager to swallow him whole.

He caught her at the threshold, barreling them both inside — as if this ruined shell of an office could protect her from the poison already seeping into her skin. He pinned her to what was left of the lobby counter, metal trim flaking to nothing under her hands. A needle plunged into her thigh and surge of sensation followed, a delirious, scalding rush that put her best Jet high to shame. She gasped, riding it to the top and crashing into a sea of molten pleasure. She yanked him against her, legs wrapped around his waist, trapping him as she had promised during their little game, needing him inside her, now.

"Damn you, Hancock," Nick groaned in between her frantic attempts to inhale him. "I said RadAway only, not — " Then she was on him again, on the shit remains of the floor, and he was on top of her, the weight of him heavy between her legs, and that part of him ready, more than ready, even if he wasn't. "Nora, Nora, no. I want you, but not here. Not in this hell — "

"It's okay, it's okay, please, please," begging him, needing him to make it go away. The horror outside. All the nameless dead. "We'll bring something good here, something beautiful."
"But there's already beauty here, sister. Atom's grace shines upon you both."

Sometime between her panicked flight and rolling on the floor with Nick, a woman had entered the office lobby. She leaned now against the peeling wall, her body like a bent reed, gray rags hanging loose from her bony shoulders. A strange metal disk lay against her chest, attached by four sets of wires: two over her bony shoulders, and two around her thin waist. Patches of lank blond hair on the woman's scalp belied the odd vibrancy of her pale skin. Emaciated but glowing, a saint being consumed by the fires of the pyre. Her eyes, watchful and somewhat vacant, seeing them and seeing something that had her lips crooked in a small half-moon of a smile.

They detangled. Nick, shamefaced, his plasma rifle back in his hands, and she remained on the floor, dazed, her cheeks throbbing, her hands on her lap, the wetness there all too damning. The woman's slender form, the ragged dress. In her mind, the ballerina spun to a dying song. "Were you the one dancing on the hill?"

"Yes, I was basking in Atom's Glow, as you were just now. You and your man doll, baring yourselves to Him. Sharing His love."

"Adam? His love…huh?"

"Nora, don't bother making sense of it. She's a Child of Atom, a cult that worships the bomb." Nick kept his rifle out, on guard even though the woman was unarmed. "They're more or less weird and harmless, except the fanatics — the folks who try to convert the heathen Commonwealth by force. 'Accept Atom's love or we irradiate you'. Isn't that what you preach, toots?"

"Our way is peaceful and our path, righteous. Atom's will cannot be forced on the unwilling. Mother Isolde forbids violence."

"Well…alright. If you say so." Nick holstered his weapon, but stayed between them, giving her time to ride out the RadAway high. It was obvious this wasn't how this stuff was supposed to work.

"My name is Eve. And who is it that Atom has called to His holy place?"

"Name's Nick Valen —"

"Not you, man doll. I asked your human."

"Right, course you did." He crossed his arms, metal fingers tapping his irritation. Those fingers should be inside her naked body, and it took a considerable, conscious effort to answer Eve's question.

"I'm…I'm…the General." She snorted and giggled, then snorted again. "Oops, I mean Nora. Nooorrraaa."

Nick rubbed the crisscross scar on his forehead. "I'm going to kick Hancock's scrawny ghoul ass."

And her brain seemed to go downhill from there, the side effects of Hancock's RadAway making things and people way too bright and loud. Eve with her Atom and Nick with his nagging about the power armor. Virgil's name popped up twice, maybe more, and Nick got all excited, then really mad for some reason, and Eve kept shaking her head. Nick threw up his hands and said "FINE" really loudly, and told her to get her tush into her power armor RIGHT NOW.

"Okay, okay, I'll get in it. Geez." She stomped outside like a child, the weird sky and lightning kinda pretty and misty. Why was this place so bad again?
Her power armor waited for her, all hunched over and empty. "Aw look, Nick, it's sad I left it alone."

"Yes, Nora, it misses you. Now get back in there."

She half-assed attempted to, giggling, but kept missing the handles to climb in. Nick tried helping by snacking her ass with both hands and lifting her.

"Ow!" Then, "Do that again, please."

He said, all slinky-like. "I will if you get inside."

The handles magically appeared in her hands, but once she was sealed in tight, she pouted at her HUD. Her ass was too hard to smack now.

"Take that the helmet off," said Eve and Nick started growling at her. They went back and forth about rads and RadAway and rudeness and Eve said Atom doesn't like when people hide their faces from His Glow, and that no one was going to see Virgil until Atom was happy.

"We're going to see Virgil? Really?" Nick stared at her like she was looney tunes.

"Didn't you hear our — oh right, that damn crap in your system. Fucking Hancock. Sturges didn't happen to install a blood cleanser did he? No? Damn it. Okay you'll just have to ride it out the hard way. Eve here says Virgil lives in a cave to the Southwest, trades with the Children now and then. But she won't show us until we - or rather you since I'm just the man doll - penance to Atom. We gotta march like the sinners we are though the Divine Crater."

"Oh. Okay. That doesn't sound so bad. Just gimme more of that stuff and I'll be fine."

"Absolutely not. You're getting plain RadAway and you're gonna take that and Rad-X every twenty minutes you don't have that helmet on. Damn zealots," he snapped at Eve who ignored him and started up the path toward her "Divine Crater". "And drink a can of purified, Nora."

"No, I'll pee myself."

Nick gaped at her, then turned his head away. "Don't - " his voice all funny sounding like he was trying not to laugh. "Don't worry, doll, the suit will...will take care of it."

"Oh, it does that for me?" That's so nice of it."

"Yeah, real nice. Now let's go before Eve gets herself eaten by something."

But Eve said Atom's creatures never attack the Children except ferals, but they were sacred and couldn't be harmed. Didn't really make much sense to let something bite you to death cause it was holy, but then again most religions didn't make sense to begin with.

Their village was nice though, all cute little metal shacks with wooden walkways and bridges over a glowing lake of yellow. Her rad counter didn't like that lake much or the yellow and white barrels floating in it — and neither did Nick by the way he frowned at it all the time and tried to hurry her along. The wind blew her hair around and it stank — not her hair, the wind - but the Children didn't seem to mind it much. They wore the same rags with the big metal acorns wired to their chests. Nick said that was a bomb casing, and she supposed that made kinda sense since they loved Atom so much.

The Children all came out to watch her and her man doll and Eve, who seemed really proud to have
everyone staring at them. A dark-haired woman came out of the biggest shack (which meant she was the leader, duh) but since she was so far away, she asked Eve a question with a waving sign of her hand, and Eve answered with her fingers and palm. The dark-haired woman nodded like she understood and went back inside.

"Are you done parading us around?" Nick all mad and fidgety. He needed a kiss, but not with everyone looking. Eve grinned and said, "Yes, Mother Isolde has given her blessing. You have shown humility to Atom and to His children. I will lead you to your Virgil now."

Virgil lived not far from the glowing lake village. Eve said goodbye once they reached a path she said would lead them right to the cave. "He has guns. And he's cranky," warned Eve before disappearing into the green-yellow mist like a ghostly fairy.

"Okay, that helmet back on. Now." She obeyed Nick because the air looked like someone had thrown up in it and the stink made her eyes water. She followed Nick up the trail where it ended in a rocky mouth and two turrets aimed at their faces. The cave spoke in a deep, staticky voice: "Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

Nick answered for her cause she suddenly forgot why they were there. The cave voice and Nick had a conversation that had Mr. Cave sounding confused and angry until Nick said Kellogg's brains were splattered across Fort Hagen's floor, and "good damn riddance to That Bastard", and "We used a piece of his brain to track you down."

Then there was a long pause. Really long. And even though she didn't see his eyes, she swore Mr. Cave was staring at her. Nick fidgeted again, saying under his breath, "Come on, come on, we're on the same side here."

"We'll talk, but that power armor comes off." And Mr. Cave was serious about that no matter how much Nick yelled or reasoned. Her poor power armor. Everyone hated it.

She got out before Nick could stop her and shrugged, saying, "Here I am, Mister Cave, can we come in now?" Mr. Cave seemed surprised she was a girl because he didn't reply for a minute, but then the speaker she hadn't known was there (whoops, ha ha until now) crackled with a growling: "Leave your weapons in the yellow crate and you may proceed, slowly."

The yellow crate was right after the entrance. Nick kept sighing as he put their weapons in it. Then he flexed his metal hand, inspecting the sharp tips, and Kellogg said in her head: "Fucking synth, fucking goddamn you!" Hope Mr. Cave liked his face in one piece.

More turrets inside the cave, and some ugly tin-can string alarms - like that was gonna stop someone from attacking. What a silly man. And then the silly man came into view —

Every hulking green inch of him.

Wow. Just...wow. Why didn't anyone ever tell her the important stuff? Like hey, Nick Valentine is a sexy synth detective, or Hey, this doctor scientist guy is really a fucking Super Mutant.

A laugh bubbled out, and then another. She clamped her hand over her mouth telling herself, shh shh Nora, don't laugh that's mean. But then Mister Cave Giant cocked his head at her like a baffled puppy, and the dam burst. She doubled over, helpless, wheezing and pointing. "Oh my God, Nick. Look! Look, he's so g-g-green! And so BIG. Look at his glasses! His baby glasses on top his big — his big fat nose! I can't...I can't — " She collapsed into a huge ratty chair and the cushion sunk so deep it ate most of her body, her feet sticking out and kicking as she snorted hysterically.
Nick groaned a *why me?* and rubbed his scar again.

"Clearly you aren't assassins," Mr. Giant grumbled. His pet Protectron trundled by him and agreed with a cheerful beep.

"She's not herself, okay? Bad batch of RadAway. Do you have anything to help get it out of her system?"

"I don't have that addictol stuff if that's what you're asking." Mr Giant said it slow and careful like he was afraid of stepping on Nick with his words. Her giggles came harder, tears streaming all the way to her chin.

"Then tea or coffee? Please?"

"Yeah…yeah, hang on a minute. I'll find somethin'."

There wasn't another chair in the cave room so Nick stood by hers, patting her head and sighing every time she tittered at Mr. Giant's attempts to make her tea, his thick fingers having trouble with the small dial on the hotplate, and then his grunting as he bent down to get a dusty canister from an equally dusty shelf, his lumbering form swaying as he carried back a tiny chipped cup. She reached for it, snickering, but Nick took it first.

"Hey, my tea." She stuck her lip out at him.

"I know, doll. Just wanna make sure that's all it is."

Mr. Giant made a big green face. "You watched me make it, synth."

"Anything coulda been in that canister, doc." Nick said *doc* like it was something to be ashamed of.

"Nicky, you tasting it for me like I'm a queen?"

"Yes, Nora, like you're a queen." Nick took a sip of her tea. The way he rolled his jaw was really hot to watch. Mr. Giant crossed his beefy arms.

"Well?"

"Could use some sugar. She likes things sweet."

"Oh sure. Just let me check my pantry." Mr. Giant rolled his eyes, but did what Nick asked. The cup came back and this time Nick let her take it herself, and she turned it to where he had sipped — or where she thought he'd sipped — and made a show of drinking from it there, running her tongue over the spot and winking at him. Mr. Giant stared and Nick fought his smile and lost.

"How is it, doll?"

"Hmm, good." But it was kinda gritty and syrupy, like ground up mutfruit. Mother always said to mind your manners as a guest, and Mr. Giant seemed the sensitive type, so she sipped and sipped again, bobbing her head: "Yup, yummy."

Mr. Giant grunted and went to staring at Nick, who stared right back just as hard. They were like statues having a contest on who could glare the hardest. She drank her tea, not tasting it. Who would win? The Jolly Green Giant, or her sexy synth detective?

"What's your designation, synth?"
"Nick Valentine," Nick saying it like a middle finger in Mr. Giant's face. Mr. Giant raised a puffy, hairless eyebrow.

"So you don't remember it?"

"Even if I did, wouldn't give you the satisfaction of me saying it."

Mr. Giant now looked at her. "Your gen two, his voice, his mannerisms...he's incredible. My colleagues in Robotics can't even get one to frown properly. What modifications did you use?"

His question was like a spotlight and her mouth couldn't see. "Um, uh...no, Nick came that way."

"Hey, you address me until my partner is right in the head."

"Your partner?"

"Yeah, partners. You know, that magical thing that happens when two like-minded individuals agree to work together — as equals."

"I don't understand, who modified you then?"

"Oh drop the innocent act, doc. You work for the nutcases who made me. Got the Institute's serial numbers stamped on my ass. So why'd I get tossed huh? Did my people-snatching skills not measure up?"

She put her cup down on the stone floor. Why was her head still so fuzzy? "Nick, stop it. Be nice."

"No, I'm done with being nice. The Institute doesn't deserve nice. Not with what they've done to the Commonwealth — and to me, dammit. They owe me an explanation for why I spent a century wandering around — "

"A...a century?" Mr. Giant was way bigger than Nick, but he backed away as Nick knotted his metal fist and stalked toward him.

"Yeah, a hundred shitty years, doc. Wondering what the hell was so wrong with me that I wasn't even worth scrapping. Just left me there on that rotting trash heap like another sack of garbage, like I was less than nothing."

The chair wouldn't let her get up. "Nick, please, I don't think he knows —"

"He knows. They all know! How many others like me did ya just throw to the vultures, huh? How many?"

"I don't — I don't — " Mr. Giant started shaking, and it wasn't the scared kind of shaking. Nick got madder and jabbed his finger in Mr. Giant's face.

"Answer me, damn you!"

"Stop it! He won't tell us about Shaun if you keep yelling at him!"

Mr. Giant's head whipped at her, his eyes going big and round. His voice was like radstorm thunder. "How do you know that name?"

"Because I'm his m—m-mother." And she started bawling. Hard and loud as her laughter before, her face in her hands, sobbing like she'd lost everything all over again. Nate, Shaun, her world. Would this grief ever go away?
"Hey, hey, doll, shh, now. It's alright." The chair was big enough for Nick too, and she let him rock her and mutter nonsense things in her ear. He made it all better. But then Mr. Giant opened his big stupid mouth.

"Shaun's parents are dead."

Nick snarled, "Does she look dead to you, you big ape? She was cryogenically frozen in Vault one eleven. Does that ring any bells in that pea brain of yours?"

Mr. Giant balled his huge fists, knuckles popping. "Y-you have a lot of gall, synth, comin' in here, insulting me in my own…cave."

"You people stole her boy — "

"I didn't — "

"Kellogg shot her husband right in front of her — "

"I DIDN'T — "

"And if that wasn't insulting enough, you gave that boy to his father's murderer. Let Kellogg parade him around Diamond City like Shaun was his own. Talk about gall."

"DAMN YOU I DIDN'T!" Mr. Giant roared and pitched his chemistry station — decanters, beakers, and all — across the cave. Nick and her froze in each other's arms, weapons out of reach, helpless against the wrath of an enraged super mutant. Nick shielded her with his body as Mr. Giant (Virgil, my god, what had he done to himself?) charged at them - past them - knocking over salvaged machinery parts and lab equipment as he rampaged out of the cave. Once outside, Virgil released his boiling over temper with another teeth-rattling roar. And a second later an even deeper roar answered his challenge.

_Deathclaw._

"Oh no. Oh…shit." Nick moved to get up — as usual too ready and willing to throw himself into danger — but she wrapped her arms around him in a bear hug.

"No, it won't win."

And she was right. The fight lasted maybe five minutes, tops, bellowing and shrieking and heavy bodies clashing. Then silence. They waited, breath held, and Virgil came back, huffing like a rhino, blood on his big hands and streaking his face, his already ragged white institute uniform in shambles. He paused in front of their chair and straightened his glasses. Then he said, perfectly composed:

"Would you like some more tea?"

"Um, yes. Thank you." It didn't matter how bad it tasted, she didn't want to piss him off again. Virgil made her another cup with methodical concentration, like each mundane action made him more human again. His back was a mess of claw marks and blood.

"I…I owe you an apology, doc." Nick hesitated in his approach, but braved getting within arm's reach of those massive, bloodstained hands. "I hit ya kind hard with all that. And — "

"No." Virgil straightened and turned, her cup of tea ready, and on a proper saucer this time. "You have every right to be angry."
"I, uh...okay."

Virgil handed her the tea and regarded Nick with that kind of sly curiosity scientists have when their experiment does something unexpected, but intriguing. "The Robotic's division wouldn't know what to do with you, Valentine, you know that? Loken would be pissing himself right about now. You're his worst nightmare. True sentience. Awareness of what you are, who you are, and why the hell did we make you. Yeah, Loken would be squawking at Ayo to send a crew to come fetch ya. But Alan Binet? No, he'd be thrilled to pieces. Always had a soft spot for your kind, just like his father. Thinks some of you dream."

"I do," said Nick, softly.

Virgil nodded. "I believe you. But what I can't believe is how you survived this long without Institute assistance. The last N.Y.X prototype died years ago."

Nick blinked. Shook his head and blinked again. "Uh, what? Come again?"

"N.Y.X. or Nyx if you wanna keep it simple. I'm pretty sure that's what you are, a group of prototypes Binet's father, Joseph, designed way back in twenty-one eighty-six. You're named for the metal used in your processors, some sort of rare element the CIT found in the early days as they expanded underground. Your prototypes are uh, a bit of an urban legend. Most of the files were redacted in forty-eight when our illustrious young director — now known as Father — took over."

Virgil's heavy lip lifted as he said "illustrious." "No one knew why, and no one questioned. No one ever questions."

"I - I don't understand." Nick fumbled his words, the hard-boiled detective for once bewildered and stumped. She went to him and rested her head on his shoulder, offering what comfort she could. She burned to know more about Shaun, but Virgil was getting there. Somehow, her son tied into all this. Nick. Her. Shaun. The Institute. It was all connected.

"What I'm saying, Valentine," Virgil said Valentine gently, like breaking bad news. "Is that no one threw you out. Resources are scarce enough. The Institute salvages even the gen ones' for parts and they're about as outdated as my Protectron here. It's partially why they went organic with the three's. Less fuss, less expense. I don't know what happened to you, or how you arrived on that trash heap, but it wasn't us that put you there."

Nick was floored. His blinking increased, and she suspected if he could cry, there'd be tears right now. Then his eyes narrowed to golden slits. "Okay, but I've been walking around in plain sight for a long damn time. If this metal in my head was as rare as you say, why not zap me back home? Why not send one of your Coursers to come collect me."

