The Desperate Ones

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Summary

The Lone Wanderer gets Amata's distress signal and has to decide whether to return and help her friend. Multi-chapter story with some action, drama, and romance.

Notes

This Fallout fic and the characterization of my lone wanderer was inspired by the Nina Simone song "The Desperate Ones." The song's moodiness, its lyrics, and haunting tone seemed the perfect background music to a nuclear wasteland where people try to survive while coping with depression, trauma, and loss.

For each chapter title, I'll take inspiration from a relevant song.
Keelah didn’t know which sound was loudest. The grating shriek of the vault door as it closed in front of her—locking her out forever—or the cacophonous hammering of her own miserable heart.

Only her left ear worked properly, but it was enough. The siren-like noise still managed to cut through her, and at the final snick of metal meeting metal, the teenager suffered an unexpected paroxysm that sent her eyelids blinking furiously and her fingernails tearing into fever-slick palms.

She couldn’t believe it. Amata had practically begged her to return to Vault 101. Begged.

Her voice wavering over the radio transmitter in a way that was uncharacteristic of the natural leader. She’d sounded so needful.

Keelah had returned. Like Amata had requested. Yet here she was again. Outside. Outsider.

Damn Amata for doing this.

. . . . . . . . . .

I hope you’re still alive to hear this…

She and Charon had made it through the first leg of their supply circuit when the distress signal pinged on her Pip-boy. Keelah’s surprise at hearing Amata’s voice made her stop so suddenly that Charon crashed into her from behind, dropping his rucksack and spilling supplies all across the uneven road.

The ill-tempered ghoul exclaimed crossly as water bottles and dried meat skittered through sand and browned trash. Dogmeat sniffed at a rehydrated Brahmin steak with some interest, but the canine knew better than to take advantage of his companions’ clumsiness. He ambled off instead to relieve himself against a mound of protruding rock that could have just as easily been bone.

Keelah murmured an apology in Charon’s direction and absentmindedly reached for the fallen goods, but she was too distracted by the distress signal to be much help. Her unfocused hands continued to find empty cellophane wrappers, broken sticks and such; and when the teen tried to hand Charon a dented cup, thinking it was a can of Pork-N-Beans, the combat merc finally elbowed the young woman out of the way and picked up his own supplies.

Keelah apologized again as she replayed the message.

If you can hear this, please stop looking for your father and help stop mine…

Keelah felt faint. She was dehydrated (Or experiencing withdrawal. It was difficult, sometimes, to determine which thirst was seizing her). The humidity didn’t help things. The sun was high and angry, and Keelah was still getting accustomed to the persistent mugginess after spending nineteen
years living in a temperature-controlled vault.

Still, the teenager was cognizant enough to know that the dizziness that gripped her now had nothing to do with weather or thirstiness. It was the distress signal that was making her hands tremble. It was Amata.

It had been so long since she’d heard her friend’s voice. One hundred and forty days to be exact.

(Not that she was counting. The Pip-boy just recorded things like that).

Amata sounded so worried. Fearful. Even through the static of the transmission, Keelah could hear the panic in her friend’s voice. And it wasn’t like Amata to be anxious. The young woman had been raised by a politician. She’d been trained to exhibit competence and composure at all times.

Keelah almost spoke aloud, a reassurance to her aggrieved friend (‘Mata, No worries. I’m here.’), but then she remembered that it was a canned voice speaking to her and not her friend.

Her mouth twisted. She had enough one-sided relationships with canned voices as it was.

The teenager knelt on the cracked ground and traced a fingernail through dirt. She needed to consider her options. The last time she’d been in Vault 101 she’d been given a farewell of bullets and accusations. Life in the wastes had since conditioned her to such things, but it wasn’t the same: staring down the barrel of a friend’s gun rather than a raider’s.

If she returned to the vault, what would her welcome be?

*If you still care enough to help me...*

She could feel Charon watching her; his six foot frame providing limited shade from the copper-colored sun.

As a rule, they never paused for very long in the wasteland. Idleness was reserved for setting up camp or for waiting in ambush for an enemy. Yet here Keelah was, drawing indistinct patterns in the dirt while potential antagonists drifted closer.

The teenager sighed. She knew she was procrastinating. Being a baby about things. She should be running headfirst into whatever problem was currently bedeviling Amata. But she knew, deep down, that the bravado she needed for such a task was absent. Long gone. She’d lost a bit of her tenacity these past few months. Lost the teeth and swagger that a fight with Overseer Almodovar would require. It was why she’d been reduced to being little more than a trader these days, traversing the Capital Wasteland with food stuffs and ratty clothes to sell when she could have been a paladin in the Brotherhood of Steel or one of Reilly’s intrepid rangers.

She’d lost the fight with herself. With the wastes. She’d lost her father.

Not even a month ago. The scientist had been so willing to play sacrificial lamb when no one required it of him. Chosen to die in an irradiated fog rather than walk away from Project Purity. But somehow he’d managed to walk away from her. His own daughter. It was an incongruity Keelah still had trouble reconciling.

She played his holotapes daily. Stretched out on the rusting floor of her bedroom in Megaton and let his voice hold sway. Memorized the passages about her mother. Replayed those first seconds that captured her mom’s voice. And when her father’s world-weary tenor got to be too much, when it dissolved her into a convulsive state that even Wadsworth couldn’t decipher, she’d turn on the jukebox and get the latest news from Three Dog. Or she’d turn to Agatha’s station and let the baleful
wail of the Soil Stradivarius override her despair.

The holotapes her father left behind, the BB gun, the silly Bobblehead that used to crown his desk—they were poor substitutes for a parent. They were also painful reminders that possessions outlived people.

Keelah cupped a handful of grainy dirt as her eyes tracked the wastes. She let the rough granules trickle through her fingers before collecting them again. Repeat.

She’d thrown a fistful of dirt into the Potomac after her father died. It was the closest she’d gotten to a burial. His body had already been gone when she’d woken from her coma after the blast at Jefferson Memorial.

_It’s been taken care of_, was all Elder Lyons would say when she inquired about the body. And none of the scribes would meet her gaze. So Keelah had marched to the irradiated shore of the Potomac. Thrown dirt into the water when she’d really wanted to submerge herself.

The guilt was something else. It left a hole where her heart should have been. To still have so much resentment for her father even after he’d died. How did the rancor manage to survive? Why did it occupy as much space as the grief?

She and her father hadn’t had time to resolve the tension between them—her bitterness at him abandoning her in the vault; his exasperation at her unwillingness to sacrifice for Project Purity.

She’d tried to bury these memories and feelings. Transformed her mind into a grave. Dust to dust Keelah. Sublimate this shit.

But if she went back to 101 it would have all been for naught. She’d be forced to remember, and she’d worked too damned hard to forget and forget.

This grueling schedule she and Charon had been on this this past month—the supply runs to smaller townships; never-ending tasks for the Brotherhood of Steel. It had all been an effort to keep her muddled feelings at bay; to help her keep grip on what constituted sanity in this godforsaken desert.

And when the travel and exhaustion weren’t enough to subdue her discordant thoughts, there was always whiskey. Plenty enough left in crates and ramshackle houses to offer reprieve from this…thing that wanted to unmercifully claw its way out of her throat.

She loved Amata. That is…she liked her (love had lost its allure some time ago), but if she went back to 101 she’d jeopardize the little bit of numbness she’d been fortunate enough to find. And she needed the numbness. She needed the weightlessness and insensitivity that enabled her to fire heavy weapons into bodies so soft and pliable that they performed ballet in death.

She needed that kind of absence of self that made fucking a stranger in a burnt out car tolerable instead of tragic.

But if she returned…

She’d have to care about something again. She’d be forced to feel. And Keelah suspected (No, she was certain), that she’d lost the capacity for such human emotion.

But her eyes betrayed her.

If Charon saw the sudden moisture in her eyes, he didn’t mention it. The stoic merc turned his back, becoming the wall Keelah needed at the moment.
The teenager stood and rubbed away the moisture that she’d already reimagined as sweat. When her hands begged for something more to do, she began swiping at the dirt that had settled on her armor.

The self-grooming was meaningless. Dirt was unavoidable in the Capital Wastes. For wastelanders, dirt/dust had become lip balm, sun screen, a skin color all its own. It was and was.

So Keelah let the dirt be.

Shit.

“Change of plans Charon. Why don’t you head back to Underworld? I’ll meet up with you in a few days to finish the drop-offs.”

All of their deliveries this week had been non-priority parcels anyway. Sugar Bomb and Nuka Cola requests that could be ignored for a while.

Charon turned to face her, his face inscrutable. With the sun at this height, his skin looked almost translucent, brand new.

“You don’t require me on the mission?” he queried gruffly.

“No. This job isn’t…uh... a combat situation.”

At least Keelah hoped it wasn’t. When she’d fled the vault the first time, she’d left with a splintered baseball bat and a ruptured ear drum.

Charon lifted what remained of his right eyebrow but asked no questions. He never asked questions.

“I’ll wait until you return for me,” he husked.

He fished a bottle of water from his rucksack and lobbed it at Keelah. The ghoul wasn’t talkative (Hell, Dogmeat made more noise than him), but recently he’d begun to grumble that Keelah drank too much liquor. And after an incident in Underworld when she’d shared a late-night drink with Patchwork and promptly passed out for two days, Charon made sure to carry extra water whenever they traveled. (He’d also threatened to end Patchwork if he ever shared Wasteland Whiskey with Keelah again).

Whenever Charon felt Keelah was getting too parched on the road, or he’d notice her hand twitching for the flask at her side, he’d throw a bottle of water at her. He didn’t care if she caught the bottle or not. There was a message in his aggressive delivery of the water. And if that message was on the nose, then, well...

Keelah stared down at the purified water with a frown. She didn’t appreciate Charon’s meddling and had reminded him on more than one occasion that her affairs were her own. She was competent at her job and kept them both in caps, so what if she drank herself silly from time to time. It was her business.

She would have to yell this time to get her point across.

But whatever rebuke she had for Charon dissolved when she saw the merc stop and pat Dogmeat’s head.

The combat veteran wasn’t affectionate. He spoke in monosyllables and rarely expressed an opinion. Yet all of a sudden he was flinging water bottles and petting dogs. It was...unsettling.
Charon knew they weren’t friends, right?

Yes, Keelah insisted he wear a helmet whenever they traveled the wastes; and yeah, he would frown disapprovingly whenever she overencumbered her pack with liquor but still insist on carrying it. But this was a business arrangement they had between them. Nothing more.

She didn’t want his worry. Didn’t ask anything of him but good aim and better stealth.

Keelah watched her stoic companion shuffle away. They’d have to have another good long chat when they reconvened at Underworld. Review their arrangement. Set some boundaries.

The teenager scowled again at the bottle of water before stuffing it into her satchel and whistling for Dogmeat.

They were maybe a mile away from Vault 101. Half that if she cut through Springvale. She’d wasted enough time with her indecision and re-memory. They would need to run.

But she supposed she could spare an extra minute to make sure Charon made it past the sewer waystation. The sprawling building had become a hotbed for raiders, and a horde of the gun-happy marauders would be too much for a lone wanderer.

Keelah watched through her sniper rifle until Charon became a speck in the distance.

Then she ran.

Chapter End Notes

*Wasteland Whiskey is whisky “enhanced” with acid from fission batteries. It’s a nod to Marguerite’s moonshine from the Point Lookout DLC. Was I the only one who thought Marguerite was cute? Loved that accent.
Chapter Summary

En route to Vault 101, the Lone Wander recalls the events of her escape.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two: He Knew the Verb “To Love” But Never Knew How

Keelah replayed Amata’s message as she ran. She wanted to listen for any extra details, decipher her friend’s tone so she could be better prepared for whatever awaited her in Vault 101.

My father’s gone mad with power…

Keelah scowled. Overseer Almodovar had been mad with power. The stern-faced despot controlled every aspect of the vaulters’ lives from their work assignments to their social activities to their meal rations. He regulated which books were allowed in the library; reviewed and edited school curriculum. He’d even inserted himself into the GOAT exam, the pompous ass.

And the overseer seemed not to give one single damn that Amata paid the price for his austerity and tyranny. Incapable of directly challenging the overseer’s authority, vaulters who had a bone to pick with him focused their ire on Amata.

Some vaulters shunned her, suspecting she was a mole sent by her father to gather intel. Others reasoned that Amata would be overseer one day and ingratiated themselves to painful degrees in order to curry favor. Still others, like Butch and the Tunnel Snakes, went out of their way to mock and harass the good-natured teen. Even though their insults were juvenile (Butch’s go-to invective was “twerp”), their sexual innuendo and proclivity for brandishing switchblades made them legitimately threatening.