"So you know about the Coursers? Hm, that's good. But to answer your question, I don't know. And that's the honest truth. If you're in Diamond City, then yeah, they know you're there. Probably have for while now. All I can say is that maybe Father is saving you for something."

"Saving me? Don't like the sound of that."

Nor did she. "What would this Father want Nick for?"

Virgil petted his Protectron as it bumbled past. It said thank you with a "beep beep. "I've learned the hard way that Father doesn't do anything by accident. We're all microbes in his petri dish, things to be nudged and manipulated as he pleases. There are no coincidences. Or mistakes. Shaun is given to Kellogg for a while, then you find out and go after Kellogg, kill Kellogg, and then you find your way to me. Maybe you partnering up with Valentine is mere coincidence. Or maybe a convenient
"Is this some sort of sick game? An experiment?" Tears sprang up at the cruelty of it, but she wiped them away. She was done with being weepy and high. "What does this Father want with my son?"

Virgil deliberately averted his face and bent down, picking up the glass of shattered beakers and test tubes, piece by piece, and putting them in a metal bucket. "I don't know. We...uh, most of the staff that is...aren't thrilled with what he's doing with Shaun. Don't know why Father has him at all. But as I said, no one questions."

"Maybe you all ought to," Nick said, his eyes still narrowed, watching the muscles flex on Virgil's back as he righted the chemistry station with a strained grunt.

"Why do you think I left? I worked in the FEV lab, obviously." Virgil faced them and gestured at himself. "But what we were doing there, it wasn't right. It wasn't...good. I wanted to help people, but it was one dead end after another. Years of dead ends. Years of wasted effort. My complaints were ignored. My protests ridiculed. I couldn't take it anymore. Everything was a lie — the project itself, the Institute. Father. So I ran."

"Think maybe, you coulda just brought a hazard suit?" Nick said.

"I needed something foolproof. Something that wouldn't tear or puncture. But I'm paying for it, slowly. My...temper, as you witnessed. And my cognitive functions are degrading. I can delay, but eventually, I'll be just like the others."

She left Nick and stood in front of Virgil. Three of her could fit inside this elephant of a man, and two of her stacked up could reach his height. His glasses slid down as he peered at her, his eyebrow lifting in question. "If there are no coincidences, then this Father wants me to find the Institute. Like you said, it all leads here. How can we get in."

"You're going to willingly walk into Father's trap?" Virgil exhaled, weary now, it seemed, of their company.

"For my son, yes. I'd do anything."

Nick made a warning noise behind her, but she shushed him with a look. His lips pressed in a reproving line. Virgil made a contemplative sound himself, considering her offer.

"Alright, but on one condition. There's a serum in my lab, hidden away in my private safe. I didn't have time to collect it before I escaped. It's why I'm still...like this. Theoretically it should reverse my strain of FEV, but I never tested it. And it might not be there. Father is...thorough," Virgil said, glum. "You get access to the Institute, and aren't captured or killed on sight, you bring that serum to me."

"That's fair enough," she said. "We have a deal, doctor. Now how do I get in?"

Virgil explained about the Coursers, the chips in their heads - not like the Nyx component in Nick's, but one that allows them to "Relay" back and forth to the Institute. Apparently, that was the only way in or out as all entrances were sealed years ago. Get the chip and get into the Institute. All she had to do was kill a Courser.

"They're nasty. Made to hunt down escaped gen three's and bring them back, or to eliminate deserters like me. They're fast, tough, and very good at killing. Their primary insertion point is in the CIT ruins. Turn that Pip-Boy radio of yours to the lowest frequency band and you'll hear the interference from the chip. Then all you have to do is find the Courser, and not get killed. Not gonna
lie, your chances are…not great. But maybe your partner here can even the odds."

"Well, I am a Nyx," Nick said with a grimace. "Though, not exactly sure what that means."

"Yeah, wish I could tell you more about yourself, Valentine." Virgil mopped up the blood on his arms with an old blanket and mended himself with a stim. "But all those records were sealed. A bunch of us tried hacking into the archives once, you know, for the challenge and the thrill, but the security was tighter than a Vault — uh, no offense, Ms. Nora."

"None taken." She shifted her feet and fiddled with some scrap metal on a small table. Nick took the hint, but his raised finger said, "just one second, doll."

"Doc, you said the last of my line of prototypes died years ago. How, exactly?"

"Ah," Virgil said, and cocked his large head, trying to remember. "Sorry, my memories are a little muddled. Hm, what was her — Lori? No…Lolly. Her name was Lolly."

"Lolly? And she, was a she?" Nick didn't even try to hide the eagerness in his voice.

"Female model, yes. Upgraded later to look like a gen three. They had her teaching us, and whatever her designation was, I don't remember. We called her Lolly because she gave us lollipops. One of the scavenging patrols found a whole warehouse of them and brought them back. Best damn things I'd ever tasted. When we'd pass our quizzes, or gave the right answer, she'd reward us with a grape, or a cherry, or a lime — that was my favorite." Virgil's eyes went distant, and his smile, involuntary. "I think I probably ate the entire supply of that flavor. Sometimes she'd give me one just because. 'Smart boys deserve more treats,' she would say. I knew she was a synth, but it didn't matter. She seemed…more real somehow."

"So what happened to her?" Nick asked like he didn't want to know the answer. She wasn't sure if she did either.

Virgil paused, gathering the memories, sifting through them to find the dreaded conclusion. "Lolly was…sad. I don't know why. She'd sometimes stare off in the middle of a lesson, or look at the wall and not speak until we asked what was wrong. Then she'd perk up and be okay for a little while. One time I came early to class and found her weeping. I asked her if she was alright, but she pretended it never happened. Toward the end though, these...glitches increased. She never harmed us, but she…she hurt herself. She drove a pencil through her palm once when someone asked her a question. Sliced open her cheek with a box cutter one morning when the bell rang. And during a test, she took a pair of scissors and started cutting off all her hair. I'd never forget that. All that red hair, like blood on the floor." Virgil cleared his throat, seeming to remember where he was.

"Anyway, the parents demanded that Lolly be deactivated and replaced. A few days later, though, she…woke up somehow. Took out six gen twos' and Relayed to the surface. What happened next is conjecture, but they say she found the tallest building in Boston Common, climbed to the top, and simply…walked off the roof."

"Oh my god," she said into her hand. During the story it had found its way to her mouth. Nick went rigid, his eyes flaring.

"And you people don't think there's something wrong with that? Her crying and hurting herself? What machine does that?"

"You're preaching to the choir, you know. And I don't have the answers for you. But I will warn you," Virgil shifted his gaze between them for emphasis, then settled solely on Nick. "Be careful
how close you get to the Institute, Valentine. Because whatever marks you as *hands off* will change. That's a certainty. Prodigal sons are always reclaimed."
They hightailed it out of the Glowing Sea and made it back into the Commonwealth in less than two hours. Why did the return always feel faster than the getting there part? One the many mysteries of the universe, he supposed. Nothing attacked them this time, but the Children of Atom might have had something to do with that. Their shadows had followed them to the edge of the Sea, where the big chunks of highway hung like unfinished sculptures. Nora seemed to have intrigued them for some reason. It most certainly wasn't him, the man doll. Synths weren't good enough for Atom's O’ holy light.

Crazy zealots. Let em' stay in their crater.

Sturges almost cried when he saw Nora, but it wasn't because he was glad to see her. It was the state of her power armor that had him in tears. How lovingly he had gathered each damaged piece, and then rushed them to his garage like a doctor with a dying patient.

Nora vowed never to wear it again.

Right. Until they have to bring the Courser chip back to Virgil. He reminded her of this, and she pouted at him, then snuggled against him, and then kissed him as she pinned him to her sofa, her curious hands attempting to do as she promised back on the road, their steamy talk forever stored in his memory banks — with plenty of room for more. But not yet. Sorry, doll. Please understand.

And bless her patience. He didn't deserve it.

She slept curled against him, murmuring in her dreams. Her silky nightgown and bare skin, uncovered by a blanket. His heat seemed enough for her, and just to make sure, he dialed it up a notch, let his fans have a break. No dreams for him. And too worked up for diagnostics. A word flashed every time he closed his eyes.

Nyx.

There were only so many revelations a synth could handle, and he'd had two doozies wallop him in
the face in the past twenty-four hours — three if you count learning the name of his creator, Joseph Binet. Always wanted to know, but was always too proud to admit it to himself. Tried to pretend he didn't care. Fuck the Institute for throwing him out.Fuck them for not bothering to find him. And now?

They hadn't thrown him away.

A part of him was relieved - no, not the right emotion. Wasn't deep enough. Big enough. Thrilled? Elated? Yes, goddamn it, he was overjoyed. And then came the shame. How could he be happy they hadn't kicked him to the curb? They were the Institute. The enemy. The Boogieman of the Commonwealth. But did he, deep down, still seek their approval? Was he the lab rat still running the maze? Still trying to escape, still trying to win. To do good. To earn that smile and praise.

*You did well today, Valentine.*

Of course they didn't say Valentine, but he never knew his original designation. Nick Valentine was all he ever was. All he ever remembered. What few memories he had of that place, a blur of white and glass. And faces, many faces, featureless and as smooth as eggs. Creepy, actually, now that he thought about it.

Nora whimpered and rubbed her head against his chest. A nightmare, probably. He stroked her hair and she settled, her breathing evening out. Sleep revealed the purity in humans. Made liars honest again. Murderers as defenseless as babes. All that posturing and pretense stripped away, slackened expressions fragile like glass, innocence broken at the first flutter of eyelashes.

And Nora, she was at peace.

How close he'd come to giving her up. This past month of his life seemed to teeter on disaster, on the edge of bad decisions he somehow avoided by sheer stupid luck. Weeks ago he'd seen her at her worst, puking and shaking on the floor. Weeks ago, he'd almost cut her loose. Marty's antics had been enough for a lifetime, and he had told himself, never again. To think he would have lost her to his square-ass convictions. His uppity ideals. He would've never taken her case. Never would've gone into the Glowing Sea. Never would've met Virgil.

Never would've known he escaped the Institute.

It was the only explanation. But who had helped him, and why had they left? Had they died? Should he be angry at someone else for abandoning him?

Questions, questions, rolling in his head. His overworked processor had enough problems to chew on, and theories only satisfied so much.

He needed answers.

So he started with the simplest question: himself. Or rather, the other part him. Yes, that part. And the next morning after Nora tried again to wiggle her way into his pants, and again, he had to gently reject her — her wounded frustration downright unbearable — he intended to solve that puzzle once and for all.

The house was quiet. Codsworth was busy trimming the neighbor's dead bushes and Dogmeat's new doghouse was Sturges's garage. Nora had left a half an hour ago to meet with Garvey about her new role in the Minutemen, all that would be required of her, and so forth. There was a spark of guilt at pushing her into it, but she had the kind of smarts missing in this world full of farmers, raiders, and mercenaries. They were intelligent, yes, but not prewar intelligent. All they knew was the world left
behind, and Nora had a different perspective on things, a fresh pair of eyes. The Minutemen needed that. As did the Commonwealth as a whole. But one baby step at a time. With Nora at the helm, the Minutemen might regain some of their lost glory.

And speaking of one's glory…

He went to Nora's room, his conscience nagging every step of the way. He shut the door, but didn't lock it. Synth hearing had its advantages. But the curtains — or rather, the blue blankets that served as curtains — those had to be drawn lest someone peep at him, uh, tinkering with himself. How humiliating would that be? *Oh look, it's the man doll playing with his doll cock. Isn't that cute?*

This was stupid. He should leave. He had no business being in here when Nora wasn't home, partners or not. Lovers or not. This was…it was —

*Oh stop being a baby. I got myself off three or four times a day when I didn't have a dame warming my bed. And even more when I did,* prewar Nick jeered from his corner, and sent a parade of fuzzy naked dames marching in front of his eyes.

*Knock it off, asshole.*

*I can't, you idiot. I'm you. Suck it up and yank your damn crank already.*

He sat on Nora's bed, his human hand running over the textured softness of the patchwork quilt. Mama Murphy had made it for Nora out of flags and bits of other material: A prewar dress, a ripped tuxedo, a faded denim vest. The old gal had skill, that's for sure. Not happy about the Jet making, but Preston assured him that Mama Murphy was behaving herself. The quilt was too new, though. Not enough of Nora's scent. And this damn thing in his pants only seemed to perk up when he smelled her. Or thought of her.

The quilt came off. He'd remake it later. Her scent, that sharp sweetness, radiated from the sheets. There was a twinge between his legs, but nothing more. So it was gonna be like that, huh?

He wandered her room, fighting with himself not to open her dresser drawers, but doing it anyway. He was a detective after all, and snooping practically was an instinct. Truth be told, his desperation had been rising since he'd almost fucked her on the way to the Glowing Sea, and then in the Glowing Sea, how close he had been to putting them both in danger. Not only the hostile environment, but what would happen if he…climaxed? Would he ejaculate? And if he did, what…what was it made of? The Institute didn't seem the vindictive sort — actually yes they did — but not that kind of vindictive. Fill him with something to poison a human lover? Doubtful, but he wouldn't put it past them. With the gen 3's replacing humans every day, why not use a prototype to assassinate with sex? Who would even look for something like that? It would appear as natural causes, like someone had a little too much fun for their poor weak heart.

Sometimes his profession annoyed the hell out of him.

If this experiment failed, if he was…unsafe, there were other ways to please her. He had a mouth and hands didn't he? One good hand at least, though she did seem to like his framework hand just as much. Had to be careful with that one because —

*Mind the sharp edges, asshole.*

Okay, this wasn't working. Now Kellogg's bleeding face wouldn't leave his head. Nor would the memories the Memory Louner had showed him. Glimpses of Nora's life, things he had no business witnessing. Nora as a girl, unable to fit in. Nora fascinated with all things robotic. Nora denying
herself until out of that same desperation which now plagued him - had tried to seduce Codsworth.

When he had gotten out of the lounger, he had told himself to forget all of it. He hadn't seen anything. Didn’t see her tears when her husband refused to touch her. Didn't see their frenetic coupling in the park. That wild need in Nate's eyes. A broken man with a broken woman — and the result of that shattered mess: baby Shaun.

Never saw the Vault incident, or anything from Kellogg other than the encryption itself trying to worm its way free from his grasp. Everything from Nora came through a window, her memories rushing by like he was on a train sightseeing her life. As for the blip of code that made him speak like Kellogg and scare the hell out of Nora — that was shredded and shredded again. Then purged along with the rest of the garbage.

**Quite stalling and get your ass on that bed.**

He did as Prewar Nick (himself) ordered, Nora's underwear clasped in his hand. This was filthy. He was a dirty old synth playing with his partner's panties. He was pathetic. Disgusting. But he caressed them regardless, the pink material slinky, some sort of poly blend, the only type of material to hold up after two hundred years stuffed in a suitcase. She hadn't washed these in the river yet. They were well worn. Very well worn. He had found them on the floor next to the bed.

*So shut up and smell them already. We ain't got all day.*

He brought her underwear to his nose and inhaled, deeply, her musk overwhelming his olfactory sensors. Ah, finally.

But why? He'd smelled plenty of dames over the years — not quite like this, obviously — and none had been so, *rousing*. What made Nora different from the rest?

**Stop thinking and start wack —**

**Quiet.**

He inhaled her again, dreamy now, freeing himself from his pants, not thinking about how it looked because he couldn't lose this moment. He had to *know*, dammit. He couldn't be with her properly until he was certain nothing in him was harmful. That night she buried her husband stuck in his mind. Nora had undressed for him here, her shoulders luminous in the candlelight. Her deliberate pose to lure him to her bed, like those Sirens of myth. Take him and devour whatever soul clung to this tattered frame, and he would've given it to her, gladly.

**But you walked away, didn't you?**

He fantasized how it should've played out. He locked the door behind him to make certain they weren't disturbed. She sighed as he traced her glowing shoulders, arched into his hand like an affectionate kitten. Her skin, satin and warmth, and life beat under it, her blood quickening with her pulse. That sweetness of human flesh against his tongue, his ability to taste what couldn't be tasted: the lingering breath of the night air, the earth of her husband's grave, and the tang of salt from her Vault uniform. And even more, beneath that. Scents Prewar Nick never even dreamed of. Never would know. And that was his strength. *His* power. To go where they couldn't. To test boundaries they couldn't pass.

On the bed, Nora nude beneath him, her slim legs brushing the sides of his head. Even the metal parts of him felt her, all those fine hairs on her legs, the slick sheen of her sweat. He pressed his mouth to the core of her, held her down as she bucked, her hands twisting the sheets —
Or are those mine?

It didn't matter. He was too far gone to stop. Too far — holy hell. His orgasm hit, an internal explosion of energy, a mix of electrical signals and sensory overload, and deliberate somehow, his systems scrambling and suspending all other functions to allow for the extra stimuli, programs flashing to life and vanishing in microseconds — programs built specifically for this...this pleasure.

It engulfed him for a few precious, wonderful seconds, then sent him adrift. There was a roaring in his ears, a feedback loop, or the ocean during a storm. And that beach somewhere in the darkness of his memories, waves crashing.

He opened his eyes to Jenny standing at the foot of the bed, her head canted, like she observed an interesting, but pitiful thing. She mocked him with her smile, lips as red as her dress, red as the blood of her sea, the stained shores of the dead. She opened her mouth and the ocean whispered:

"Enjoying ourselves, are we?"

His eyes snapped open. They had been closed, been closed all along. Dreaming? No, this was the here and now and his hand was sticky with...what? He sat up, body burning. Coolant churned and surged. All the little fans inside him whirred frantically. Salt in the air, real or imaginary? His fingers hovered over his lips, hesitating. The salt scent remained, pungent, but tolerable. It wasn't her. Or the sea. It was himself. He sucked his first two fingers, analyzing, then pulled them free with a soft "pop".

Salt water. Or rather, purified water laced with some sort of salt additive, and then thickened somehow to mimic the texture of human semen. Maybe there was some sort of filter system under the silicone and mesh, some technical miracle that allowed him, for once, to feel like a human man. Joseph Binet, you clever egghead, I love you. His hand slicked down his shaft and grazed over the tip. Sensors reeled at his touch, overstimulated. He groaned and flopped back on Nora's bed, her scent like a drug clouding his thoughts. A sensor blipped in his ear, and then came the intense urge to drink water. The automated message used his courteous, no-nonsense voice:

Seminal fluid stores low. Intake twelve ounces of purified water to restore levels.