Time and time again, Keelah found herself having to come to Amata’s aid. Those confrontations usually ended with either her or one of the Tunnel Snakes in the infirmary.

Keelah defended her friend with her fists. Overseer Almodovar didn’t intercede on Amata’s behalf at all. He watched them all from his glass paneled office but couldn’t be bothered with the day-to-day humdrum of the vault rabble. Instead he let his security officers settle most vault disputes.

His indifference infuriated Keelah, and the teenager anxiously awaited the day she’d get to call him on his bull. She got her opportunity when the overseer’s computer terminal experienced an unexpected power surge and died. With Stanley busy repairing the vault water filter, his tech intern, Keelah, was assigned to the repair.

Keelah set off for the overseer office with toolkit in hand and a stream of epithets in mind. She knew her father would be mortified that she’d insult the overseer, but she figured any punishment she received would be well worth it. It was high time someone challenged the egotistic man.

Their showdown had to wait though. The damn computer was emitting sparks by the time she got to it, and she dove headfirst into her formidable task.
After two hours of rewiring and hard resets, she’d finally been able to fix the terminal and she decided to celebrate her success by confronting the overseer once and for all.

He’d been hovering over her shoulder the entire time, snippily supervising a task he didn’t understand. Keelah exploded.

“Why don’t you redirect that energy to Amata?!” Her words had been practically spat. “It’s not easy for her, you know? Being the overseer’s daughter?”

The overseer had seem surprised that the teenage technician would even address him. “Pardon me?”

“She gets picked on constantly. Ostracized. It’s not fair to her.”

The overseer smiled. (Well, the flash of teeth was too menacing to be a smile but Keelah got the idea).

“Amata shouldn’t concern herself with such petty squabbles. She’ll be overseer one day. She’ll need a strong constitution.”

Keelah pressed down hard on the computer keys. Sent a row of unintelligible words across the computer screen.

The overseer quirked an eyebrow at her action. “Are you done, Catherine?”

He called her by her first name. He knew she hated it.

“So you won’t intervene?” Keelah asked hotly. She’d worked herself into a righteous fury. Her hands bunched into fists on the keyboard.

“Doesn’t Amata already have a protector?”

He was amused. She could it hear it in his voice, in the barely contained laughter. But there was something else in his tone. Something heavier. Jealousy?

Keelah turned and studied him. She needed a better visual to decipher the...sadness(?) she could hear in his voice.

The overseer was a small man, rail thin, nowhere near physically imposing. But his stone face and severe attitude made him intimidating, so Keelah had never really looked at him before. Even those times she’d brushed past him on the way to Amata’s bedroom, she would avert her gaze. He was just someone best viewed from the periphery or not at all.

With a closer inspection, she could see the lines around the man’s eyes. Some unnamed emotion flickered in his brown orbs and Keelah released a breath at her new understanding. Before the moment became too big between them, the overseer did an about face.

“I’ll inform Stanley that you performed satisfactorily,” he intoned before striding out of the room.

Keelah figured it was the sudden tension between them that forced his exit. But after a successful reboot of his computer, she found his private journals.

The first one:

*If Butch and his leather-clad delinquents accost Amata one more time, they'll have more to deal with than their acerbic teacher.*
Their "services" have come in handy upon occasion, I must admit, but they're starting to become... unruly. If dogs become feral, they must be put down.

So he was aware of the bullying. And he was just as pissed as Keelah.

Another entry:

Every time I try to get Amata to open up, she just pushes me further and further away. Since she was a child, I've tried to instill in her those virtues that have made this Vault what it is today: loyalty, honesty, commitment, hard work.

She does try, and with a lot of guidance has grown into a fine young woman. That makes it all the sadder that she continues to alienate me. She looks at me and sees the Overseer, not the father that has cared for her alone -- alone! -- since she was an infant.

Keelah reread the note and sighed. For such a smart man, the overseer couldn’t grasp the obvious. Amata treated him like an overseer because that was the only side of him she had access to.

Her father was a doctor, but he didn’t walk around with a stethoscope and lab coat all the damn time. He didn’t treat her like a patient!

Overseer Almodovar had gotten so caught up in being the vault leader that he’d forgotten how to be a father. He’d forgotten that being a parent wasn’t just about “instilling virtues.” It also involved laughter and general silliness and being present in those vital ways that define a parent-child relationship.

Keelah exited out of the journals.

So maybe the overseer did love Amata (he’d clearly left Keelah alone so that she could find these journal entries and be reminded of that fact); but he obviously didn’t know how to express that love.

Keelah suddenly felt grateful for having a father who was communicative and demonstrably affectionate. Yeah, her dad could be a bit detached at times. And sometimes he was too involved in his work and whatever “classified project” that kept him in his office at all hours of the night. But she never doubted his love. And he was always good for a hug or a chat (or a quick bandaging up when she’d hurt her hand against some part of Butch’s face).

Her best friend didn’t have that. Not even close.

Poor Amata.

She powered off the terminal. Collected her tools. Thought about the emotion she’d seen in Overseer Almodovar’s eyes before he’d left the room.

Shit. Her plan had been to insult him. Now she actually pitied him.

. . . . . .

Keelah paused against an overturned bus and tried to catch her breath. She was only halfway to her destination and already winded. Dogmeat panted beside her.

“Damn Dogmeat. I finally understand why you breathe so loudly when we make our way through those multi-story buildings.”

Her canine companion whined in response and Keelah removed a bottle of water from her pack to
give him a much-deserved drink. She chuckled at his enthusiastic slurps before reaching for her own bottle of purified water.

This running shit was exhausting. Especially when a person was outfitted in full leather armor with a twenty pound sniper rifle strapped to her back.

She and Charon relied primarily on stealth when crisscrossing the treacherous wastes. Slinking may have been useful for a sneak attack but it apparently did shit for a person’s cardio.

“You’d think going up and down all those ramps at Megaton would keep us fit, Dogmeat.”

Her heart was beating too fast. She felt like she needed a stimpak. Ultrajet would probably do the trick. She had a few in her pack that she intended to trade in Rivet City. But Charon would probably start throwing Sugar Bomb boxes at her if she took up the habit, so Keelah decided to make do with water. And a five…uh…ten minute break.

The brief respite gave her time to catch her breath. And think about some things. Memories from Vault 101 that were more pleasant.

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A pristine *Grognak the Barbarian* comic pressed into her hands by a smirking Amata at her tenth birthday party. Amata had been overjoyed that she’d actually managed to surprise Keelah. How the little brainiac had managed to organize a birthday party (at ten!) and get her unsociable father to participate was something Keelah would never understand. She’d repaid Amata’s generosity by splitting Old Lady Palmer’s sweetroll with her. The two of them had sullied that copy of *Grognak* with their sticky fingers. It had been Keelah’s best day in a long time.

By the time they were fourteen, Amata had become proficient at manipulating Keelah’s thick hair into the mid-sized cornrows the tomboy preferred. Neither teenager had mothers and the vault’s current barber only knew how to cut hair not fashion it so, by default, Amata became Keelah’s hair stylist.

Keelah would try not to squirm in the uncomfortable metal folding chair in Amata’s bedroom as her friend drew neat lines in her scalp with a plastic comb. Amata would hum softly while she concentrated on making perfect parallel lines of hair, and she would tut under her breath whenever Keelah fidgeted too much and messed up a part.

Keelah hated the chair and the stillness, but she loved the feel of Amata’s fingers in her scalp; took pleasure in the rhythmic hums that fell from her friend’s lips. She would redirect her fidgetiness to her feet and add the steady tap of heavy boots to Amata’s soft voice. She was drum and Amata was verse and Keelah reasoned that there was no sound more beautiful than the two of them making second-rate music.

Over the years she and Amata became some of everything to each other. Friend. Party planner. Hair stylist. Percussionist.

The vault was a claustrophobic place to be most days. And with the escalating aggressiveness of the resident knuckleheads (Butch and his gang), it was beginning to become a dangerous place to be. It was nice to have someone to escape to. To escape with.

The pair had fashioned a makeshift hideout in the reactor room. Heavy pallets made of surplus blankets and a stash of food and books hidden behind the multitudinous metal boxes and supply crates.
When the mood would strike them, they would sneak down to the lower level and laze about on their blankets as they scarfed down Nuka Colas and Sugar Bombs. Keelah would make up stories about the outside and perform piss-poor impressions of Butch. Amata would laugh hysterically at her friend’s theatrics, her eyes alight and her face relaxed for the first time that day.

Keelah loved making Amata laugh. Being the overseer’s daughter had its consequences. By nineteen, the pretty teen had been groomed to behave in a manner befitting a future overseer. She didn’t laugh as freely or tell jokes. Didn’t partake in any of the activities, both ribald and inane, that made up normal teenaged experience. She fretted instead. Hid her true self behind a mantle of leadership. The frown she seemed to carry at all times now was a permanent worry line that perfectly mirrored her father’s.

Those organizational skills that had been endearing when Amata was a ten-year-old party planner were now excessive and frantic to the point of being neurotic. There were days when Keelah didn’t even recognize her friend.

But when the two of them were “below ground”, squirreled away in their sad excuse of a hideout; secreted away from the prying eyes of a judgmental overseer/father and the slimy overtures of the Tunnel Snakes, Amata would come back to herself. She would laugh loud and free and her eyes would pierce Keelah in a way that sent a pleasant shiver down her spine.

Keelah would do impersonations and attempt clumsy handstands that imperiled them both, all in an effort to make Amata relax and be herself again.

In their quieter moments, when Keelah had exhausted herself with failed gymnastics and Amata had giggled herself back to recognition, Amata would read for the both of them, her voice echoing throughout the metal enclosure. Keelah would balance her head on Amata’s lap as her friend messed up the very cornrows she’d so painstakingly braided by running her fingers through Keelah’s thick hair again and again.

They read everything they could get their hands on. Classical works. Tech manuals. Cloyingly romantic fluff. Grognak volumes 1-14. There was little else to do for fun in the vault. Reading gave them different worlds to escape to. What an exciting deceit it could be.

The novel they returned to most often was one about adventuring children. It was full of magic. Had witches. A space-jumping father. A dog name Fortinbras.

They enjoyed the book so much that they’d violated library policy and never returned it. Instead they each took turns hiding the novel beneath their pillows. They could have kept the book in their hideout, but there was something about the book’s cover that mesmerized them. That made them want to stare at it again and again. Three tiny figures flying across a burnt orange sky. It was the most either of them had seen of a sun. It was a tableau they never tired of.

Keelah loved the novel. Was enthralled with the cover. But she took issue with certain parts of the story.

“I can hear you muttering under your breath Kee’.”

“How could he just leave his family like that?”

“This again? Keelah’s he’s a scientist. Sometimes scientists have to make sacrifices for the greater good.”

“His wife was a scientist. She didn’t run off on the family.”
“He didn’t run off.”

“That’s right. He time-jumped. Semantics.”

“Keelah…”

“Doctors don’t get special license to abandon their kids. You know how many kids would be orphans if that were the case? Too many. It’s madness!”

Amata stroked her hair knowing the story hit a little too close to home for Keelah. Her mom had been a doctor who left her in death. And sometimes her father’s work kept him occupied too long.

“We don’t have to finish it,” Amata murmured, her fingers soothing and strategic.

“No, I want to. And you read it so well.” Keelah moved closer into her friend, her right ear pressed against Amata’s belly. “Besides, we haven’t gotten to my favorite character yet. What’s it? Her name?”

“We’ll get to her if I can finish reading without the added commentary.”

“Fine.” Keelah huffed exaggeratedly but gradually relaxed under the ministrations of Amata’s fingers. She risked drawing Amata’s ire by proffering one more comment. “He could at least have said goodbye.”

Amata pressed a soft kiss to her friend’s forehead, making Keelah’s eyes flutter closed, her fingers tighten into the fabric of Amata’s vault jumpsuit. “I agree.”

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Keelah snapped back to reality. “Let’s go Dogmeat.”

She collected their bottles, and the pair set out again at a brisk pace. Amata was waiting. Perhaps even standing in that same spot in the secret tunnels where they’d said their final goodbyes.

She should have left with me, Keelah thought moodily. And not for the first time. Five months later and she still couldn’t believe Amata had refused to join her.

They’d been standing right before the vault entrance. The door had squealed open and Keelah had extended a hand:

“Come on! Before more guards come.”

And Amata had refused. “I can’t Kee’. My place is here.”

“What? I thought we were doing this together?”

“I’m sorry. But the Vault needs me. I have to help clean up this mess…” Amata put a trembling hand to her brow. “…our fathers made.”