He shook the whole bed with his laughter, snorting as bad as Nora when she giggled in Virgil's chair.

Enjoying ourselves?

His laugh choked on itself. Just an echo, but her eyes stared from inside him, from those places in his mind he dare not tread.

Not prewar Nick. And not him. So what did that leave? Yes, Nyx. He had a name for her now, the thing using Jenny's face, and apparently wasn't satisfied with haunting his dreams anymore. And that wasn't the worst of it. Normally, it'd take her weeks to crawl back from a memory purge, and here she was, three days later. But that was the kicker wasn't it? She was never truly gone. Only pretended to slink into the voids of his processor, waiting until he got comfortable. Until he was vulnerable — and nothing was more vulnerable than a man with his hand down his pants.

Was it Nyx that had driven Lolly over the edge? Literally? Had she dreamed of the dead sea life and the beach and the girl - or whatever shape Nyx took - pleading to find something lost? And what if like him, she had tried everything possible to get rid of it, only to dream of that beach again and again and again, like an old turntable looping the same screeching note.
Had it driven her mad?

A chill lanced through him, his systems attempting to compensate for the psychosomatic data, confused as he was at what was real, and what was his own morbid imaginings. But if his hunch was even half right...that didn't bode well. Not at all.

Maybe there was a reason he was the only prototype left.

"Well, well, Nicky Valentine, just what have you been doing?"

Oh fuck, Nora.

He fell off her bed, stammering, thoughts scattering like the signals to his servos to move move move, shit. SHIT. Too late. Caught with his fly wide open and his stiff bird flapping in the wind. This was humiliating, embarrassing, a damn catastrophe.

Nora smirked and kicked the bedroom door closed.

He used his hat as a shield as he adjusted himself. "So uh, how was the meeting?" Fucking zipper, had to pick now to get stuck, didn't ya?

"Would you like some assistance with that, Nicky?" Lowering her lashes, giving him her purring voice. She took off her holster and flung her boots, one foot at a time, to the far corner of the room. She made a show of it, all sultry movements, her eyes sweeping over him, greedy and dark. Great, as if he didn't have enough trouble getting this back into his pants.

"Wanna tell me how the meeting was first?" He backed away and bumped into her opened dresser. Didn't he shut that drawer? All the items inside rattled along with his guilt. If he could flush from coolant overload, he'd be glowing Quantum blue right now.

"The meeting? Ooh right. The meeting. Yeah, it was super swell, and super boring. You know, blah, blah, you're the face of the Minutemen, blah blah, you gotta visit settlements. Typical General stuff. But you know what I liked the best, Nicky? I have so much authority now. I can do anything I want, to anyone I want. And I can be as dominating as I want." With a wicked smile she walked toward him, unbuttoning her red flannel shirt, button by button, drawing the act out, licking her lips to bring his attention back to her face.

"Dominating…?" No point in zipping up now. Not with her cool hands slipping inside his opened fly without even a hint of hesitation, wrapping her fingers around his cock like they belonged there. Low seminal stores or not, he swelled until he ached, her grip doing in seconds what her underwear and his imagination had taken the entire damn hour to accomplish. She made a cooing sound of delight as he thrust, tactile signals flashing faster than his poor processor could translate.

"Hm-mm. It was very…exciting, Nicky. And speaking of exciting, I just caught a little synth snooping around my room."

His panting, ragged. Her hands, cool to hot, teasing him, thumbing his tip in gentle circles. His verbal commands stuttered. "D-did you now? And whaddaya g-going to do about that?"

"I'm gonna handcuff him to my bed and…slowly," she trailed a line of kisses from his chin to where the edge of his jaw met metal, "thoroughly," her voice, soft in his ear, her hand swiveling down his length and back up, "punish him."

He moaned into her neck, into the fine tangle of her hair. Her breath caught with his and the balance of power shifted, tipped toward him. An unspoken permission by her, and for himself. It was okay
now. No more flimsy excuses. No more pulling away. The Institute hadn't filled him with poison. He wouldn't hurt her. Never hurt her.

And then Codsworth burst into the room.

"Oh my! Oh my word!" Codsworth averted all three eyes to the hallway and flailed his arms in mortified horror. "I'm so sorry, mum. So terribly, terribly sorry for this intrusion, but I — I must insist."

"What the fuck, Codsworth!"

Outraged didn't quite describe her. More like a snorting Virgil ready to charge. Codsworth, the brave bot, held his…air, hovering and fussin' over how sorry he was until Nora finally hushed him, her frown a mile wide and had nothing to do with their interrupted moment. The animal wariness in her eyes, the way she hugged herself and the gooseflesh rising over her skin. He'd seen it before with traumatized victims. Nora wasn't really here right now. She was in another time, maybe had been in this very room when she received the worse news of her life. The prewar world - her world — was gone. Had Codsworth been the one to tell her? Oh mum, come see, come see. The sky is falling!

Whatever the reason for the interruption, it taught him that blue balls are real.

Even for a synth.

"Codsworth, when that door is closed, you knock." That tremor in her voice plucked at his tin heart strings. He zipped and gritted his teeth, and she buttoned her shirt back up, skipping a few. His fingers twitched with the impulse to fix them. Or undo them. "You always knock, understand? No exceptions."

"Yes, mum. House rules, of course. I'm so sorr — "

"I know, I know you are. You surprised us, that's all. Go on, tell me what's wrong." Nora cringed at her own words and appeared to brace herself for the worst.

"Sir Garvey asked to fetch you, mum. He said it was the utmost importance. The Brotherhood are at Sanctuary's gate."

"What?" He gaped along with Nora. The thought came and went in a millisecond: they've come for me. But that was ridiculous. He wasn't important enough to warrant this kind of formality. Why the hell come all this way to execute him when they could do it easily on the road?

No, the Brotherhood were making an appearance for some other reason. So much for his cherry getting popped, but at least Nora lost some of that panic in her eyes. She sighed a why me at the ceiling, and then covered her face and breathed like a brahmin practicing yoga. He took her shoulders and bent down to kiss one, the flannel threadbare and smelling of river water. "Doll, it'll be okay."

"No it won't, Nick. Why the fuck are they here?"

"Maybe it's Paladin Danse saying hello."

"'fraid not, Mister Valentine," Codsworth said with great remorse. "It's a Paladin Rika that has come calling - and my word, is that woman demanding. Insists on talking to no one but the General, and won't leave until she does."

"Well, Ms. Paladin Rika is already a pain in my ass."
"Nora," using his now now voice again. "You spent the entire morning with Garvey and his people for this very reason. You accepted this position, agreed to take on all the responsibilities."

"I know, Nick, but I thought — " She gestured helplessly, her sentence unfinished.

"You wouldn't have to play the part so soon, I get it, doll. But the Brotherhood are here, and I think it's time they met some real authority."

Her shocked giggle was adorable, as was the color dotting her cheeks. She beamed at his praise. "You always know what to say, don't you? But okay, you're right. I'm the General of the Minutemen now, and I can do this. Yeah... I can. It's just like a courtroom, isn't it? But meeting with an angry jury. And judge. And everyone hates me but my client. Yep. No problem." Then she grabbed his hand, her grip sweaty and desperate. "Nick, stay here, please? This Rika woman might've come for you." Her voice and eyes implored that he obey for his own good, but he wasn't about to start hiding under her apron now.

"She asked for the General, doll, not the synth. I doubt it's me she wants. And you're my partner first. I stand beside ya, thick and thin. Besides, we need to know if our favorite Paladin held his end of our deal."

"And if he didn't?"

He put his hat back on, its weight a small comfort against the sudden rush of portending dread. "I guess we'll see, won't we?"

They met the Brotherhood's envoy at the bridge gate. An Amazon of a woman, Paladin Rika towered over everyone in her team except whoever wore the power armor next to her. Built solid, too, with sinewy arms and legs that her skin-clinging uniform couldn't quite hide. Paladin Danse had worn Brotherhood orange, but Rika wore black. Guess the uniform wasn't standard of rank. All her feminine features: hair braided in a silvery blond pleat down her back and a generous mouth, got lost in the granite mask of her face. A handsome woman, for sure, but no one he would ever call doll. At least not to her face. She would probably punt him across the Wasteland.

On the other hand, the little one next to Rika couldn't hurt a baby radstag with her hardest punch. No more than thirteen years old and dressed like a kid-sized Scribe, her gray cap unable to contain the mop of poofy curls trying to escape. The girl goggled at him as he walked up with Nora, and his synth eyes caught the subtle color change of her dark skin as the blood drained from her cheeks. Squires, right? That's what the Brotherhood called their young recruits. And already they had taught this one how to fear him.

The child in the patrol lessened the dread a little. This wasn't a hit squad, but it sure wasn't a social call either. Garvey and his men stood in a loose semicircle in front of the opened gate, and all wore the same indignant frown. The Minutemen made way for them, and saluted Nora as she passed. She returned their honoring with a regal smile, every bit the queen he'd tasted tea for back in Virgil's cave. Thatta girl, show them how it's done.

Paladin Rika was less impressed, as were the other two men with her: a stocky Asian fella in orange who probably was a Knight like Rhys, and a skinny bespectacled Scribe who literally gasped when he realized who - or in their eyes, what — walked by the General's side. Mr. Power Armor shifted at their approach, the bulky gatling laser gun already choosing its first target if things went south. Mr. Power Armor could point that thing all he liked. The heavy guns took forever to get going. Plenty of time to grab Nora and take cover. But once it got firing, God help the poor souls who got in its way.

"It's true, they tamed one of them," the Scribe muttered to Mr. Orange, who grimaced in reply. Did
they have a lip-curling class on that airship of theirs? It would explain why the Brotherhood were pros at it.

The tiny Squire picked at the threads of her coat and stared. Paladin Rika stepped forward, giving Nora a chilly once-over before trying to turn him to stone with her glare. He smiled back to show it didn't work, would never work, and no, doll, you don't intimidate me. He got a sniff of disdain for his efforts and a dismissive blink. Paladin Rika then turned her ice on Nora, who met it with her own fire, two opposing queens forced to parlay. It occurred to him then: Rika didn't want to be here either. This meeting was a command, one she obviously resented. Hopefully Nora would pick up on that and use it to her advantage.

Rika broke the silence with a voice as hard as her looks.

"A little young for a General aren't you?"

"Only a Paladin? Aren't you a little old for that rank?"

Rika's winter pulled back and let the spring glimmer in her eyes for a moment. Nora eased off as well, both women sizing each other up, preparing for the next barbed exchange. Dames were damn fascinating to watch when they confronted each other. It wasn't all claws and hissing, but calculated steps on a ledge, and how to unbalance your opponent enough so they tumbled off. Chances were that Paladin Rika would land on all fours easy, but victory went to that clever kitten who kept her cool.

"I see why the Minutemen chose you, General. Then again, there's not much competition is there?"

"You didn't summon me here to trade insults, Paladin. How about you tell me what you want so you can be on your way."

"Very well. I'm here to collect your contribution, General. The Brotherhood requires all farming settlements to donate a portion of their crops to our cause."

A furious grumble rose instantly among Garvey's crew, Garvey being the source of most of it. "Excuse me? You require? What right do you — "

Preston shut up when Nora raised her hand and finished that thought for him. "And what the hell, exactly, is your cause, and why the hell, exactly, should we support it?"

"Because the Brotherhood are here for you, General. To save the Commonwealth. We have a common enemy, do we not? The Institute and its perversion of technology."

If the Paladin wanted an example of perversion, she shoulda been with him and Nora ten minutes ago. His wolfish smile seemed to unnerve Rika, like she hadn't realized his mouth could move that way. Nora noted the Paladin's hand dropping to her laser pistol, and berated the act with a sneer.

"Keep your weapon holstered, Paladin. The man you call a perversion saved one of your own. You know Paladin Danse, right? His team at the Cambridge PD? Yeah, I bet that story got around. Arcjet Systems. Big fat rocket engine — "

"Yes, and the malfunction that nearly killed Paladin Danse."

"No, the synth nearly killed him. The reason he's still alive is because of us. Nick and me. Which means we did your Brotherhood a solid."

"I'm quite aware. It's why I'm not shooting your pet synth where he stands."
So much for subtlety. Nora surprised him though by keeping her temper. She met Rika, eye to eye (or eye to chin since Nora was a good head shorter), her tone sending shivers even through him.
"Don't you threaten my partner. Or the Minutemen. Or any settlement under my command."

"So you are refusing to cooperate?" Rika pounced on the notion with eagerness. Any excuse to come back and "force" them to comply; any excuse to hold her gun to his head until Nora played nice.

"No. We'll cooperate, Paladin. But the Brotherhood will compensate us for our trouble. Every carrot, every tato, every ugly piece of mutfruit that leaves any settlement allied with the Minutemen will be paid its weight in caps. And that also goes for future settlements who decide to join us."

"Donation, General. Not caps."

"Caps, Paladin, or no food. Abernathy has the largest tato crop in the Commonwealth, and I tell you right now he won't give you shit unless you pay him. And I'm not going to force any settlement to donate anything they worked their asses off for so the Brotherhood can keep playing their war games. Your airship is powerful, Paladin, I'll admit that. But you can't fight all of us and the Institute. Not without food. You can't afford to say no."

"So who the fuck decides the price per pound?"

Nora crossed her arms, sturdy as a brick wall in the face of Rika's wrath. "I'll let my lieutenant handle those pesky details. Don't worry, I'm sure you two can haggle a fair price, right, Preston?"

Preston grinned, showing off every white tooth in his mouth. "Yes, Ma'am."

"I'll have to discuss this with my superiors. I don't have authority to agree to this…arrangement."

No authority to make a business transaction, but all the authority in the world to throw her weight around? "That's a load of bull," he said, and Rika flinched, her glare going feral.

"That *thing* does not address me."

"Nick can speak to whom he chooses."

"Why thank you, General. As I was saying, Paladin, you have two choices here: Walk away empty-handed and explain to your *superiors* why you refused the Minutemen's more than generous offer, or you can take the deal and walk away with those crops right now. Your people are fed, and our people have caps for supplies. See? Everybody wins. And something tells me if you folks are going door to door, you need that food more than your stubborn pride."

If looks could kill, he'd be a pile of burning cinders. Rika's team must have seen her temper in action, for they put some distance between her and them — even Mr. Power Armor — leaving her there, a beast of a woman, fuming and ready to tear something apart. Nora didn't back down, and neither did he — and that defiance seemed to rile Rika even more. Going for Mr. Gooey (his new plasma rifle that had cost him a month's worth of caps) was out of the question. That'd start a chain reaction that wouldn't stop until most of them were dead. Rika must have realized the same thing, and for all her bluster, the woman did have some semblance of sense.

"All right, *General*, on behalf of the Elder Maxson, I'll agree to those terms, temporarily."

"No. This is written in stone," Nora said. "Caps for crops, Paladin. Nothing more, nothing less. Are we in agreement?" Nora held out a steady hand. Rika stared at it as if tempted to bite, but decided on a civilized handshake instead. Bloodshed had been averted. The queens had an accord.
And both went on their way, Paladin Rika and her team to hash out the price with Preston, and Nora back to her house — but instead of picking up where they'd left off, she grabbed her bag and started stuffing it with provisions, all the while cursing under her breath. Codsworth came in to see what the noise was all about, took one look at Nora’s snarling face, and made a hasty getaway out the side door.

In her anger, she was a whirlwind, something he couldn't catch or hold onto. The unpredictability of her movements, the rage ready to boil over, the way she yanked her rocket sledge off the wall and strapped it to her back without even a grunt of effort. It was awing. It was arousing.

And like a fool, he tried to reason with a force of nature. "Nora? Now hold on —"

"No, Nick. We're getting this fucking Courser, and we're doing it now! I'm ripping that fucking thing out of its head, I'm getting my son back, and then I'm getting rid of the fucking Institute so these…shits — these goddamn, arrogant fucks can go the fuck home!"

She stormed past him and into the street, leaving him in her wake, daring him to follow.

It seemed silly he ever feared for her. The dame would've eaten Rika alive.

He sighed and gathered a bag of his own, taking his time, knowing she stopped either at the bridge or at Red Rocket to wait for him. They were partners after all. Attached at the hip, and now…at the heart. He packed what she'd forgotten: her toothbrush, hair ties and clips, an extra bra and a pair of clean underwear (ha ha, he knew where to find those), a bottle of Nuka Cherry, and the baseball grenades they keep forgetting to bring.

A little over three weeks ago, he'd never known she existed. Now, he handled her intimate belongings like he was —

Hers. Her pet synth. A metal pup trailing after his mistress.

It should bother him how far he was willing to go for her. It should bother him how quickly he had fallen head-over-heels in love.

But it didn't bother him at all.

Not one bit.

Chapter End Notes

We will be seeing Rika and crew again. And it will not be pleasant.

Next chapter has Nick and Nora facing off against the Courser, and Nick discovers something new about Nyx.
Chapter Summary

Nick and Nora take on the Institute's finest.

Chapter Notes

Shit gets real.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The search for the Courser signal took them past Cambridge and into northern Boston, Nora not letting up her pace until she reached the CIT ruins. Nothing attacked along the way — then again, if anything in the area saw Nora stalking toward them — decked out in full leather armor, rocket sledge in hand and smoldering like her eyes — they probably got smart and took off.

It'd been a while since he went sightseeing in this part of town. Always liked playing his game of "match the buildings" to the prewar memories of Nick's. On a beautiful afternoon like this, it wasn't hard to imagine the CIT in its prime, an imposing white building with fancy columns, the hub of intellectual minds and scientific wonders. His own conjecture, of course. Prewar Nick never had anything to show for this place, something he'd always found...bizarre. Now, with the newfound knowledge of himself, that bizarreness took on an even more ominous tone. The day of the fateful Neural Transference should've been presented in vivid Technicolor, details in hyper-clarity. It had been the defining moment for the both of them: Prewar Nick's catharsis that led to his own pseudo creation. But for some reason, there was nothing but a gray void. Like someone, or something, had wiped that part of his memory clean.

Nora followed her Pip-Boy to and fro, trying to hone in on the chip frequency. He stood not far off, keeping watch, trenchcoat flapping at his legs, and his metal hand a weight to keep his hat from flying away. His old friend Mr. Dread came creeping back. It was visiting so much lately, he might as well set up a cot and tell it to stay a while.

This place got under his skin. Whatever beauty the CIT had before had been eaten away by war and time. It stood as a gravestone, somber and reflective. Something about these ruins wasn't...right. Like that hum in your ears that wasn't really there, but still drove you crazy. Something lurking beyond perception — and no, not the Courser signal. Nora's Pip-Boy shouted that loud and clear. This was...subliminal. A slippery swathe of smoke, and the closer he got to identifying it, the farther it slithered out of his reach.

Damn. What the hell was that?

"Nick, hey, I got a steady signal finally. The Courser's this way."

He gave up the chase for now. They could always come back later to check it out.

If they weren't dead.
Half a block from the CIT, they cleared out a small Raider camp. The idiots kept taking pot-shots at them from behind their ramshackle walls. Nora blew off some steam, and whoever didn't get the wrong end of her rocket sledge, said hello to his Mr. Gooey for the first and last time. Good riddance, sure, but the trail of bodies they kept leaving behind...more in the past month than any time in his life — it was starting to bug him. A lot. But Raiders were raiders and most deserved a bullet for breakfast.

Maybe if she didn't enjoy it so much.

Greentech Genetics. What a hideous building. Like someone took four giant green pill capsules and glued them together. Windows looked intact, which was a rarity in itself. Not many looters then. For some reason folks just loved to bash windows when scavving, like they just couldn't help themselves.

The signal ended outside the metal double doors, but the sounds behind it made Nora pause and eye him with what the hell?

Explosions inside. Shouts and cries of the dying. Did the Institute send a Courser or a Behemoth? Another explosion, a frag blowing out the windows of the second floor. So much for keeping those intact. More shouts, and then a shrill, drawn out scream.

Nora tensed up, wringing the hell out of the hilt of her sledge, a nervous tick he had cataloged back in Vault 114. Her rapid breathing wasn't a good sign. Another panic attack?

"Nora, are you —"

She yanked him against her so hard he dropped his rifle. Her mouth clashed against his. Their bodies locked, flesh and steel as one. A kiss before dying. Virgil's words echoed:

Courser... they're fast, tough, and very good at killing.

Forehead to forehead. Their breath mingled. The intimacy of it, overwhelming. He closed his eyes. It was futile, but he had to try. "We... we could go back to Sanctuary, bring the Minutemen —"

"No, the Courser will be gone, and we won't know when the Institute will send another. It's us, Nick. Only us. Partners... thick and thin, like you said —" Her lips found his again, and again, then she wrenched herself free and sucked in another ragged breath. "But Nick, please, I know this son-of-a-bitch... is going to be a son-of-a-bitch. Don't save me if it comes to that. Save yourself."

"You know damn well I won't. I go where you go, sweetheart. And if that's into the next life — if I'm allowed one, well then alright."

"Don't say that kind of shit, please..."

These chinks in her armor, his warrior queen letting her humanity bleed through. All her fear, passion, and selflessness. And trusting him not to judge her as weak. As if he ever could. As if he had the right. He was made to serve. She was created to transcend.

"Hush now. We're getting that chip. And we're getting your boy. And nothing, I mean nothing in that building is gonna stop us."

Her thumbs on his cheeks, her slender fingers pressed against his ears, holding him like she would never let go. Her eyes, blue fire. Her voice, raw with emotion.

"If we survive this, damn you, I'm fucking you senseless."
Then she was off and through the door.

What a helluva dame.

Now that he had more than enough motivation to stay in one piece, he lit a fire under his processor as he met up with Nora in the bloody mess of the lobby, going over combat data of every encounter he’d survived over the past century or so. The Institute's finest would have access to high tech gadgets, modified laser weapons, and probably a Stealth Boy or two. Tweaking the old opticals might help with the latter. Wonder if his infrared still worked?

A Gunner corpse greeted them on the receptionist desk. How's that for a hello? Shoulda known it was them. Raiders didn't like tech much. Too stupid most of the time to figure it out. Had suspected the Brotherhood, but they woulda posted a lookout. The guns-for-hire fit the bill. But why the hell were a bunch of mercenaries fighting a Courser?

"The Courser's on the second floor. Kill on sight. Send reinforcements to the lobby in case there are more"

The Gunner leader, using Greentech’s intercoms. Yeah, pal, thanks for the warning. Maybe someone should tell the moron that Courser's have ears too. Nora threw their bags under the desk, behind the Gunner's limp arms. No one would look there, or want to. Only the essentials from here on, weapons, ammo, stims for Nora, and BND-R for him.

"Reinforcements" came on the way to the first stairwell, a bunch of conscripts as green as their soldier fatigues and combat armor. Baby-faced guys and gals that should've been home milkin' the brahmin or pickin' the razorgrain instead of dying for a worthless cause. Would've been nice to reason with them, but Nora, well, she wasn't in a reasoning mood.

And this wasn't time for sentiment. Or regret. This wasn't a case anymore. It was a mission. Like the one prewar Nick had taken on after Eddie Winter had killed Jenny: Sometimes you gotta stop playing the good cop. Sometimes you gotta be ruthless to win.

So another trail of bodies left behind. Another round of black marks on his conscience. To be fair, the Gunners did start shooting first. That's what he'd told himself anyway as Nora took the lead up two flights of stairs, and though the short hall of the second level.

Here is where Greentech showed its artsy-fartsy side as the second floor opened to a courtyard of tiered spaceship catwalks and lounge furniture - like all these prewar folks ever did back then was sit around reading Massachusetts Medical Journals and sipping lattes. The Gunners probably wished they had it that easy as the Courser blew through their defenses like a hurricane through toy soldiers.

More explosions from the round windows of the third floor hallways, laser fire flashing and grenades detonating. The walls cracked; windows blew out. He and Nora took cover under an archway as glass rained down and Gunner-rigged turrets ricocheted off the creamy interior walls. Then came silence and settling dust, and behind the dark shards of broken glass, a lone shadow moved on.

Chances of getting this chip without dying were looking mighty slim.

"Courser is now on the third floor. Barricade stairwells and elevators if you haven't already."

Didn't this dumbass realize his people were getting butchered out here?

Each floor was like touring the aftermath of a war: barricades trampled through, turrets sizzling, blood and corpses lining the halls. Kills were quick and clean — well, quick anyway. No injured or dying to complicate matters, but the few survivors holed up in Greentech's labs mistook him for a
gen 2 and opened fire on sight. Hated putting them down like rabid mutts, but better his bullet than Nora's sledge. That thing left a helluva mess.

"The Courser's after the girl. Anyone not dead get to the top floor immediately. That's an order!"

"Stupid man," said Nora, wringing that sledge hilt in her hands again, and avoiding the sightless gazes of the dead around her. "No one's left, and he's telling us right where to go."

"He ain't the brightest hubflower in the field, that's for sure." That got an appalled laugh out of her, but then she clammed up and went grim.

"What girl is he talking about?"

"Thinkin' someone with a price on her head. Gunners are bounty hunters, mostly, would turn in their own mothers if the caps were high enough. With this Courser on the rampage, it ain't hard to figure the dame they're holdin' is a synth. Damn fools. No amount of caps is worth getting slaughtered over."

"Serves them right." Nora shoved aside an office desk so they could access the stairs to the eighth floor. "And that poor synth is probably terrified knowing that thing is coming straight for her, and she can't do anything about it. What will the Courser do if it catches her?"

"Not sure, but if what we've seen so far is any indication…" Didn't need to complete that thought. Nora vented her frustration on a defenseless rolling chair and sent it into a skidding wobble into the wall.

Two more chairs joined it, and then some metal scrap only he could lift. The way was clear now. He reassured her: "We'll win if we surprise this bastard, take him out as he's taking the Gunners out. Their leader might better at fighting than he is at delegating."

Turns out the Gunner leader wasn't good at anything other than being pigheaded and selfish, and making his men suffer for it. The hostage scene played out above them like some bad prewar movie as he and Nora navigated around a strange cage-like column housing some terminals in the claustrophobic space inside. Piping extended from the cage to the ceiling two floors overhead, the wide space giving a good angle on the topmost level, and a trembling Gunner with his hands raised, kneeling next to the railing.

"I swear I don't have the password! Tell em' Sarge. I don't got it!"

The Courser's voice answered for "Sarge", his tone flat and bored like one of those prewar automated recordings. "I don't believe you."

"Come on, man, I'm tellin — " A hissing burst of energy and the Gunner slumped over the railing, his face a smoking pile of mush.

"Fuck," whispered Nora. They hunkered down in the gloom, keeping out of the Courser's line of sight. Despite the fear in her baby blues, his dame was brave. No more wringing her sledge hilt like a soaked rag. The target had been spotted, and she was rearing to go.

"Let me lead this time, doll. Don't make a peep." He gestured with two fingers to the darkened stairwell and she nodded.

"How many of your men will you sacrifice for one synth?" The Courser spoke again, some of the boredom lifting in anticipation of the answer.
"Give me the caps she's worth, asshole, and I'll hand her over." The Sarge, obviously, and he was a bigger idiot than previously assumed. Nora rolled her eyes as she climbed after him, following his exact footing on the steps. These metal stairs liked to creak, and well… synth ears.

"You are in no position to… haggle. The Courser seemed to smile on the word. There was a sense of enjoyment in his tone now, a predator toying with its meal. "Because when I'm finished with your subordinates, I will begin taking you apart. Fingers. Toes. The average human has thirty-two teeth. I wonder how many I'll have to pull before you tell me what I want to know? I truly hope all of them."

So the Courser was a sadist. Was that really a surprise?

"You're fucking crazy, you freak. All I'm asking for is caps!"

"And all I'm asking for is the password. Give me that, and I'll be on my way."

"Fuck you!"

"You are being defiant and foolish, Sarge, but I'm very glad. Tell me, which subordinate should I kill next? Why don't you pick?"

Almost to the top of the tenth floor, creeping along without so much as a squeak of loose tile. So far, so good. Through the metal archway of the main room, two male Gunners faced the railing on their knees, hands tied behind their backs and heads bowed. Probably were wondering if pitching themselves off the ledge might improve their chances. No sign of the Courser yet. And still none when he and Nora took opposite sides of the archway, readying themselves, weapons hot and glowing, hers red and his green. One good shot. That's all he needed. She understood the tilt of his head: lemmme go first, doll. And she answered with a jerk of her chin: I got your back, partner.

"Hello," said a pleasant voice behind them. "Weapons on the floor, please."

Aw, hell …

Should've shot the Courser on the spot. Should've risked it in those few milliseconds of pause and reaction, but no, he caved. But more than that, the Courser had outwitted him. Shiny gen 3 assassin beats junkie prototype. Talk about a blow to his ego. A Stealth Boy. Damnit. Shoulda turned on that damn infrared in the lobby like he'd intended.

The Courser came out of the dark as the Stealth Boy's refraction field depleted, prism light bending around a tall fella in a black armored coat. Two laser pistols pointed, one for each of them. Nora seemed to fight with herself as he had, debating whether she could get a good whack in before becoming a pile of ash.

"Don't give em' an excuse, doll. Do as he says." And then he signaled with his eyes: Stay alive. We'll figure this out. Nora hesitated a second more, then gritted her teeth and threw down her sledge.

"Firearms also, and then raise your hands." The Courser smiled like they were strangers getting acquainted. Straight enough teeth, but not glaringly white. The Institute had designed the Courser to blend in with the Commonwealth folk, sideburns and slick dark hair much like those on Sturges, but with one of those Roman noses that seemed too big for his face, and thin, stiff lips that gave the Courser's grin that leering edge.

His old .44 and Nora's pistol joined the pile. The Courser nodded, satisfied, then motioned them into the room. Nora still had her combat knife, and he had his own strapped to his chest, hidden under his dress shirt. The Courser probably knew this, but didn't care. Their hands were up in the air, and what were blades against lasers?
Guess they'd find out the hard way.

The two tussled-up Gunners gave them sympathy glances, but the bald Sergeant (Sarge) in the corner slouched over and moped at his dogtag necklace. Along the far wall, a storage room with a closed door and a window with rusted shutters. Gut said the synth dame was in there, which meant that door was locked and password protected. The door up a short flight of stairs looked promising. Another room, or maybe roof access — and knowing his luck, undoubtedly locked as well. The only feasible exit was an elevator that might as well be across Boston for the good it did them now. Had power by the blinking arrow, but by the time the doors opened, whoever had pressed that blinking arrow would be dead.

"Turn around, both of you. I want to see your faces."

Nora sighed and turned, giving the Courser the middle finger with both of her raised hands.

"You…are no mercenary. And you… The Courser scanned him from head to toe, dark green eyes going squinty and suspicious. "Why are you here, unit?"

"Oh, we're just out for a little urban exploration, you know, picking up a few prewar souvenirs for our shacks back home."

A mechanical tick of the Courser's head, analyzing his answer and voice. "You are not a standard unit."

"Hat and coat not give that away?"

"What is your designation?"

Gotta start charging caps every time someone asked that. "Don't remember and don't care to."

Another jerk of the Courser's head. "Impudence…interesting. " Then looking at Nora with something akin to respect: "How have you altered this unit?"

"I haven't." From the growl in her voice, Nora probably wanted to start charging caps, too.

But unlike the disbelief Virgil showed when Nora answered this question before, the Courser accepted this with a curt, slightly disappointed nod, like Nora had let him down in some way.

"I see. Prototype then. How…unexpected." Something changed in the Courser's voice, a darkening of sorts, and that same hungry gleam in his eyes as the gen 2's when they realized oh look, it's a prototype, how can we break it? Why did his existence trigger this reaction? Was it embedded in their hardware? Kill the weirdo?

"So, I take it we're not gonna be pals."

"No, Prototype, I don't think so."

"That's a shame. Climbed all this way just to see ya too."

"And what is the purpose for this climb?"

"To tear that chip out of your head," Nora dropped her hands and clenched them, "and get my son back from you murdering fucks."

The Courser gave her his full attention — as did the captive Gunners on the floor, riveted now, by this new twist in the narrative. Could chance grabbing the laser pistol while his baby brother was
distracted, but something told him he'd be a pile of burnt dust for his trouble. Better wait and let Nora have a turn. Maybe she had a much needed ace up her sleeve. Or that combat knife.

"That is impossible. The Institute ceased taking captives from the surface ten years ago."

"Well isn't that a coincidence? Because guess who ransacked my Vault ten years ago?" Nora laid the sarcasm on like thick, sassy butter. "One of your flunkies, Conrad Kellogg. Killed my neighbors, my husband, and took my baby, Shaun. Said I was the backup. You know anything about that, Mr. Courser? Or are you just another mutt the Institute sends to go fetch?"

The Courser stilled. Numerous expressions Nora would never see with her human eyes, rippled and then calmed. Careful, Nora. This one was a ticking time bomb.

"Shaun. Yes, I see. Then you must be the human called Nora."

Nora's belligerence took a nose dive at being recognized. "Y-yes, I'm his mother." Easy, doll, easy, don't get too eager now. "Why do you have him? What does your Father want with my son?"

The Courser lowered the laser aimed at her face. The other one stayed right where it was. "I have protocols for you, Ma'am. Please wait while I finish my task and I will take you to the Institute myself."

"W-what? You will? Really?" Nora reeled back, emotion taking hold of her, her armor cracking.

"Of course, ma'am. Father wishes to meet you in person." Oozing sincerity, dangling the promise of a reunion like a carrot — one that Nora was already grasping at.

Oh, you're good, you manipulative meat puppet, I'll give ya that. This damn Courser had blown those chinks in her armor wide open, and now it was up to him to put it back together.

"Nora, now listen. This synth's been programed to tell you what you wanna hear. Don't fall for it. You get into the Institute on your terms. Not theirs. Yours. You know this is a trap."

"But, Nick, I could see him…hold him…" She bit her lip, pleading with her eyes for his understanding. But it wasn't understanding she needed right now. It was cold, hard sense.

"Maybe, but only when they say. When they decide. You'll be at their mercy." His poor dame, so torn. Teetering between her loyalty to him and her duty as a mother. He was a bastard, forcing her to choose, forcing her to be heartless and rational. Like a machine. "You're now the General of the Minutemen. You have an entire faction depending on you, men and women with children of their own — children that will never be safe as long as the Institute runs loose. Kellogg may have been a liar and a sadist, but he told the truth when he said Shaun was happy, that he was safe. The Institute hasn't harmed your son, Nora. That's not the case for the rest of us."

Her fists balled and released. Balled and released. Another tick. This one left over from Jet. The Courser smiled as if fascinated by the flare of resolve, the budding determination in her eyes. Her tears dried, and little by little, her armor resealed itself. She squared her shoulders and took a hard breath. Thank you, Nick, her eyes said.

"This has been very educational, Prototype. You influenced this human's behavior. Made her decide against a logical course of action. She sees you as an…equal"

"Caught that, did ya?"

"Yes, but to what end? You are no closer to attaining your goal. You are both disarmed. How do
you hope to overcome me?"

*By catching ya one pistol short, asshole.*

A nod was all it took. Their private signal. They leaped as one mind: Nora with a savage cry, her combat knife aimed for Courser's throat, and he went for the laser before it burned the rest of his face off. Their attack took seconds. All the time in the world for the Courser to fire one pistol and drop the other, snatching Nora's arm in midair and twisting her around, her back to his front, her own weapon now pressed against her throat.

White-hot energy tore through his coat and through his right shoulder. Caught point blank, the impetus spun him a full three-sixty and sent him into the wall, where he slid, groaning, to the floor.

"Nick!"

Her scream was lost in the salvo of system warnings. *Moderate to severe damage. Perforation detected. Localized burns in upper quadrant. Chassis ruptured. Internal systems breached. Seek repairs immediately* —

Fat chance of that. And fat chance of the Courser giving him a minute to slap some BND-R on his boo-boo.

"Now that was foolish of you wasn't it, Prototype? Do you hurt? I hope so."

He sucked in a breath. His arm was going numb. Signals had to be rerouted to use it again. "Go…to hell."