“Fine. I’ll stay too. I can help.”

“No! You’re not safe here. And if Officer Mack dies…” Amata stared at her. Her eyes browner, wider than Keelah had ever seen. “I don’t think I’ll be able to protect you from my father. Or Wally for that matter.”

“I’m not afraid of Wally Mack. I’m not afraid of any of them.”
“They have guns Keelah!”

“I know that!” Hell, she’d been dodging bullets since she woke up that morning. “Which is why you should come with me. You’re not safe here either. You never have been.”

Amata wrapped her arms around her midsection, a defensive posture. “The guards won’t hurt me. My father won’t let them.”

“That’s not true, and you know it.”

Keelah moved a step close. Placed a tentative hand against Amata’s arm, where elongated purple bruises dotted her brown skin. Amata stiffened under her touch but relaxed as Keelah’s hand curled around her waist, forming a loose one-armed hug.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner,” Keelah whispered. They were close enough that the words brushed against Amata’s ear.

Amata unfolded her arms. Placed her hands on Keelah’s hips. This was new for them. Being so close, face-to-face. They hugged all the time, but this was different. Desperate. Keelah was close enough that she could count the freckles on Amata’s nose. Amata could see the tiny scar above Keelah’s lip, residue of a birthday scuffle with Butch.

“It’s not your fault,” Amata murmured. She pressed closer until Keelah’s loose embrace became a full-fledged hug. “You saved me.”

With her face hidden in Amata’s hair, Keelah allowed herself a momentary lack of composure as she recalled the scene she’d interrupted in the overseer’s office not in ten minutes ago. Officer Mack had been swinging a police baton wildly. And Overseer Almodovar had been standing by. Idly. Supervising like he always did.

How many times had he struck Amata? How many more times would he have hit her to get what he wanted?

Her grip on Amata tightened and Amata sighed contentedly at the contact.

Fuck Stevie Mack, Keelah thought. And fuck the overseer. She’d pitied Amata’s father. Thought he just hadn’t figured out how to properly love Amata. But he’d permitted his security officer to beat information out her... Stood by while the burley security officer swung again and again with the police baton.

Keelah had tackled Office Mack in a rage, their bodies twisting in ineffective combat until they’d both managed to scramble back to their feet. When Office Mack advanced on her with the heavy club, she’d regretted not taking the 10 mm pistol Amata had offered earlier. She’d never shot anything larger than a radroach, but she would have made an exception for the detestable guard.

She had to make due with a baseball bat, already splintered from fending off radroaches and other hostile security officers. The flimsy weapon disadvantaged her. Office Mack landed successive blows to her head with the baton, the final hit exploding her right ear and making her crumble back to the ground.

Office Mack had assumed he was victorious and sauntered over to gloat, his mouth pulled wide in his trademark sneer.

But the bat saved her after all, the wood jagged enough to pierce. In an instant the bat became a stake, and Keelah pushed it as hard as she could into Officer’s Mack side.
She wasn’t sure if it killed him. He fell into an awkward pose that looked like death. But as she stood, she took pleasure in the red of his blood; in the amount that stained his vault-issue uniform. Such a hypnotizing wet.

He’d beaten her best friend. He’d killed Jonas. It was fitting that he bleed.

She’d turned to Overseer Almodovar who, somehow, still managed to appear condescending even when outmatched.

“If you hurt Amata again…,” Keelah growled.

“I don’t take kindly to threats, guttersnipe.”

She’d heard worse from Butch, so she only moved closer, the broken baseball bat slick in her palm.

“Guards! She’s in here. Guards!”

Keelah scowled at his cowardice and briefly considered using the rest of her bat on him. But she knew Amata would never forgive her. Besides, there were others ways to hurt him.

“I can tell you how it feels when a father betrays you. It’s not something she’ll ever forget.”

Keelah’s shook her head in disgust. “She’ll never be your daughter now.”

The words seemed to do something to the overseer. He visibly deflated. Waved a hand dismissively. “I won’t let anything happen to her.”

Keelah nodded. Turned to leave. But the sudden movement shook something loose. She had to put her hand against the wall to steady herself. Her vision was clouding. And there was a sharp pain building behind her neck, steady and intense, a hair away from being excruciating. Without the adrenalin of fighting, she could feel again. A torrent of pain from where Office Mack had struck her repeatedly.

She stumbled her way down the hall. Amata had run off during the fight. She needed to find her. Find a way out of the vault before more guards came.

Keelah was so disoriented that she didn’t realize she was leaving a trail of blood. Any security personnel sent after her would find her easily.

Despite her injuries and gradual pace, she made it to the vault; hacked the terminal; extended a hand to Amata so that they could leave together.

But Amata said no.

Keelah thought she’d misheard. Her right ear had swollen and stopped working, and there was a sound like rushing water pressing against her scalp. She blinked past it. Moved closer to her friend so that she could hear better.

“Come on. Before more guards show up,” she repeated.

“I can’t Kee’.”

They hugged for long minutes. Keelah knew she was still in danger. The next shot to her could be a projectile, could be fatal. But she couldn’t let Amata go. Not yet.
It was Amata who pulled away first. She took a step back; pressed something heavy into Keelah’s hands.

“Take this.”

Keelah thought it was the 10 mm, but it was a small sack of items. Her BB gun. The Bobblehead from her father’s office. A few tins of food. And the worn copy of their favorite book. Three tiny figures against a blood orange sky.

“Maybe it will help you find your dad,” Amata whispered.

Keelah was sure she was crying, but it was hard to tell because her entire face had gone numb. When Amata took another step back, Keelah felt the rest of her body go cold. It was an absence of feeling she would try to replicate in months to come. A loss of self she’d tried to find in a tall glass of whiskey.

There was a loud clamoring a feet. Shouted instructions.

“You need to leave.” Amata’s tone was forceful. She crossed her arms. Seemed to grow taller. She’d never looked more like her father.

“Don’t…” Keelah stammered.

Don’t do what? Send her out into the wastes alone? Don’t break her heart? Keelah tried to communicate it with her eyes when her mouth stopped working.

Her helplessness seemed to soften Amata and the teenager took a step towards Keelah, her hand outstretched. “Keelah…” she breathed.

“There she is!”

Security Officer Richards fired at her. Office Wolfe charged with a baton.

“Go Keelah! Run!”