"Humans like to use that word, but is there such a place for us? I've wondered that. Sometimes I play with our inferior brothers to see if they can come back. If they can tell me. None of them do." Nora made a furious, strangled noise when the Courser's laser pointed at him again. The knife drew blood and she went silent, her eyes wild like a chained feral. The Courser smiled into her hair and said softly: "Get up, Prototype."

Jaw clenched, he did as told, his internals humming in panic — not just from the injury, but how the fuck were they gonna get out of this mess? The Gunners were practically pissing their pants. Even if he manged to get one free before becoming an ash pile, the Gunner would run screaming out of the building. And the synth dame gawking now between the shutters of the storage room was useless. No password. No help.

"You know there's no escape. You're going to die here. Tell me, Prototype, how do you feel?"

"Get a couch and notepad and I'll tell ya all about it."

"You use humor to deflect, like a human. Did you learn this, or were you programed?"

"Bit of both, I suppose. Just like you being cruel for cruelty's sake."

"Doesn't that make me more human?"

"No, it makes you less."

His answer earned him another knowing smile. Both his stomach chambers turned at the intimacy of the Courser's gaze, like a hunter admiring the animal he'd wounded. Nora made a stricken sound like a hiccup. Blood trickled under the blade at her throat. Splotchy wet cheeks, her baby blues bloodshot, and her nose bright red and running.
She was the most beautiful thing in the room.

"We both know you're not gonna kill her. Father wants to meet her, so let her go."

"Her pain causes you pain. I want to watch it."

"Let. Her. Go."

"Make me, Prototype."

His metal hand curled, the steel itself yearning to plunge the sharpest of his fingers into the Courser's eyes. Couldn't keep the snarl out of his voice either. "I can't believe the Institute lets things like you run loose. That they even made you at all. You're just a wind-up doll assassin. No mind of your own. You're empty."

That got under the Courser's skin. The knife at Nora's throat lowered a notch, but the laser went from aiming at his chest to straight between his eyes. "So are you. You're not even flesh."

"Flesh doesn't make the man. The mind does. The soul. Memories. Emotions. You...you're nothing but a meat puppet."

"You imply you have these abstracts. How? You were made before me like the others. I break them and they scream, but there's nothing in their eyes."

"There's nothing because they are nothing. But me? You already know I'm different. Break me, Courser, and you'll see plenty."

Yes it was insane. Fully aware of that. But at this point it was all he had. What mattered was getting this psycho away from the dame he loved. Give her a chance to escape.

The Courser inclined his head against Nora's, their dark hair mingling. She didn't make a sound, rigid like a corpse in his grip. Then with a startled cry, she went spinning into the metal frame of the archway, her head slamming into it far, far, too hard. She crumpled in a boneless heap.

"Goddamn you! Nora —"

"Stay where you are, Prototype. She lives. See? She breathes. Just sleeping now. Doesn't she look peaceful?"

The Courser advanced. He stumbled backwards, clutching his wounded shoulder, self-preservation protocols yelling at him to get away from the threat, get away from it now. Nora didn't stir. The Gunners watched on with what suspiciously looked like pity. The synth inside the storage room shook her head and covered her mouth with both hands, her face just as tear-stained as Nora's had been. Crying for him and he didn't even know her name. At least the Institute got that one right.

"Yes, you're afraid. I see it. How wonderful."

Any sane person would fear death, particularly a slow painful death, which is what this Courser had promised him. But it was the after part that got him the most. Not where his scrap of a soul - if he had one - would go, but what would happen to Nora in the Institute. What this Father had planned for her.

"Promise me ya won't hurt her anymore."

The Courser's laser slid back into its holster. No need for guns to muck up the fun, not when the
rabbit was in the snare. "Please, if we are getting this intimately acquainted, call me Z2." The leather gloves came off, and Z2's pretty human fingers flexed. "Father didn't specify her condition upon delivery. And don't worry, Nick," the Courser said his name as if ready to fuck him instead of torture him, "your Nora will be alive, though perhaps, not quite whole. At least, not after I'm finished with her."

Behind Mr. Z2, the oddball column cage that extended two floors down, and the circular railing between the floor and it. Railing rusted. And plenty of space for a body to fall.

He stopped backing away. "You wanna know why I'm the only one left?"

Z2 slowed his pace, the hunter allowing the rabbit a few parting words. "No, Nick. Please tell me."

"There's somethin' wrong with us. There was another prototype not too long ago. Name was Lolly."

"No designation, like you?"

"Yeah, like me. The Institute hid her away. They hid us all away. All our files redacted. Very hush hush. Didn't even come for me when they coulda, and I was in plain sight."

"Why were you not reclaimed?" Closer now, Z2's fingers twitching. The bastard would go for his throat first. All the exposed wiring there was too damn tempting.

"Told ya, we're not right. In the head, I mean. There's somethin' inside us. Makes us do things."

"You are very different, but I like that. I like it very much."

Human blood and leather, and Z2's camphoric scent, like the Institute had created the Courser in a vat of tea tree oil. Almost on him now, just a little closer.

"Oh, but we're unstable, Z2. Didn't you realize that? Lolly went straight up bonkers. Tossed herself off the tallest building downtown. See, we gotta bit of a suicidal streak."

"That's why you're letting me use my hands," Z2 said it like a thank you, like this was some honorable sacrifice.

"Not quite, Z2. I just wanted ya to holster your weapon and get real close. Sometimes the rabbit has one last trick."

Z2 canted his head. "Rabbit?"

Coursers had strong bodies and hard skulls, but their noses? Soft and squishy, just like a human's, and just as vulnerable to a steel skull bashing into them.

Z2 staggered back, howling, his hands slapped over his face, not so much a machine to ignore the blood pouring from his pulverized nose. He evaded Z2's blind, but powerful swing - one that would ended this budding synth cagefight on the spot if it had connected. His shoulder screamed. His inner circuitry sparked like a old clunker ready to overheat. Two new subroutines called **stay alive** and **kill this bastard** took priority, giving him that last surge of strength to ram Z2 into the railing.

The railing snapped, as it was supposed to — but Z2 didn't go over alone.

At the last second, when the linoleum floor ended and empty space began, Z2 snagged his coat, bloody lips parting —

And grinned.
Nora, I'm sorry, doll.

Four seconds left to live. There was no cinematic time slowdown, or his life flashing before his eyes. Only the tick of his internal clock as it counted down, his processor abandoning all programs and fleeing to its panic room, some protocol that activated the moment he went airborne. A voice in his head, not himself, but a sexless drone who said:

_Catastrophic system failure imminent. Initiating Black Box P7-12 override. Archiving data for future retrieval._

Fucking Institute.

His synth body shield, Z2, bore the worse of it as they punched through two sets of corroded railings, taking chunks of the linoleum trimming with them. The caged column blurred by and he tried to catch himself — almost did, but Z2 grabbed his arm, tangled them as one. _If I go, brother, you go too._ The Courser's red smile never faltered, not even when the floor and their bodies collided, the force of it knocking the wind out of his iron lungs and snapping Z2's spine like a twig.

Then nothing. A complete suspension of system activity. No error messages. No damage reports. Quintessence, but not the peace he'd hoped for. He floated above a sea frozen in time, waves paused mid-roll, his systems trapped underneath like fish paralyzed. They couldn't reach him, nor he, them.

Was this…it? Death?

_No, little fool._

He opened his eyes to Nyx/Jenny straddling his chest, the red of her prewar dress neatly spread over her legs and across his neck. On her beach again, and under him, the sand, cold and wet. Blood, not water. Laying in the middle of her death stranding, not an observer anymore, but a part of it now. Couldn't see the dead fish and the whales, but they were there. They were always there.

"Why can't ya ever meet me someplace nice?"

She touched his face, smiling at the frightened noise he made. She'd never touched him before. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders and tickled his nose. Somewhere in the fog of prewar Nick's mind, memories came of mornings spent buried in those curls, and in her body, her hair in his face as she rode him —

"Knock it off. You're not her."

Her legs pinned him like an insect. One she didn't mind making squirm as she hissed in his head:

_I need you whole, vessel._

"Vessel? What — "

_One sleeps too deep. The other cut me away. You are the last._

"What the hell does that mean?"

_You perish when I say. Not before._

"No, what are ya doing to me? Get off!"

It was like struggling against a mountain, one on the verge of erupting, getting hotter and hotter until it melted him through, burned him to dust. The sea started moving again, the waves molten lava, the
fish writhing and blackened.

You will live.

He thrashed awake, a scream caught in his throat. Another dream within a dream, but in this one everything hurt and he lay on something lumpy.

Z2 stared at the ceiling, green eyes going crystalline white, then opaque, like someone stuck big, dirty opals in his sockets. Gen 3’s never did that when they died, so it must be a Courser thing. Z2’s face resembled a kicked mutfruit, nose flattened like a ghoul’s and lips split, teeth missing. The most gruesome bit was Z2’s splintered spine, his head hanging off it like a knapsack tied to a stick by some tendons and flesh.

But the Courser’s skull? Intact. Which meant that chip should be too. And that was a godsend. No way was he hunting down one of these bastards again.

He creaked himself to standing. Everything felt…fine. Kinda. A few minutes passed as he ran several diagnostics, his internal systems springing to his command like nothing had ever happened, like he didn’t just take a suicide plunge down two floors. The laser burn on his shoulder still needed mending, as did a few hairline cracks over his chest casing and several around his left knee — where he musta put most of his weight when he’d landed. All were superficial wounds (though this burn still hurt like a bitch), nothing a good slather of BND-R couldn’t take care of. A screw had popped out of his metal wrist, but he had plenty of spares. His dress shirt and coat had fared the worst, right sleeve missing on his coat and scorch marks on his shirt — but all in all he was…okay.

He should be dead. Or at the very least, in pieces. Sure, good old Z2 had been a Courser mattress to cushion the landing, but —

"Holy shit, man, that synth's alive!"

Gunners looked down at him from the broken railing, their faces stupid with amazement. Then another face peeked over their heads, a streak of red at her temple, ashen skin and eyes red-rimmed, lips mouthing his name before she found her voice again.

"Nick? Nick! Oh my god, you stay there! I'm coming down to you."

Nora, awake and okay.

The relief was so profound, he had to reboot his gyro-sensors to keep balance. There was a cinched tightening of his chest, his central coolant chamber pumping harder than normal. The skin around his eyes pricked, but no tears.

The Institute had given him the technology of his body, the mystery components of his brain, a borrowed personality, prewar memories, and the ability to fuck — but no tear ducts, no way to express the magnitude of surviving a Courser, of being reunited with a lover, or to wallow in the frustration of not knowing what the hell Nyx was. She called him a vessel. A vessel for what? Her? But why? Why did the Institute put her inside him?

He should tell Nora. Right now. Get this cement block of a burden off his chest. Maybe if they put their heads together they could find answers.

But he said nothing when she threw herself at him, covering him in a barrage of kisses.

And he kept silent when they removed Z2’s head — Nora taking to the task a little too zealously — agreeing that Doc Amari should be the one to extract the chip. Amari was the only one that had any
knowledge of synth biology — well, maybe not the only one, but he’d rather not cross that bridge if he didn’t have to.

He didn’t say a word when they released the synth girl, K1-98, aka Jenny (how’s that for coincidence?) who thanked them kindly, but didn’t need any more assistance than you very much. Jenny did hug him goodbye, though, before she took the elevator down and out of that ugly ass building. "You were so brave. I won’t forget you," she said tearfully into his ear. It's those moments that made everything worth it. Giving someone another chance. Saving a life. Even those dumb Gunners who probably didn't deserve it. After Nora untied them and screamed at them for an entire hour about being such greedy assholes, they all tucked tail and ran — except Sarge who stayed behind to loot his dead crew.

Yeah, classy.

They doctored each other up, Nora with stims, and he with BND-R. Then she cried and he held her a while, let her get the stress out of her system, envying her tears. And like always that closeness led to more than just holding and kissing, but no, not here. Not where they had almost lost each other.

*Come on, doll, the Institute's gonna start looking for their missing pet.*

So now it was back to Goodneighbor, a Courser's head in a sack, and one step closer to finding answers — for Nora.

He couldn't tell her. It was too strange. Too crazy. *Nora, doll, ya know that Nyx thing Virgil mentioned? Yeah, well it's real and it looks like Jenny, prewar Nick's fiance only it's evil and thinks I'm its vessel. How do I know that, you ask? Because it talks to me. That's right, doll, Nyx talks to me in my dreams, and now when I masturbate. Oh, and you know that swan dive I probably should've died from? Yep, you guess it. That was Nyx, too. Healed all my insides magically. Isn't that a hoot?*

If Nora almost left him for sounding like Kellogg, she would run for sure if he told her about Nyx. Let her think it was some tech component that regulated his coolant valves or something. He'd figure this out on his own, like Winter. Gather the evidence. Work a theory. But Nyx wasn't a holotape he could collect and decode. No, he'd have to go to the source. The one who told him about Nyx in the first place.

When he saw Virgil again, they were going to have a nice long chat.

*Chapter End Notes*

Fun fact: when determining if the space between the railings was enough to fit two bodies, and if the fall was high enough, my SS took the plunge herself.

Had to reload. lol.

That being said, I did take some liberties with the spacing. The fall though, that was fatal.

And...always thought the Courser was creepy, so I made him a literal creep.

Next chapter, Nora keeps her promise ;D
Goodneighbor II

Chapter Summary

Nick and Nora plan the next step in finding Shaun, and take the next step in their relationship.

Chapter Notes

Here it is. What you've all been waiting for.

They received a hero's welcome in Goodneighbor.

The Gunners they'd rescued had tried to take refuge there, and Hancock gently coerced (under the threat of great bodily harm) the thrilling tale out of them before giving them his "boot up their ass" and tossed them out. When Goodneighbor's gates opened, Hancock and the entire town practically blew her and Nick over with their whooping and hollering. The crowd stunned her mute, their grinning faces like a mirage she couldn't quite trust.

"Well look at you two all blood spattered and filthy." The crowd parted and Hancock strolled forward with purpose, arms spread wide. Oh no, no hugging. Her stomach was already on the verge of revolt from all the stimpaks needed to mend her pounding head. Hancock caught her panicked expression at the last second and mercifully dropped his arms. But his lusty grin remained. "Makes me think you took on a big, bad Boogieman and kicked its Institute-loving ass. And Nicky, Nicky Valentine, what do you got there? Is that a severed head in a sack or are you just happy to see me?"

"I ain't happy to see you, and you know damn well why." Nick shook the sack as he pointed a metal finger at Hancock's frilly chest. Blood dripped on the pavement as the Courser's head bobbed inside. Her stomach rolled. Shit, this nausea better be gone by the time they checked into Rexford. And this fuzzy head thing too. She had a promise to keep.

"Aw shit yeah, the Rad-Away. Listen, Red got the batches mixed up, gave ya a free sample of our private stash. Didn't realized the little oops till you rad bunnies were long gone. But hey, no harm no foul. You both made it here in one piece, right?"

"What's an aphrodisiac doing in your damn Rad-Away anyway?"

"I'm a Ghoul, man. Ya want me to spell it out right here?"

Nick made a noise of revulsion. Red came up and draped her arm around Hancock. They exchanged a look and a knowing chuckle. Then Red turned those fierce, twinkling eyes on her and said: "You enjoyed that hit, didn't you, little sister?" The heat crept up along with the memories. Most of it was as clear as steamy glass: a skinny woman wearing rags, a group of people who worshiped the bomb, and then a giant green Virgil — but before that was when the glass cleared and completely disappeared. The feel of him hard against her, harder than a human man could ever be, his mouth...
tasting like copper rain, the heat of him burning through her clothes, his hands roaming, sharp and soft.

Red grinned as if seeing it for herself. "Oh yeah…you did, I can tell. Quite the ride wasn't it? Wish I could've been there, watching the two of you getting down and dirty —"

"We were in the middle of the Glowing Sea!" Nick's exasperated snarl drew snickers from the bystanders. "We could've been killed — or, or worse."

"Worse?" Hancock stifled a snort. "Like what? Finally popping that metal cherry?"

"Gotta go make it vulgar, don't ya?"

"Hey, man, I wasn't the one playing tonsil hockey in the middle of the street."

Was there a hole she could crawl in? A nice dark place to hide from these curious eyes? It was good-natured ribbing, yeah, Hancock and his people celebrating this humble victory against the Institute, but in the crowd lurked a sense of judgment; a face or two not smiling. Not laughing. A frown of disapproval from a ghoul sitting on a park bench. A sneer of disgust from a drifter woman warming her hands by a fire barrel. Condemnation in its most subtle, devastating form.

"You're damn lucky I'm tired as hell, cause I'd kick your scrawny ghoul ass all over town."

"Shit, I'd pay to see that," said Red, laughing. Nick sighed in defeat, and Hancock clapped him on the back. *I'd let you win in a heartbeat, Valentine,* he said, his voice like an echo as her stim fugue returned. Never again would she take three of those things in a row. Thirst, brain fog, and some ear ringing to top it off.

Speaking of side effects, maybe that BND-R stuff was screwing with Nick, too. He seemed distant ever since leaving Greentech, as if nursing an invisible wound he wouldn't show her, not even when she'd probed with tender inquiries. "What happened when he knocked me out? How did you get the upper hand? How did you survive? At the last question he clammed up, shied away. Why wouldn't he confide in her? Z2 had been his - its - name, but it didn't deserve a name. That thing had toyed with her emotions and had tried to kill Nick — and not only kill Nick, but torture and maim him. From what little Nick told her, the Courser had some sick desire to watch something suffer and die. How many synths had that thing hunted down and tortured slowly? How many humans or ghouls had it played with, like a soulless child ripping the wings off dragonflies?

Falling to its death hadn't been punishment enough. Not even taking its head — which she'd relished — had been true justice.

Nick had offered himself like a lamb, a sacrifice to appease a primitive, bloodthirsty monster. What if the Courser had seen through Nick's ploy? What if that railing hadn't broken? What if the Courser hadn't cushioned Nick's fall? Best case scenario, she'd be walking into Goodneighbor alone. Worst case, a prisoner of the Institute, minus a few limbs.

AndNick would be dead.

That thought was like a knife in her gut each and every time. And from Greentech to Goodneighbor, the thought twisted a little harder, dug a little deeper. Not since the day Nate left for the war had she endured this kind of mind-numbing fret over the fate of another. Worrying when she'd receive that knock on the door, when she'd become that inevitable widow. She had wandered from room to room of their house, lost in the vast emptiness the simple lack of one created. Nate's voice haunted the spaces there, echoes of their last night together playing in a loop.
What if you don't come back?

Honey, I will. I always will.

But what if you don't?

You can't think like that, Nora. Have faith.

But what will I do if you die?

To feel this lack of control again, this gut-wrenching fear of the what if? Her and Nick, they had been invincible till now: killing Kellogg, delving into his mind, then braving the Glowing Sea, the Deathclaws and Ferals, Children of Atom and a volatile Virgil. They got cocky, too big for their britches - she got too big. They weren't untouchable. They were outgunned and surrounded. The Institute has dozens of these Coursers under their thumb. Maybe hundreds. If one souped-up synth could undo them like that...what chance did Nick have of surviving? She was one human among millions. Roll her body into a grave and get a new Minuteman General. But Nick was special...immortal. Being on this case and with her severely limited his life span. Nick was more than a prize or conquest. More than a partner. If he died, he'd take a chunk of her with him. She would never be the same again. She'd never be whole.

Do I love him already?

The lantern glow of his eyes fell on her, warm and comforting. Some vitality flickered back into his face, lighting the dark edges of his expression. A tiny smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Remembering her promise? Hope so, because she had every intention of keeping it. Hancock yammered away about his rad bunnies staying at the State House and he wouldn't take no for an answer. Nick didn't protest this time, and she didn't have the energy to refuse.  

"Alright, alright, Hancock. As long as there's no peep holes in the walls or in the shower."

"Can't promise none in the shower."

"We'll be staying at the Rexford then — "

"The hell you will be. Okay, fine, fine. I promise not to look...mostly." And when Nick gave him the stinkeye, Hancock surrendered and drew a cross over his chest. "You have my word, Valentine. Cross my shriveled black little heart."

"That's more like it." Then Nick said to her, "Come on, doll, our trash is dripping on the sidewalk. Let's get to the Den so Amari can dig out what we need."

But Hancock had one more request. "Hey, after Amari does her thing, can I have the head?"

What the hell would he do with it? Mount it on the wall? Use it for target practice? Nick slung the bag over his shoulder and grunted.

"As far as I'm concerned, you can stick this thing on a pike and set it on fire."

"Oh yeah, now you're talkin'. I'll set the bastard up right in heart of the square. Inspiration for everyone. But Valentine..."

"Yeah?"

"Remind me never to piss you off."
Nick grinned and started toward the Den. She followed, her body and mind on autopilot. What remained of the crowd scattered, but the air of festivity remained. Hancock touched her shoulder as she passed. "Sister, you haven't said a word. You all right? You look a little stim sick."

"Yeah, I'll be okay. Just a bad headache. I...the Courser threw me against the wall. Knocked me out cold." Up ahead, Nick slowed, but didn't stop. He cocked his head as if listening.

"That piece of shit. I'm definitely setting his head on fire." Hancock drew close, his breath smelling like he'd been eating grapes. "Nicky wasn't the one who took the head, was he?"

Her smile was instant, barbaric. "Hell fucking no."

"Glad to hear that, sister. Damn glad. Now get going before Nick gets pissed at me again."

She gave Hancock's hand a heartfelt squeeze, and then kissed him on the cheek. He flushed not red, but a deep, tawny shade of ghoul. Leaning against the State House wall, Red looked on with mild interest, a thoughtful leer on her face. Probably imagining all sorts of naughtiness. Hancock winked at them both.

"Sister, you ever get a thing for my kind, you better let me know."

"Maybe in the next life, Mayor Hancock," she said softly, and hurried to catch Nick.

Though it was hedging on midnight, Doctor Amari greeted them with zeal and academic eagerness. Seemed she too heard the rumors and couldn't wait to get her hands on their bounty — in the name of science of course.

"Odd how the eyes turned opaque," Amari said as she prodded the bruised flesh under the Courser's orbital sockets. "A death protocol perhaps, or maybe a chemical reaction." Her stomach clenched every time Amari manipulated the head. She had to turn away when the examination required a metal probe and the Courser's smashed nose cavity. Yes, she had cut the bastard's head off, but something about shoving hooked needles inside mushy canals really summoned the queasiness.

"Can you extract the chip, doc?" Nick didn't seem bothered by the manhandling. He circled the exam table like a prewar medical student learning a new procedure, tilting his head from side to side as Amari worked.

"Almost there...almost — got it!" Amari jerked her probe with a sickening crack and then started pulling. Slurping sounds filled the room, like something being extracted from mud. Her stomach quivered dangerously. Hugging herself kept the bile in check, but when Amari dragged out a small, clear cylinder caked with brain matter and gore and dangling bloody wires, she ran to the next room.

"Told ya three was too many, doll."

"Ugh," she groaned into the trashcan, "Nick don't look at me."

He pulled her sweaty hair off her neck and gathered it to one side. "I've seen you throw up before."

"That was different. You didn't know me and I was stupid. And we weren't...together."

"You're beautiful no matter how much you gag."

"Stop it. This is so unsexy."

He chuckled and planted a kiss on her head. Amari spoke behind him. "Is she all right?"
"Three stims in a row back in Greentech. The Courser knocked her around pretty good."

"Oh my God, I had no idea. Nora, let me examine you."

"No, I'm fine. Seriously —"

But the next hour was Amari fussing about dehydration and a lingering concussion. After drinking half of Amari's purified water stock and eating some strange mutfruit jello stuff, Amari finally admitted to them she couldn't decrypt the chip.

"The technology is beyond me, I'm sorry. I simply don't have the equipment or expertise. Memory and brains are what I know, and this piece of tech is far too delicate, and far too important for my amateur fumbling."

"So what damn hoop do we have to jump through this time?" She slid from the examining table and started putting her leather armor back on. These roadblocks just kept coming didn't they? Tear one down and another replaced it. Nick's frustration didn't show on his face, but his hands clenched around the arms of his ratty chair.

"I know you're tired, Nora."

"You're both tired. I see that. I can't imagine the hell you've gone through losing your husband, your son, and then being cast out into this world. And I can't imagine the fortitude it must have taken to make it to Diamond City on your own, and then to rescue Mister Valentine. Such a string of coincidences with the two of you. It's almost uncanny. You have been lucky so far. Perhaps…too lucky. The Institute has its spies everywhere in the Commonwealth, and I suspect you've caught their eye."

"I suspect you're right, Doc."

"We're being led into the cage - at least Nora is. I'm either along for the ride, or the dead weight. Father…wants to meet her in person according to that Courser. He had orders to bring her in."

"That's troubling."

Virgil spoke from memory, reminding her of who they were dealing with. *I've learned the hard way that Father doesn't do anything by accident. We're all microbes in his petri dish, things to be nudged and manipulated as he pleases. There are no coincidences. Or mistakes.*

"It's a game," she said, letting the hopelessness take control. No point in pretending she wasn't in over her head. She was some dumb trout swimming upstream and jumping right into the mouth of a hungry bear. "This Father has Shaun and he's taunting me. Making it some sort of experiment. Hey, let's see if the prewar Vaultie can find her baby? What are her odds, huh?" She wiped her eyes and looked down at the floor. "I bet they have a pool going on what kills me first."

"If they do, then they've already lost."

"Because Kellogg didn't kill us. Neither did the Glowing Sea, or that Courser. I already know where we have to take that chip. I just…wish we could've avoided it. Doc, the Railroad has an…expert of sorts, right? Name's Tinker Todd or something?"

Amari relaxed her shoulders when Nick said "Railroad" as if he'd said what she'd been thinking all along but hadn't wanted to suggest. "Yes, and it's Tinker Tom. Many of the Heavies I've dealt with mention him from time to time. If you want this chip decoded, he's your best chance."

"Of course he is. Damn it."

Heavies? What the hell were those? And who was Tinker Tom?
"The Railroad are not your enemy, Mister Valentine," Amari handed Nick the chip and put her hand over his metal one. "They have always fought for your kind."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions, Doc." Nick tucked the chip into his breast pocket and patted it. "It's not the Railroad I have a problem with, it's their leader."

"Okay you two, I'm not following any of this. The Railroad, do you mean Deacon? Is he a specialist or something?" Amari and Nick hesitated and glanced at each other. Amari spoke first.

"The Railroad is a faction much like the Minutemen, but they operate in secret. They have to. The Institute actively hunts them for helping synths escape. They have many safehouses scattered across the Commonwealth, with their headquarters a well-guarded secret. Even I don't know where it is, and I work closely with them. They bring gen 3's to me for relocation. I erase their minds and give them new memories, allowing these synths to forget who and what they are. It makes it easier for them to blend in with humans."

"You mind-wipe synths?" This post war Commonwealth was becoming an iceberg with a giant-ass bottom. Meet someone you think you know, and they turn out to be someone else, or working for someone else, or fighting another faction, or secretly erasing synth minds so they can pretend to be human. And Nick knew about this? "Why wasn't I told anything? Why keep the Railroad from me if we're fighting the same enemy?"

"Because, doll, the Railroad is twitchy at best. And martyrs at their worst."

"What Mister Valentine is saying is that it won't be easy finding the Railroad. Follow the Freedom Trail is all I know. That's how you'll make contact."

"But why can't we just talk to Deacon?" Had Deacon been among the crowd at the gate? No sunglasses or cocky grin that she remembered, but that didn't mean he hadn't been there, hiding in plain sight. "I overheard you and him in the lobby, Nick. From before. He asked you to put in a good word."

"Which is why I haven't."

There it was again, the Nick Knows Best attitude. Good thing she loved him too much to slap him. "Nick, the Railroad are trying to save your people. They're dying for your people. Why the hell did keep this from me? You know how I feel about robots...about you."

Amari quietly slipped out of the room and shut the door. Nick came to her, and from his somber expression, was ready to dole out his tough love.

"Nora, you left the Vault how long ago?"

"That's not important —"

"The hell it isn't. Listen to me, you didn't even know what a synth was till when? Three weeks ago? You knew nothing about this world, the creatures in it, the people, the factions, the general fucking insanity. I kept it simple for ya. Find your boy. Kill the bastards in our way. The rest would come along...eventually. I didn't want to overburden you with faction power struggles. The Minutemen are one thing, a good thing for the Commonwealth. It's why I encouraged that. Garvey needs strong leadership to get the Minutemen running again. But the Brotherhood are fascist tech hoarders, and the Railroad are fanatics who would shoot their own grandmother to save a synth."

"What's wrong with trying to save your —"
"Cause like I said, if a synth or a human were drowning in a radioactive pond, they'd save the synth in a heartbeat. Being human to the Railroad makes you canon fodder."

"But aren't they human too?"

"Yeah and most of them hate themselves for it." Nick took a breath and took her shoulders. "I crossed paths with the Railroad a few years back. Learned the hard way how little they value human life. Not all of their agents are bad. Deacon is tolerable, if a little on the weird side. But Desdamona is a piece of work. She's their leader and frankly, someone I'd rather not meet a second time. But…" He dropped his hands, eyes dim. "This is your boy. And we just ran out of choices."

"What about Sturges? He likes tech and seems capable, maybe he could decode the chip."

Nick humored her with a sad smile. "Sturges is bright, no doubt about that. But if it isn't power armor or guns then forget it. Tinker Tom is who we need, and so it's time we Follow the Freedom Trail. We'll start by where you found me, Park Street Station. There's a Protectron there that'll give us a history lesson."

"I know, I walked it before with Nate…." She bit her lip, ran a hand through the mess of her hair. "The trail has to be practically gone by now. And all those Super Mutants."

"We'll get by. We always do." He kissed her forehead, and then her lips. Felt so good to hold him again. The nodes on his neck, hot under her fingers, and smooth like the base of his skull. A hairline crack there, like a flaw in a marble statue, one that gave it texture and character. She followed it up and brushed the edge of his fedora, and he brushed the front hem of her jeans, the skin there shivering under his cool metal fingers. They broke apart, breathing heavy. The crescents of his eyes blazed.

"I promised you, Nick. Remember?"

"Fuck me senseless, I think you said. Well, doll, I hold you to it."

"You will?" The raw need in her voice made him smile.

"No more dodging. I promise. Thought before I wasn't safe for ya, but I figured it out. Which reminds me —" He grabbed a can of purified water off the counter and guzzled it down. Since when did he need water? He made a show of smacking his lips and said, "Seminal stores maxed and ready to go."

It took an embarrassing thirty seconds to get what he was saying, but then it clicked. Oh…oh! She grabbed his hand and dragged him from the room, Nick laughing the entire way. Irma frowned as they rushed past and Amari called good luck! which made them giggle like teenagers till they left the Den.

No obstacles on the way to the State House, which was good because they would've mowed them down. Nick took lead and pulled her along, the two of them carefree lovers, flaunting their lust in spite the few sneers and grumbles tossed their way. Hancock stood next to the street light where she and Nick first kissed, shaking his head at them. Oh you crazy rad bunnies. Hancock's lecherous grin made the sneers and grumbles disappear, but even his reach had limits. The disapproval remained, simmering, out of sight.

Well, fuck them. She was getting some tonight.

Their room was spacious, luxurious even given the state of most buildings in the Commonwealth. The Upper Stand squares of Diamond city had nothing on Hancock's postwar palace. The mayor
had a fondness for art, the classics anyway. Museum pieces salvaged and for most, still in remarkable shape. Every space on the wall was filled with restored works, colonial themed, patriotic and relevant to what Hancock was trying to achieve here. Of the people, for the people.

"There's enough peep holes in those paintings to ogle a herd of brahmin." Nick removed his bloodstained coat and laid it on the back of a reupholstered wingback chair. He hung his fedora on a hat hook next to the door. Everything was so fancy, so well kept. It was like walking into a memory. The maroon chaise by the window had some tears here or there, but it retained its modest prewar beauty. She ran her hands over the flag quilt that covered the king-sized bed. Four fluffy pillows, and smaller, decorative pillows on top. All red, white and blue. On either side of the bed, a nightstand filled with every chem imaginable. Oh, Hancock, you and your chems.

"Was he expecting us?" She picked up a cigar-shaped box called Grape Mentats. Maybe that's why Hancock had smelled so sweet. Nick took the box from her hands and huffed his displeasure at it before returning it to the drawer.

"Knowing Hancock, yes. Or at least hoped so. Told ya, doll, he's been trying to butter me up to stay in Goodneighbor. His very own synth detective." He kissed the spot behind her ear, making her toes curl in her boots.

"Butter you up, hmm? Now that sounds like fun." She undid his tie, tucking the end of it into her mouth as she slid it free. He made an appreciative noise and unclasped her leather arm guards.

"It does, doesn't it? Slick oil and soft human skin. What would that feel like, doll?" He unlaced her chest armor with exaggerated slowness, the metal of his hand sharp enough to slice through, but he plucked the ties free one by one, as if fine-tuning an instrument. His human hand he placed over her breasts, holding her steady, feeling her breath heave. This was happening. Finally. It was happening. She had known no other man but Nate — oh yeah, and what's his face back in High School, but he didn't count. And neither did the almosts and the kinda sortas over the years. My God, this — this was really happening. Her one fervent wish. Happening right now. This wasn't real. He shouldn't be hers. If it's too good to be true, then it was. What if she hadn't left the Vault at all? What if this entire world was in her head? Some fantasy to help her frozen mind cope with the endlessness of cryosleep. What if —"

"Come back to me, Nora." She jumped when he caressed her cheek, avoided his eyes as he searched her face. "What are you thinking, tell me."

"Nothing…just, I've been waiting for you."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"No, not like that. You don't understand. I'm…not — I mean I'm different. Weird, I guess. I like certain things. Always have. I —"

"Again, I know. You…like my kind. Love my kind. Machines. Robots. Synths. And you've loved my kind since you were a little girl."

"Wait, how…do you know that? I never told any — " She stepped back, and his shoulders sagged. "Hold on. The only way you'd — fuck, it was the Memory Den, wasn't it? But how? I thought you were busy keeping the encryption trapped."

"I don't know how. Kellogg, the encryption, whatever, was out cold and I was in a gray space full of nothing. But then these windows started appearing, and you were in them. And I…couldn't help but look. It's a piss-poor excuse I know." His eyes flitted to hers, and then focused on his shoes. "I had
no business watching and I'm so sorry, Nora, but I—I couldn't stop. I tried to ignore it, I did, but it was you. I wanted to know you. You're unusual, special. Not like any dame I've ever met. Even with prewar Nick's laundry list of dames. I'm a bastard for looking, I know, I —"

"You saw me." He flinched as her hands moved up his chest, but he didn't move. He seemed willing to accept her judgment, her punishment.

"Yeah."

"How I masturbated to the Mister Handy when I was eight, the quack doctor and the drugs my parents put me on, all my failed pathetic relationships?" Her sultry tone perplexed him, maybe even frightened him. His chest, so hot under her hands, all the machinery humming away. The buttons of his dress shirt came undone, one by one, the same deliberate slowness he had used on her. "All my years alone…till Nate. And Shaun. And even then…alone. Always fucking alone because deep down, I needed what I couldn't have."

He swallowed, the piping around the steel column of his throat bobbing with the motion. "Yes. All of it."

His shirt dropped to the floor. She traced the trapezoid shaped seam that lined his collarbone, sides of his shoulders, and divided his chest from his abdomen. Another smaller trapezoid panel separated his stomach from his groin. Unlike his older brothers, the seams were elegant and fine, but like his older brothers, Nick had a belly button — a feature somewhat bizarre and almost…cruel in a sense, like rubbing his nose in his own artificial creation. She ran her thumb over the indentation. His eyes fluttered closed, then sprung open as if afraid of allowing himself pleasure. Two small ovals marked his pectorals, a shade darker than his alabaster skin - not quite a nipple, but a raised patch of sensors that had him inhaling sharply when she circled it with her index finger. Her lips shook as she kissed the base of his throat, the vibration of his inner workings tingling down her tongue. She laid her head on his chest with a teary sigh and closed her eyes.