Keelah stumbled through the doorway. Sprinted down the long, dusty tunnel. She risked a glance back and saw Amata throw her body in the way of Office Wolfe, tripping him. They both went down in a tangle of limbs. More shots rang out from behind. Bullets whizzed by barely missing her.

She made it to the wooden lattice door, wrenched it open, slammed it closed. Then collapsed onto dirt and gravel, her breath disappearing into the stifling heat.

She waited for the radiation. For the fearsome beasts that all vault children had been warned about. But there was nothing but her breath and the sun, so bright. Brighter than she and Amata had ever imagined. More stunning than she’d hoped.

Keelah let her head fall against the wooden door. There was a noiselessness to the outside that was unnerving. As if the entire world had been emptied out.

But maybe it had.

When she moved her hand to her ear she found blood. Rust-colored and thick. There was more around her nose and eyes. The baton would leave scars.

The person who could have tended her injuries was gone. Keelah grimaced at the irony. Clutched the beloved novel in her hand.
Maybe it will help you find your dad.

She doubted it. Her father hadn’t even bothered to say goodbye.

Keelah climbed gingerly to her feet. Steadied herself against a door she’d never again use.

She had a few supplies, a toy gun, a worn novel. And an expanse of earth and sky that looked like the end of the world.

Keelah began to hobble down the dirt path.

But maybe this was the beginning.

.

Keelah and Dogmeat made it to the outer door of the vault just as the sun was setting. With the fading light, it was hard to pinpoint the wooden entry from beneath the outcrop of jagged rock, but the teenager remembered the way. She’d never forget her exit from this place. The loneliness that had gripped her as she tiptoed down the steep incline towards a destination still unknown.

“We made it boy,” she murmured, scratching behind Dogmeat’s ear for her comfort as well as his. She slipped behind the wooden door then moved quickly down the darkening tunnel. Her breath shallowed immediately. She’d have to reacclimatize herself to recycled air.

She made it to the vault door. Stared glumly at the muddy 101 lettering.

It was now or never.

Keelah typed *Amata* into the security terminal. Stepped back as the door creaked open.

She was home.

Chapter End Notes

High drama and some romance in Chapter 3.
Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer makes it into Vault 101 and receives a harsh welcome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three – Weak Become Heroes

“We are going to your father,” Mrs. Which said.

"But where is he?" Meg went over to Mrs. Which and stamped as though she were as young as Charles Wallace.

Mrs. Whatsit answered in a voice that was low but quite firm. "On a planet that has given in. So you must prepare to be very strong.”**

Months ago, when Keelah entered Vault 112, the cheery hellscape of Dr. Braun’s mind and the last known location of her father, she’d been filled with a confusing mix of trepidation and joy. She’d been afraid that Vault 112 would be yet another dead end and that her father would have already moved on to his next location. She’d also been afraid that her father would be angry that she’d tracked him down and would reject her in favor of his Project Purity undertaking. But beneath Keelah’s fear was pure, unadulterated joy. Inside that Vault was someone she loved. And with a few steps, and several bypassing of metal doors, she and her father could be reunited.

Keelah felt a similar mix of anxiety and elation as she reentered Vault 101 for the first time in more than five months. She stood at the entrance for a few seconds gathering her wits about her and surveying her surroundings. It was only when the Vault door closed behind her with its telltale groan that she got down to business.

“Alright Dogmeat. I want you to stay here, okay? There’s no need for you to be a casualty if I don’t get the warmest welcome.” Dogmeat barked his dissent and Keelah knelt to scratch behind his furry ears. “Stop being so hardheaded. I’m beginning to think Charon is rubbing off on you.”

She reached into her pack and removed a Salisbury Steak; his favorite meal.

“This should keep you busy.”

After she set out water and gave him another comforting scratch, she made her way past the Vault entrance and through the secondary doors.

The first thing she noticed were the bodies. Two of them. At first glance it seemed as if the two
people were sleeping. Their bodies were hunched in such a way that could have been repose. But when Keelah crept closer she could see bullet holes, too many to count, punched through the faded blue of the Vault jump suits. It was Jim Wilkins and Steve Armstrong. She hadn’t been particularly close with either of them—they’d been a few years older than her and ran with a different crowd—but it still hurt to see fellow Vaulters splayed out like that. Killed and discarded.

Keelah looked for something to cover them with but there was nothing. As she left them behind a myriad of thoughts raced through her mind. Had the security team started killing civilians? Officers were the only ones with access to firearms, so it had to be them who killed Jim and Steve. Amata had warned that the Overseer had gone crazy, but she hadn’t specified that the Vault was in the midst of such violent unrest. Vault 101’s population was already dangerously low. Had the overseen gotten so unhinged that he would jeopardize the small group that remained?

Keelah removed the 10mm SMG from her hip and readied it. She’d been halfway expecting a hail of bullets upon her return to the Vault, but she’d never imagined that the Vaulters would be shooting at each other. She could be walking into a veritable firestorm.

True to her prediction, once she made it through the final metal door, there was a gun pointed in her face.

“Stop right there! I don’t know how you got in here, but…”

Thank goodness the security office talked first and shot later.

“Office Gomez, it’s me.” Keelah said when she recognized the face through the security visor. She removed the Crowbot helmet she’d worn into the Vault and hooked it over her shoulder.

“Well I’ll be. Your hair’s a bit longer and you’re carrying a lot more dirt and grime than I’m used to seeing on you, but it is you.” Office Gomez smiled broadly and put his gun away. He’d always been especially nice to Keelah. Probably because she was the closest thing to a friend his socially awkward son, Freddie, had growing up. The affable guard had even helped her out a bit when she first escaped the Vault.

Keelah followed his lead and holstered her gun. “What’s going on here Officer Gomez? There are bodies out front.”

“Yeah…this area of the Vault is off-limits now due to…well, you know…you and your dad.” Keelah’s mouth twitched uncomfortably. “Some officers found those two lurking around the door. Figured they were trying to escape.”

Keelah bit back a curse. So even being near the Vault door was a capital offense now?

Officer Gomez seemed to read her mind. “I would have just put them in the holding cell, but I wasn’t the one to find them.” He sighed. “Things have gotten pretty brutal around here.”

“I gathered as much from Amata’s message, but I must admit, I wasn’t expecting martial law.”

“Amata contacted you?”

Uh oh. Keelah backpedaled. “Maybe?”

“Well, if she did, you should keep that under wraps. For her sake. For my sake, let me give you the short version of what’s going on so you can leave and I don’t get caught talking to you.”

Keelah squatted down on her haunches. “Shoot.” She immediately shot back to her feet. “As in, give
me the details! Not shoot.” She gestured at his weapon.

Office Gomez chuckled. “No worries kid. You’re safe with me. What happened with your dad was unfortunate, but I don’t blame you. You and I aren’t on the same side. My loyalty is to the Overseer. But I’ll do my best to help you out if I can. And to help Amata.”

Keelah sighed, relieved. “Thanks. So what’s going on?”

“The night you and your dad left, everything went crazy. Between the radroaches and the confusion, we lost a lot of people. When your dad opened up that gate, he let loose a whole lot of crap, if you’ll pardon my language. But he also opened a can of worms. People started thinking that if your father could make it outside, maybe they could too. There were calls to open the Vault and people started petitioning the Overseer for clearance to go outside. Overseer Almodovar didn’t like that one bit. He came down hard. Doubled security. Set curfews. And outlawed this area of the Vault. He wasn’t expecting people to rebel. He certainly wasn’t expecting you to come back.”

Keelah’s heart sank. “All this because my father decided to leave.”

Office Gomez looked uncomfortable, scratched the back of his neck. He was a decent guy. Hated conflict so much that it almost made him an ineffective security officer. “Yeah. So...did he get to do whatever it is he needed to do so badly? He’s not going to show up next, is he? I’m not sure there’s anything I could do to spare him.”

“He won’t be showing up. He’s dead.”

Office Gomez made a sympathetic noise. “I’m sorry to hear that. James was my friend.”

“I know.” But they didn’t have time for more chit chat or condolences. “Where’s Amata?”

“The rebels have turned the clinic into their base of operations. She’ll be there. We haven’t had any open conflict in a while, but it’s only a matter of time. Both sides are getting antsy and even minor skirmishes have proved costly since there’s no doctor to patch anyone up. Just last week one of the rebels died from a leg wound.”

That bit of information stung but Keelah blinked past it. “Take me to Amata.”

“Sure thing. But be careful. The Vault’s changed a lot.”

Well, shit, the two bodies at the entrance proved that. But Keelah remained silent as she followed Office Gomez down the hallway.

There were only a few working lights to light the pathway. And there was trash everywhere. Overturned furniture and broken crates. Keelah felt a sense of déjà vu. It was almost like being back out in the wastes. Everything was so disordered and dirtied. To think that the Vault once ran like clockwork. People and machine working together to keep things ordered and safe and the same.

There was another security officer just in front of them. Keelah put her hand to her SMG. It was Office Taylor and he currently had his own weapon pointed at an unusually animated Freddie Gomez.

Freddie was taunting Office Taylor and the seasoned veteran actually fired at the teenager.

“God damn it, Stanley, stop shooting!” Officer Gomez yelled.

The old man turned to them. He was visibly shaken. “I didn’t mean to. He had a knife. And those
rebels scare me.”

“He’s not a rebel, he’s my son. And we can’t open fire on these kids just because we get scared. Do I have to confiscate your weapon?”

Office Taylor pulled his gun against his chest like it was a toy he was protecting from a bully. “But then I’d be defenseless when they attack!”

“Is everyone this paranoid?” Keelah asked Office Gomez.

Office Taylor noticed her for the first time. He pointed a shaky finger in her face. “It’s you! Why, I oughta report you to the Overseer. Don’t you know when to stay away? All of this is your fault!”

“Calm down Alfred before you accidentally discharge your weapon.”

“It wouldn’t be no accident with her, I tell you. She’s the reason my poor Agnes is dead.”

“Alfred…” Office Gomez sighed reproachfully.

“No, it’s true! With all the commotion that night, my Agnes’ heart just gave out. Now she’s here to rub it in my face.”

Keelah had anticipated being blamed by the Vaul ters, but Officer Taylor’s accusation still managed to hurt. “I’m actually here to help Mr. Taylor.”

The elderly office scoffed. “A fat lot of good you’ll do. Everybody hates your guts. You won’t make it five seconds without someone pulling a trigger. And it’ll serve you right!” He seemed almost gleeful at the thought of Keelah being gunned down and Keelah gave up reasoning with him.

She turned to Office Gomez. “Upstairs, right?”

Officer Gomez nodded. “Near the atrium.” As she turned to leave, Office Gomez beckoned her to the side.

“Listen,” he whispered. “Try and do your best to wrap things up quickly. The other guards have planned a raid in a couple of days. They’re going to come in hard.” He gave her a meaningful nod. “If you could let Freddie know, I’d appreciate it. He and I don’t see eye to eye on this whole inside-outside thing, but he’s still my son. And I want him safe.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She headed for the med clinic. Behind her she could hear Office Taylor muttering about “turncoats” and “murderers.”

Before she could make it to the clinic door, someone else intercepted her. Butch Deloria. He was welding a switchblade and still wearing that god-awful leather jacket.

“Damn, look who it is…” he started, his mouth comically agape in his surprise. “The original Vault bandit.”

He didn’t look poised to attack so Keelah simply brushed past him, ignoring his attempt to start a conversation. Her time in the wastes had introduced her to more dastardly adversaries, ones who actually wanted her dead, but she still couldn’t stand the pompadoured jerk and felt it best to kept her distance lest her trigger finger start itching. She wouldn’t kill him, of course. There was enough death in the Vault without her adding to the toll. But she could still target some non-vital body parts.
She made it past the classroom with only a few obscenities hurled her way. And then she was in the med clinic. Her heart went into her throat as she scanned the messy room.

But Amata wasn’t there.

Old Lady Palmer wandered over, a wide smile on her wizened face.

“Well, well, well,” she said throatily, “Back to save the day, young one?”

Keelah’s face melted into a smile of her own. Damn it was good to see Ms. Palmer. She was hands down the nicest person in the Vault.

“Back to lend a hand at least.”

Old Lady Palmer hugged her. Keelah returned the embrace happily. Ms. Palmer always smelled like the sugary sweets she perfected in the Vault kitchen. And her personality was just as sweet as her baked goods.

Old Lady Palmer pulled back to look at her. “Are you well, dearie?” She scanned Keelah from head to toe as if looking for any injury or infirmity.

“I’m fine Ms. Palmer. Everything’s still intact.” Everything but her ear. But she’d lost that in the Vault not the wastes.

Old Lady Palmer gestured to the disorderly room. “As you can see, we’re not doing so well here. The entire Vault has gone to shit.”