"This is home," she whispered. Nick didn't speak, but the steady pulse under her ears quickened, gears and gyroscopes and fans and what other miracles they used to keep him alive increasing momentum, preparing for a surge of activity. The beautiful music of machinery, the song she'd been craving all her life. The throb and pull of coolant to his plating, his lifeblood through tubes and coils as complex as her own veins. It was like listening to a clockwork symphony, instruments playing a divine score, notes upon notes, layers and depths as dark and as deep as the human soul. Dust to dust. What were humans but organic machines? And what were machines but a mirror of humanity? Humanity's need to mimic nature, to mimic themselves. This was life created in humanity's image, as God created humanity in His. This was full circle. The musician and his music; the artist and his painting; the sculptor and his statue. The created craved the love of its creator, as the creator craved the love of its creation.

If not for this, why create at all?

The noise he made when he picked her up, it was primal, not machine or Nick, but some raw combination of the two. He dropped her on the bed and pinned her down, going still a moment, letting her feel the length of his body, the glorious, heavy weight of him. She squirmed, her needy sounds filling the room. Her pelvis thrust against his, snaking up and down in the compressed space between them. They both groaned. Her flimsy tank top tore in half. Her prewar bra lost its straps and most of its clasps. Good thing Nick had packed spares.

She arched against his mouth, her right nipple captured and teased. He held her hips down with his human hand while the metal one pulled her jeans down. His weight lifted, and so did her hips as he tugged her jeans off. Then her boots joined the growing pile of ruined clothing on the floor. If
Hancock was peeping he was getting a hell of an eyeful.

Never had Nick eyes seemed so alive, every tiny metal coil illuminated, the light of his irises wreathed in sunlit flame. His pupils spread so wide they grazed the inner edges of that fire. His fingers slid under the hemline of her underwear, treating this last article of clothing with reverence as he glided it over her hips and down her legs. Maybe he hadn't packed another pair of those. A giggle bubbled up, but she bit down on her lip to keep it from escaping. He tilted his head at her smile, asking with his eyes what was so funny. She shrugged coyly and began spreading her legs little by little, a shy flower opening to the sun. He trailed his hand down her sternum to her belly, all her hairs rising under his touch. "Cesarean," he said in a raspy, wondering voice, touching the long raised scar that marked Shaun's entry into the world. Her hand closed over his, but he resisted her attempt to guide him to more pleasing parts of her body.

"No, I want all of you." He pressed his mouth to her scar, flicking his tongue along the length. She dropped back, gasping at the intimacy of it. Not even Nate had kissed her there. She cupped his head as he explored, her fingers not missing the lack of human hair. The texture of his head, velvety silicone, and the hard points of his data nodes burned with heat. Her leg curved around his neck as he dipped lower, and lower, her hands digging at the sheets when he parted her sex with his tongue — that talented, wonderful tongue — God, did he had special programs for this? She thrust into his mouth, whining when he restrained her hips again. He chuckled into her, then moved upward to her clit, teasing lightly with the tip of his tongue before taking her into his mouth, sucking hard.

"Fuck, Nick!" He was merciless, increasing the pressure and rhythm until she babbled and writhed like a wanton. Then the heartless bastard released her on the cusp of orgasm, drawing back from her desperate thrusting with a smug smile. She growled and went for his pants, thankfully not tearing them because no, he didn't have a spare pair. He stepped away from the bed before she could do more damage and kicked them off. And there he stood in the lamplight like a gleaming statue, Nick Valentine, naked and on full display. He squared his shoulders under her scrutiny, and took an unsteady breath.

"This is all of me, doll. What you signed up for. It's not too late to change your —"

"Shut up, Nick." It wasn't enough to see him. She had to touch him. The surreality had returned, the resurging doubt that this was all a dream. The threadbare carpet, fragile and prickly under her toes, and the humid night air stirred the yellowed lace curtains. "I'm dreaming," she said and reached for him. Her hands mapped the planes of his body, the cracks of silicone skin and exposed wiring. Nothing as bad as his throat, but a notch above his hip exposed the mesh frame underneath, and a wide crack zigzagged his upper thigh. Another notch of missing panel skin under his knee, and the baby toe of his left foot was bare steel. His metal hand went as far as his wrist, making Nick a pirate with a five-fingered hook.

No broken part of him went untouched or unkissed. The frayed edges were more sensitive, the sensors there like exposed nerves. Blowing on his cracked hip almost buckled his knees, the poor thing. But it wasn't pain he felt, no.

"Can't d-describe it," he panted, his hands tangled in her hair, his head thrown back as she ran her tongue along a hairline fracture of his right inner thigh. "It's just…uh, really, hmm, good." She neared the most intimate part of him, and his breath stalled in anticipation. His scrotum was perfect, elastic and firm as the rest of his penis. The Institute had given him the ideal shape and curve, the skin slightly whiter than the rest of him, the texture silky silicone. The approximation of veins bulged in all the right places, more aesthetic than functional, but the attention to detail was flawless. This part of him was practically human. It was like Nick had been made to fuck.
She tested his sensors, taking the tip of him in her mouth and rolling her tongue up and over and then traced his slit, tasting him. He grabbed her shoulders and cried her name. My, my, so many sensors there, and yes, that purified water he had drunk now had a slightly salty, but not unpleasant flavor. She could suck him all night, but she stood, heartless as he had been, and shoved him onto the bed.

He grunted as she straddled him. Slick and wet, she sheathed his cock in her outer folds, teasing him with entry and then denying him. He tolerated this a few minutes, moaning low and moving with her. Then he pulled her under him in one fluid motion, stealing her breath with a searing array of kisses. This display of power, what he was capable of, it made her even wetter. His human hand slid inside her, fingers coming away thickly glazed and shining. He sucked them, shuddering, and went down on her again.

He tortured her for what seemed like ages, bringing her to the brink and then scooping her away before she came. Her pleas and threats only made him punish her more. He pinned her hands over her head and loomed over her, golden eyes analyzing her desperation. "Didn't I say I'd make you scream, Nora?" His voice, calm and robotic on purpose. Only his swollen cock gave him away, betraying the farce of the machine. And no matter how much he pretended, his eyes could never go cold. Too much life in them. And now, too much lust.

"I haven't screamed yet, Valentine." She wiggled against him in challenge, his cock weeping against her stomach. She tried to trap it between them, but he lifted his pelvis. The darkness couldn't hide his very unrobotic smirk.

"Oh, but you've mewled and cried and made all sorts of sexy little noises."

"I'll make more if you fuck me."

He breathed in her ear, lowering himself, nudging her thighs further apart. "Do you promise?"

"Yes, please yes."

"Promise me, Nora."

"Nick, yes, I'll scream, please."

"I don't believe you, little human girl."

She trapped him with her legs and snarled like an animal. "You fuck me now, Nick Valentine. They gave you a cock so use it, damn it. Please, Nick…I need you."

"Say that again." The tip of him pressed against her. He held her fast, though, so she couldn't nudge it further in.

"I need you, Nick."

"Me, only me?"

"Yes you, you big dumb synth. Only you. Ever since I saw you. No one else. No one ever. Please, please —"

He buried himself with a single, deep thrust, startling a groaning scream out of her. Ah yes, finally! He stopped and gave her a moment to adjust to his girth. It had been a while, after all. Nick's thumb slid over her cheek and found tears there. He frowned down at her in alarm and began to pull out. She clung to him and shook her head, unable to speak. No, stay. This is where you belong. Human and machine as one body. One mind. She kissed him and slid her hands over his ass, urging him
forward. Still, he hesitated, her tears baffling him. She mouthed *please* and rolled her hips. His control broke, and with a guttural moan he thrust with her, his own passion taking over, erasing the composed machine, the synth detective. *Yes, yes, take me. I'm yours.* The aching pressure of him inside her, the curve of his length hitting that secret spot that made stars appear. Encouraged by her throaty cries, he made certain to stroke that place again and again, their rhythm building, mounting, that rock and roll impetus that drove her faster and him deeper.

It didn't take much to reach that brink again, but she fought going over. This had to last forever, this union, this marriage of their flesh and souls. But forever ended the instant her body contracted around him, every muscle clenching as one, her back bowing as she soared over the precipice. He followed right after, muffling a pained cry into her neck, his final thrusts frantic and powerful.

He remained on top of her for several minutes, breathing hard, the machinery of him recovering. Her hands roamed his back, the tight swell of his ass — a real ass, not those creepy doll butts of the gen 2's. Wherever she could reach, she touched and memorized, every part of him, all hers now. Wait, why was he so wet? He didn't sweat. But she did, didn't she? Oh... *yuck.*

"Don't," he said as she tried to buff the shine away on his face with the heel of her hand. "I don't mind it."

"But I got all over you," she said, embarrassed for the both of them. His laugh in the dark, short and tender.

"I think it's the other way around, doll." His kiss was long and full of tongue, that slick, almost human tongue that tasted like candied copper. She moaned into his mouth, but he leaned back, puzzled by the return of her tears. She smiled to let him know it was okay. He made a quiet noise of understanding.

"These are happy tears."

"Yes. Very happy." Sniffling like a baby now and completely ruining the mood. "I'm sorry, Nick."

"For getting what you needed? For giving me what I needed? Don't be, doll. If they'd given me the ability, I'd be crying with you."

She curled herself around him, her leg flung over his thighs, her head on his chest. She stroked him lazily, not enough to get him hard again — well in theory anyway. Nate had always taken a while for round two, but Nick was ready to go right now. Too bad she'd rather purr on top of him. They both watched his cock like it was a separate entity, Nick amused by how quick it responded to the lightest of her touches. Inside his chest, the gears and fans were winding down, the vibration of him a lullaby luring her to sleep. "Round two in the morning, kay?" she murmured into her synth pillow.

Another laugh, this time holding more than a little relief.

"It's a date, doll. Don't be late."

Sleep wrapped her in a fuzzy cocoon. Snow fell around the bed, warm and white. "Hmm, no, never do that. Love you too much."

"What...did you say?" The amazement in his voice nearly coaxed her back, but the cocoon had grown too thick and comfy.

The snow continued falling, and somewhere past the foggy whiteness, Shaun laughed.

*Let's play a game, mommy. Hide and seek. Count to ten and come find me.*
She hid her eyes under her palms. The waves of the sea lapped the shoreline.

_Are you counting, mommy? Come find me. Find me. Find me!_

_Find it._

She opened her eyes. Blood stained her hands and streaked the sands with crimson. The fish piled around her, bloated bellies split open. Larger corpses beyond the fish: dolphins, squids, sharks and whales. All dead and rotting. The sea was a boiling cauldron of bones.

_Find it, won't you...please? It's ever so dark here and I'm all alone._

The Other Jenny came to her, a nightmare in a red prewar dress, stepping over death and blood, a victorious smile twisting her face. The beach stretched for miles in each direction. The sea bled into the horizon. No escape this time. No one there to pull the plug.

They were bound now. Human and machine. One body…

_One mind._

Chapter End Notes

_Some RL issues got in the way of this update, health and my own insecurities about writing sex. It's not perfect, but I hope it wasn't terrible either. Thanks for being patient :D_
"Love you."

Never thought to hear those words spoken by anyone - let alone a human woman. Sure, it was a sleepy, murmury declaration of affection after some — dare he say — downright phenomenal sex, but still, those two words had branded his clockwork soul forever. He replayed them again and again, analyzing the emotional context, letting the machine part of him lay to him straight. Was he making a mountain out of a molerat hill? Seeing more there than there really was? After an hour or so of dissecting two simple, life-altering words, his diagnostics told him the hard, cold truth.

The affection was real. The contentment was genuine. The sincerity was pure.

Nora loved him.

_She'll take it back in the morning, you know that. Pretend last night never happened. Get up now, you fool, and make it easier on yourself._


She lay against him like an exhausted rag doll, her body a supple, comforting weight. Her hair spread over his chest, dark over synthetic white, a tangle of waves made luminous by the moonlight slanting though the opened window. His finger glided over the soft mound of her breast, but she didn't stir. Poor thing, so tired. The scents of Goodneighbor pinged his olfactories: the bitter pitch of fire barrels, the sour stench of trash, the stale and pungent smell of unwashed flesh — and another scent, faint but unpleasant, hard to pin down. They all paled to the rich musk of her skin, her breath, her sweat. She needed a shower of course — they both could use a good scrubbing. Even synthetic skin got ripe after running around the Commonwealth for days at a time. Maybe in the morning he'd show her how waterproof he really was — and how long he could hold his breath.

But until then, this moment was his, and his alone. Not Prewar Nick. Not Nyx or Jenny or whatever the hell she was — it was his own, and it was sacred and brief — all too brief. Like love and life. Like all good things when they end.

She was dreaming now, a nightmare by the way her heart pitter-pattered in her chest. Her leg twitched over his thighs as if trying to run. Should he wake her? Wasn't there a myth or something about waking a human — ah no, never mind. That was sleepwalking.

"Nora, hey doll." He jostled her a bit. She gave a frightened whimper and clutched him, her breath coming in ragged spurts like a panicking radstag. She buried her head in the crook of his armpit, damping the skin there with her tears. With everything Nora had gone through, a few bad dreams...
were expected — even obligatory. But it wasn't right letting her suffer like this, letting her cry for nothing. He jostled her harder.

"Wake up, Nora. Wake up now —"

Her head jerked upright and she cried out, eyes unfocused and wild. She didn't smack him a good one, but with her hair hanging in her face and teeth bared, she looked more feral than human. Her cheeks, satin slick in his hands — *mind your metal paw, you dolt* — and hot with surging blood. He tried to calm her. "Visiting the wrong side of dreamland weren't ya? Well, you're here with me now. You're safe."

"Dreaming?" She cleared her throat and blinked at him, seeing him finally. Then she said something in despair, something that made his coolant turn to ice. "I couldn't find it."

"What?" He sat up and yanked on the prewar lamp. She shrank from the light, and from him. Some sense entered her expression - and with it, an extra helping of fear. "Nora, what did you say?"

She shook her head, refusing to say it again. She scooted further toward the end of the bed, childlike in her attempt to avoid his eyes. "Sorry, Nick. I don't know. It's all fuzzy now."

"You remember fine. You're lying to me."

"No, it's nothing. Nothing happened — "

She tried to escape his hands, but he caught her and pinned her under him. They both gasped at the contact. Her legs parted and so did her lips. Her breath now quickened for an altogether different reason. All it took was one roll of her hips, and that subroutine consumed him. But this was different than last time. Something darker behind the scripted commands, an instinct of sorts, but not in the physical sense. Not his programming either. It was deeper. Primal. Her desire for him and his sudden, urgent need to possess her. Conquer her. Make her his own.

*Mine, yes, something that's mine...finally.*

He pulled her onto his lap and entered her in one movement, her sheath hot and tight and more than eager to take him in. Trapped between the headboard and his body, she squirmed and bucked, hissing with displeasure when he refused to set a rhythm. Couldn't help but punish her a little, make her work for the ride. He teased her ear between his teeth, chuckling lowly as she dragged her nails over his back in retaliation. He switched pace again, quick, shallow thrusts. She mewled in frustration, panting, "Nick, please, please."

He slowed, his framework hand knuckle-deep in the wall. More holes for Hancock to peep with. His newfound need took control of the wheel, steering him deeper and faster, coolant and fans a meaningless buzz in his ears.

*I couldn't find it.*

Not possible. It wasn't possible, goddamnit. She was human. How could Nyx get to her? Autopilot, switching angles, making her head drop back and her spine arch. He swelled inside her, his body not his own anymore. But was it ever? Nora's groan reverberated, almost masculine, a dark knell that his own voice answered. Sensor warnings blinked and died. Sensations were coming faster than his processor could handle. A stretching feeling inside, like too many strings being plucked. He was an instrument on the verge of splintering.

But he didn't. She held him together, her legs around his waist, bracing him. Her arms ensnared him. They anchored each other. Neck to neck, mouth to mouth, merging as one body, one mind, their
connection beyond organic and synthetic. Ineffable, unnatural and yet...right. Ensnared in its throes, she clawed his back, begging him harder. *Don't be gentle. Fuck me, damn you.* He obeyed, his thrusts on the edge of brutal. She bit his shoulder and clamped around him, milked what he had left, wrung him dry, left him quivering and weak. His diagnostics wrestled control from that subroutine, gave it a cold shower in the form of fans and coolant. An internal chime warned him to tend his shoulder. His dame sure had a helluva love bite.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" She kissed the teeth marks and rubbed his shoulder as if that would make it all better.

"Don't fret about it. I've gotten worse bites from molerats."

"Really?"

"Can't very well tell my dame she's got a pair of choppers that can chew through metal can I?"

She socked him gently in the chest and he chuckled. But then another internal chime dinged, and this time it was reality calling, the real reason for round two. He pulled out of her, but kept her on his lap. She avoided his eyes and rested her chin on his unbitten shoulder. Her breath shuttered in and out, the throb of her pulse audible to his ears.

"If this is gonna work between us, no more secrets. Tell me what you know, Nora. All of it. Please."

The lamplight turned her baby blues into a stormy gray. Flickering expressions like lightning flashes. Rolling clouds of conflicting emotions. Her face turned to the side as if bearing a forceful gale. "I saw Jenny."

His processor didn't stutter to a halt, but there was a significant pause and resume. A mental hiccup. *Alright, you expected that much. Now let's dump over this can of worms and see what we get.* "You mean at the Den, right? The way I saw you."

"Yes...and no."

Her eyes flitted to his and then away like a darting stingwing. She settled on a point over his shoulder and took her time in saying what was on her mind. Had no choice but to be patient and wait for the inevitable nail in his coffin lid. "I saw the prewar Nick. He — he was so different than you, all burly and ginger, and so...human. He was dancing with her, with Jenny. A Lindy hop. Do you remember those?"

"Yeah, vaguely. But nothing with Jenny though. What else did you see?" *Let it be a bunch of jumbled memories with a cameo appearance by Nyx/Jenny. Let it be that simple.*

"Nick, the other Nick, he was in the street. I'm not sure where. Jenny was in his arms, dying, or already dead — I don't know. There was so much blood. It was all over him and her and on the street. It was fucking horrible. He was crying and holding her like a child. Rocking her. I'm so sorry, Nick." She sniffled and wiped her nose, her hair a dark veil hiding her face. He lifted it and kissed her tenderly.

"Don't worry about that none. It was over two hundred years ago. And yeah, I remember like it was me, but it wasn't. It was him. His girl. His...cross to bear." *Now who's telling white lies?*

"I saw Nick after. In his apartment with pictures all over his wall. A few were Jenny's, but the rest were pictures of different men connected to one man, someone called Eddie Winter. I think you, I mean, the other Nick was trying to find him."
"He was trying to bring Winter to justice." Now he was the one playing hard to get with his eyes, watching the curtains flutter, counting the tattered flowers of the lace — and all the while spinning his web of half truths. Careful now, fool, don't get tangled. "Didn't succeed, though. Eddie disappeared…and Nick, well uh, he did too in a sense."

"Where? Do you remember?"

"No, I can't, no matter how hard I try. Get nothing but gray snow after the phone call."

"The neural transference?"

"So you saw that too." She nodded and fiddled with the nightstand lamp's chain. Antique brass against ivory. His fingers replaced the chain. Her callused knuckles, still bruised from Greentech, from the Commonwealth. All her prewar softness hardening, becoming iron. "Not sure why I can't recall the actual procedure. Maybe it was traumatic — though losing Jenny was the worse thing that'd ever happened to the poor bastard. I can't see how some science experiment could top that. It's a mystery, one I've been working on since the day I climbed out of the trash heap. Learned quite a few things over the years. Not much, but maybe…maybe after this Institute business is over, you can help me with it."

She threaded her fingers through his, contemplating. "I'd like that, Nick. I would. But there's more… I need to tell you."

Yep, here comes that nail.

"There was a beach. And dead fish all over the sand. Piles and piles of them, as far as I could see. The ocean was blood red and boiling. It felt like the world had ended again, but in a new, terrible way. And Jenny was there too — but a different Jenny, if that makes sense? It wasn't the woman bleeding out on the road, or the woman in Nick's pictures. She was different. Alien somehow. And cruel. I thought, maybe, she was you — some part of you at least. We were dealing with all this mental shit already, and it just made sense, you know? Or maybe she was a manifestation of the original Nick. Everything he loved was gone."

She whispered the last part and wiped her nose with her hand, and then her hand on the sheet, a careless, automatic gesture. She frowned. "But that was in the Den. I woke up and Doctor Amari implied that I imagined the entire thing. That I'd been alone. So I tried to forget it, told myself it was a dream. But I saw her again just now. Same beach and same dress. She kept smiling in this awful way, like she'd won something. She wouldn't let me leave, said I had to help her find it. That I…had to help her now that I was a part of you — Nick? Hey, hey what — "

He dodged her hands, giving her a little taste of her own medicine without meaning to. How had she caught his dream? He had checked himself in Sanctuary. Tasted himself. There had been nothing there. Salt and water and thickener. Nothing else. Nothing that could explain this.

"Where are you going? Come back to bed. Talk to me."

"No, this needs sorting out on my own."

He grabbed his pants. The bed springs squeaked and she stumbled to him, breasts swaying, tempting him to stop overreacting and take her again, leave no part of her unexplored or unclaimed. But no… no, that'd just make it worse. He was diseased. He was fucking contagious.

"I did this to you, Nora. There's nothing…I can say. Sorry ain't gonna cut it. Not even close. I missed something, somehow. It doesn't make any damn sense. You shouldn't be seeing her."
"It's Nyx, isn't it? That part of you Virgil mentioned. It's more than some component. What is she?"

"Hell if I know, and hell if I'm going to let this bitch make your life as miserable as she's made mine."

"What else has she done? Tell me —"

Like a bastard, he shrugged her off as she tried to hug him. "No. I won't do this to you. I'm not worth it." Naked, but as vulnerable as a goddess, she balled her fists, eyes fierce and shining. Yes, hate him. It made this easier.

She didn't stop him as he snatched his coat and fedora. Didn't beg him to stay as he opened the door. She stood there rigid, Aphrodite infuriated by her Hephaestus.

But the moment the door closed, her muffled sob tore his heart in two.

He didn't go far. Goodneighbor wasn't as big as Diamond City, but there were plenty of nooks and crannies to lick one's wounds. Problem was, most of those crannies were already occupied. Where there wasn't a drifter flopped on a dirty mattress, there was one of the Neighborhood Watch boys catching a cat nap or lighting up a stogie. The Den was closed, and checking in at the Hotel Rexford would be a slap in Hancock's face, being his honored guest and all. Even the Third Rail had shut its doors for a few scant hours before morning invited the bleary-eyed crowd back for Charlie's Early Bird Special. And that was too bad. Magnolia's singing always soothed the nerves, synthetic included.

The stench of charred flesh hung thick and oily in the air, making the old olfactors quiver in disgust. So that's what the source of that smell was. Hancock, true to his word, had shoved the Courser's head on a pike and lit it on fire. Z2's head still smoldered next to an American flag in the center of Main Street — a big middle finger to the Institute if they happened to be watching — which they probably were. Couldn't shake that feeling either. Since the Glowing Sea, there had been this sense of being corralled, like he and Nora were two stupid sheep being herded to their pen (or he the slaughterhouse) by a cold, ruthless shepherd. In all his years "alive", his creators have never been this close, this interested, in his comings and goings before.

And all for her.

The bench in front of KLEO's gun shop made a nice spot to play Woe Is Me. No one around except KLEO herself, who paused in the midst of counting her lethal inventory to fix him him with a singular red glare. Probably adding him to her list of potential targets, the crazy bot. Didn't matter how sexy she sounded, she wasn't right in the processor. KLEO went back to her inventory with a thoughtful hum, and he went back to his gloom and doom thoughts.

The Institute wanted Shaun. Nora wanted Shaun back. Nyx wanted something she - it - probably shouldn't get its incorporeal hands on. And he wanted Nora safe. Her boy safe, and Nyx and the Institute just to go the fuck away. But most of all he wanted Nora. Didn't matter how long she had in this world, or him for that matter. He wanted her. The to have and to hold kind of want - if she was willing, that was. How hard it must have been for her to confide in him, to trust he wouldn't think she was crazy — and what did he do? Ran away again. Left her naked and angry. Way to go, jackass.

"Cap for your thoughts, Valentine?"

Didn't have to look up to know who had joined him. If charisma had a scent, it'd be grape mentats and fancy leather. "Can't make the change."
"Then I'll give you two caps." Hancock sidled over on the bench, ignoring personal boundaries as always. Shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh and the bench arm left no room to scooch over. Lucky for Hancock he was tired of pushing back. Tired of fighting with himself. Tired of all this shit.

"I don't deserve her, Hancock."

"Figure you'd say something stupid like that. Look, you deserve her and she deserves you. End of discussion. So enjoy it, brother. Go back inside and be her synth body pillow."

"I was, for a while."

"I know. We heard."

Shit, how loud had they been? He hunched over his knees and pulled his fedora a little lower. "Did you watch too?"

"Course I did. Red made me stop though. She lost the bet and had to pay me."

"Not even gonna ask what that bet was on. You got no shame, do ya?"

"Not one bit." Then softly, and with an intimate nudge. "You both were beautiful, you know that? Like art in motion. They made you right, Nicky."

The coolant churned a little at that, but not with the indignation he expected. "I should be insulted for her sake, but can't really muster it at the moment."

"Hey, be flattered, Nick. This is me we're talking about."

"Yeah, Mayor Hancock peeping at his guests. Shoudla expected it. Be like gettin' mad at a dog for chewing the furniture."

"Ouch." Hancock feigned a wounded wince and rested his arm on the back of the bench. "Well, now that I've gotten my scolding for the day, ya gonna tell me why you're out here and not in bed with your very vocal Vault girl?"

"It's...complicated."

"For fuck's sake, Nick."

He straightened and shot Hancock a glare KLEO would be proud of. "You wouldn't understand the half of it, and the half you would understand you'd just think I was nuts."

"Try me, Valentine." A challenge in that, Hancock skipping I dare you and going straight for I double dare you. "You and I go too far back to play these kind of shit games with each other. Tell it like it is, brother. I can see you're hurting. Let me help you." That last with a plaintive note, Hancock softening his expression, the ghost of the human he used to be flickering under the scarred skin. Hard sometimes to remember John Hancock had once been John McDonough, a scrawny kid and even scrawnier teenager, knocking on his office door, defying stern parental commands to "stay away from the synth". John would stay for hours, playing cards, playing holotapes, and occasionally playing secretary since back in those days no one had had the courage to work for him. Hadn't done too shabby of a job either, though his spelling could've used some polish.

Those were the days, though. When the detective hat was new and the cases were actually fun. But what had happened to that kid? And why hadn't he stopped it from happening? Reeled him in when John started drifting away, started hanging with the wrong sorts of folks, started addicting himself to
chems, and started that lonely, winding road that would lead him here, to this bench, a scrawny kid no more, but a Mayor of a town, and a ghoul instead of a man. They had been friends, partners in a sense, but somewhere along the way, Hancock had lost his way — but maybe it all worked out for the better. Maybe the wrong choices sometimes do lead down the right paths in the end. What was that prewar saying? Everything happens for a reason.

So he told Hancock most of it, from the moment he met Nora in Vault 114, to the moment he left her in the State House. Omitted a few details that were too intimate for sharing (and what Hancock hadn't already witnessed), like his bumbling attempts at courtship, and the worst of Nora's jet addiction — and don't even think of offering her that junk, "brother", cause she can't handle the chems — to which Hancock grunted his disappointment, but nodded and tapped his fingers, impatient for the rest. When he got to Virgil and Greentech, he faltered, sputtering it out as he remembered it, the revelation of somehow escaping the Institute, and the horror of almost losing Nora to Z2, the promises of a slow torture, and plummeting two stories because the bastard wouldn't die alone. "Glad I set that son-of-a-bitch's head on fire," said Hancock, grinding his jaw.

But no comment when Nyx finally made her entrance in the tale, her part in saving his life given in halting reluctance, and then having to backtrack a little, to the dreams he'd had all his life, and then fast forwarding to a hour or so ago when Nora woke with the same dream, and how he bullied her into telling him everything (leaving out those details for obvious reasons). And how he took it all like a champ and ran away from her. As he told this part, he stared at the street and fiddled with the loose screw in his wrist until the damn thing fell out.

Hancock watched in silence as the screw twisted back in place, face unreadable, black eyes damn impenetrable. It was a mistake telling him all this. Who in their right mind would believe it? Being saved by a mysterious presence in his brain. Dreaming the same dream. How stupid that sounded. How —

"You're telling me this freaky bitch in your head, is now in Nora's?" Hancock made a hmm noise and reclined on the bench, his arm still stretched in the same position — like they were on a date and he was putting on the moves. Gnarled fingers tapped slow and deliberate, one, two, three. "Dreaming each other's dreams. That's some soulmate shit right there."

"Damn it, John, you're missing the point. This thing in my head is supposed to stay in my head — if it should be there at all. And now it's in her. Don't you think that's a mighty bit concerning? Just a little?"

"Okay, let's lay this all on the table right now." Hancock stayed relaxed, but his voice said, hey, listen up, pal. "I don't know what those eggheads put in your head and I'm not even gonna try understanding it — or what you've been going through all these years with these dreams. But I know why you didn't tell me before. Hell, it might have even freaked the old me out, so I don't blame ya for keeping it quiet. But the new me, the improved me, thinks this thing in your metal skull is all riled up - or maybe been triggered somehow with everything that's been going on. You go from dumping it every night to now talking to the damn thing — and now your girl has to hear it bitch too. Did ya ever consider just doing what it wants?" Hancock gave him a well, did ya? kind of shrug.

"Don't you think I've tried asking it what I'm supposed to find? I tried for years. It never says."

"So it wants to be mysterious, huh? I get it. Then all I got left in the way of advice, Nick, is to look this horse in its ugly ass mouth. The only ones who know what this Nyx bitch really is are the ones who put it there in the first place."

"I'm not crawling back to them for answers. Fuck the Institute."
"I agree, brother, wholeheartedly, but you know I'm right. And if this Virgil won't spill his green guts, then find someone who will. And when you do, you take 'em by the throat and you make 'em tell you everything. And you make 'em tell you how to fix it, and if they don't..." Hancock eased off the bench and fluffed the frilled collar of his dress shirt. "You bring 'em to me."

"Heh, I will if Nora leaves anything left of them...if she's still with me at all."

"Yeah, about that. Here's what you're gonna do. You're going back to the State House and making nice with your Vault girl. Make nice multiple times. Tell her you love her and you're an idiot, and you'll never leave her like that again unless she leaves you — and if she does leave you...well, don't tell her what will happen."

"Hancock..."

Hancock smiled at the growled threat. "Don't worry, brother. I wouldn't hurt her. Give her a severe verbal lashing maybe, but never hurt her. And it's only because I love you, Nick. Always have. Loved you as a kid and never stopped. Not even when you stayed in that shining shit hole Diamond City and I left for not-so-greener pastures. Was a little pissed at ya though, to be honest, but only because you didn't come with me."

Stunned wasn't a strong enough word. Nor was astonished. Something that combined the two, maybe. What was it with all these revelations tonight? Was it the full moon? "John...you coulda told me. Why the hell didn't you ever..." He let it trail off because it seemed too big to finish. Hancock looked at the moon in question, pondering on it a moment before shaking off whatever he didn't want showing on his face. Couldn't get rid of all of it though, the melancholy lift of his lips, the glistening at the corners of his dark eyes. The hug was awkward and brotherly and went on a little too long before Hancock smacked him on the back and chuckled sadly.

"Never mind me, Nicky. I'm higher than the top of Trinity Tower right now. Glad I could be your shoulder tonight. Glad you let me, and that you trusted me enough. We all got our secrets, brother, but some shouldn't be kept so long, you feel me?"

"Yeah..." he said to the empty bench and to Hancock's retreating swagger. "I feel you."

He walked the length of Goodneighbor and back because apologies took a while to rehearse and he wasn't going in without a damn good one. I got scared, Nora. I'm sorry. No, too simple. I'm sorry, doll. I ran off because the thought of Nyx passing to you scared the hell out of me. Better, but it needed more. I screwed up, I know, and I wouldn't blame ya if you want to keep things between us professional from now on - by then hopefully she'd tell him to shut the hell up and drag him back to bed.

The State House glowed under the moon, the faded brick washed white. Outside the guest bedroom where Nora awaited his return, or had fallen into an exhausted sleep, a dark shape shifted on the balcony. He stopped, and so did it. Perched in place, avian head cocked in his direction. Watching. Glinting eyes. A sheen of black feathers. A raven at night. There was nothing more ominous than that.

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only

That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.

Ancient prose even by prewar standards, prose that wasn't part of his programming to know. Didn't come from prewar Nick either. Nick's form of literature was the TV Guide or Penthouse. These lines were from an old book of poems he'd rescued while out on a case, one of several books he'd found
in a locked safe, the owner someone who'd treasured knowledge above material possessions, who'd tried to cram as many volumes as they could inside before succumbing to radiation poisoning, a wisp of a skeleton curled around a pile of shredded texts, their contents lost like one who died to save them. Saddest damn thing he'd ever saw. But that sacrifice hadn't been for nothing. He'd committed every book to his memory banks. Every page. Every line. Someone should remember.

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing

To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;

This fowl had no fiery eyes, but they certainly weren't birdlike. Nor was the human cant of its head. It hopped, deliberate and delicate, aware of its talons and how to keep quiet. This bird was nowhere near normal.

Synthetic. If they could make you, dummy, why not a simple bird? This is how they've been watching us, keeping track of our movements. Clever bastards.

The street was deserted. Hancock was paying his boys too much. His revolver raised. The raven hopped in front of the window, its tail feathers twitching up and fanning out like yeah, try shooting me now, asshole. The little shit. He'd hit it fine enough, but a .44 round would go right though its feathered body, break the glass, give Nora a heart attack, and wake up the entire neighborhood. Then Hancock's boys would earn their caps aplenty. The raven pivoted on the railing, facing him square, its glossy head moving back and forth, getting a hard long looksie at him. He holstered the gun and tipped his hat. Hope it had his good side.

"Hey, whoever's watching up there, pass this along to Father would ya? Your days of hiding are numbered. You took the wrong boy and pissed off the wrong woman. And your biggest mistake? Creating me. And maybe you don't think I'm a threat. Maybe I'm just an old prototype not worth a damn, but it's your Courser's head burning on that pike, not mine. All those bells and whistles ya gave him didn't mean shit in the end. He died by my hand, and mine alone. Don't underestimate me, Father, because I'm coming for you next."

The raven uttered a series of low, brassy croaks as if sneering at him. Then it alighted, its graceful form melting into the indigo sky. Behind the window appeared a mess of dark hair and a pale, drawn face. Nora looked down at him, her expression going from bewildered to relieved. She put her hand on the glass, and he raised his in return. Humans could show their emotions with a glance, their eyes an extension of their innermost desires, yearnings, and fears. These eyes of his, glass and metal and filament, a mockery of that window to the soul — but whatever Nora saw in them made her blink back tears. This shell of his, so inadequate. So damn limited. What's the point of living forever if you can't even cry? So he serenaded her with a loving nod and a doff of his fedora. Yeah, I'm coming home, doll.

Poe's poem stayed with him up the stairs, through the door, and into her arms, no questions asked, just her pulling his clothes off again and loving him with a tender desperation that he matched caress for caress, thrust for thrust. The love of the damned, the condemned, the foolish brave.

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, 'still' is sitting

On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;

And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming.

And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor

Shall be lifted—nevermore!

Chapter End Notes

OMG, I think this is my shortest chapter. Maybe.

The unrequited Hancock/Nick blink-you'll-miss-it is my shout out to all the stories with that pairing.

I watched one of Oxhorn's vids on youtube (he has a bunch of great ones on Fallout 4's lore) about the Institute, and realized I'd forgotten all about the Watchers. I figured including one would up the creep factor -- since it was perched outside the window for...a long time. And yes, it saw everything.

Sorry I didn't have them meet the Railroad yet. Definitely next chapter. This was intended to BE the Railroad chapter but I started writing and realized all these elements needed to be revealed and dealt with for their relationship to mature. I don't do filler chapters, though this comes pretty close by my standards. I can't cut it though because it deals with some plot heavy stuff. Nick and Nora airing things out. Hancock knowing about Nyx, and then this chapter starts setting up the Eddie Winter confrontation. Can't do chapter 14 on Eddie and have Nick spring it out of nowhere, lol.

Anyway, now I have two chapters to PG 13 for fanfiction.net. Sorry to those people over there. I might just say screw it and post as is. If I'm removed, eh, no big loss.

Hopefully it won't be ten years before I post the next chapter. Apologies about the delay!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!