Keelah startled at the vulgarity. “Why Miss Palmer! You always got on us kids if we used bad language in front of you.”

The old woman chuckled. “Times out for niceties, my dear. This is a madhouse now. I’m afraid we’re no better than the badlands outside the Vault door.”

That was what Keelah was afraid of. “Where’s Amata?”

“Probably gone to try to talk some sense into her father. She heads up there every day to negotiate a truce. I don’t know why she bothers. The Overseer wants compliance not compromise.” Her face darkened suddenly. “You know he killed my boy? My sweet Jonas who never hurt anyone.”

Keelah nodded. She remembered passing the crumpled body on her way out of the Vault. There’d been a halo of blood around his unnaturally serene face.

“The guards tried to tell me that it was an accident. But I know the Overseer had him killed. That’s why I sided with the rebels. I don’t want to go out into the wastes, but I certainly don’t want to live under the Overseer’s rule anymore. It’s time for a change.”

Keelah smiled at the woman’s gumption. Old Lady Palmer always had spirit. It was nice to see that some things hadn’t changed.

“I’m going to go unpack my gear in the back office,” Keelah told the woman. “Will you tell me when Amata arrives?”

“Sure thing sweetie. It’s so good to see you again.” And she gave Keelah a small wave as the teenager moved towards the corner office.

Adjacent to the back office door was an oversized panel of wood, balanced upright against the wall.
The wood was so out of place that Keelah gawked at it as she moved closer. Someone had to have broken down one of the tables from the cafeteria to fashion such a large structure. There was little other wood inside the Vault.

Keelah moved closer to divine the wood’s purpose.

There were names carved into the surface, deep and vibrant as if someone had stabbed the wood repeatedly and in anger. There were numbers below the names, ostensibly dates.

Keelah read the names: Agnes Taylor; Vikki Hannon; Mary Holden; Tom Holden; Stanley Armstrong; Mary Kendall; Monica Kendall (God, she’d only been ten years old). Siblings Janice and Jim Wilkins; Chip Taylor; And so many more names, one after another with what had to be the date of their death.

There were nearly two dozen names there. Almost a quarter of their population. Keelah traced a finger over the indentation of one name: Jonas Palmer.

The oversized wooden placard was full of the names of friends, classmates, peers. Hell, even if some of them were people she didn’t particularly like or who didn’t’ like her, they’d all been Vaulters. They’d been a community. And now the community was dying; succumbing to infighting and preparing to attack their own relatives.

Keelah felt a figure move into the space beside her. “It’s a memorial,” she heard from the figure at her left.

She turned. It was Amata. Still so pretty. As unflappable-looking as ever. But there were bags under her eyes and worry lines etched in her brow that were disconcerting for someone so young.

“Amata,” Keelah breathed.

“Keelah,” Amata echoed, the tiniest of smiles on her face.

They reached for each other at the same time, hugging for long moment, both quiet but content.

“Ouch,” Amata hissed.

Keelah pulled back, worried. “What is it?”

“I think your gun nicked me.” She put a reddened finger into her mouth and sucked. She must have gotten caught on one of the sniper rifle gears.

“Sorry,” Keelah said. She reluctantly stepped back from Amata. “Is there somewhere I can store my stuff?”

“Sure. We’ve been using the back office as a triage. There are open lockers there.” Amata headed for the back room. Keelah could only stare after her. It was so surreal. Seeing Amata again after all this time.

Amata looked over her and shoulder and smiled tenderly at Keelah’s flustered expression.

“Coming?”

Keelah blushed and hurried after her.

They walked into a bloodbath. The Vault’s robot technician, Andy, was covered in blood, the mechanical saw that functioned as a right arm spinning wildly and shooting bits of blood and bone
into the air like gruesome confetti.

Beatrice Armstrong lay limp on a blood-soaked table. She was ashen, and her entire right leg was missing.

“Andy!” Amata shrieked. She rushed over to inspect Beatrice.

“Ah yes. Another injured patient who requires my services?” The robot responded calmly. His saw speeded up in anticipation of another operation.

“Beatrice came to you about a bruised toe. Why did you…What did you do to her?!”

“Ms. Beatrice suffered a rather nasty sprain to her left toe. Obviously I had no choice but to amputate. She seemed quite content with the results. She hasn’t complained once.”

“Because she’s dead!” Amata roared. Keelah blinked in surprise at Amata’s tone as she too surveyed Beatrice’s body. She’d never seen Amata so angry before. The young leader looked ready to eviscerate the bumbling robot.

“She still has a pulse,” Keelah contradicted. She moved her hand from Beatrice’s throat to her left wrist. There was barely a pulse, but it was a start. “Get me something I can use to cover this wound.”

The wastelander moved swiftly, removing her weapons and supply bag before yanking Stimpacks and medical supplies from her pack. She removed the tiny medical kit she’d been able to buy off Red in Big Town and got to work.

She’d seen her share of severe injuries in the wastes. Exploded limbs, third degree burns, severed arteries. Her dad had taught her basic first aid when they were still living in the Vault, and she’d picked up a few things from Red these past few months. If they worked fast, Beatrice could still be saved. She jabbed Beatrice with two Stimpaks and relieved beyond words when some color returned to the woman’s cheeks.

Amata began riffling frantically through cabinets. “I’m not sure what you need Keelah.” Opening drawers wasn’t fast enough. She began to yank the drawers out and dump the contents on the floor.

“Just give me something big enough that I can use as a tourniquet.” Keelah began using her medical supplies to pinch off the arteries that were bleeding the most. Her hands were immediately covered in blood and she struggled to keep her grip on her tools. Fuck she was glad that Red showed her how to do this. “I could also use a blow torch of some kind. I’m going to have to cauterize the bleeding points.”

Amata ripped a bedsheet in half and handed it to her. “A blow torch? I’m not sure if the Vault has one of those.”

“You’ll be happy to know that I’m equipped with a blow-torch madam,” Andy chimed in. “The E-class model, top of the line.” He powered up his left hand to demonstrate his fire-making capabilities.

“Step the fuck back Andy,” Keelah growled. “Go wait in the corner.”

“Are you certain you won’t require my services?”

Typically robots couldn’t discern human facial expressions but something in Keelah’s eyes made the robot do a quick about-face.

“As you wish ma’am.”
Amata ran out of the room shouting for Butch. Keelah worked quickly. She could have used an extra pair of hands, but she couldn’t spare the time it would take to track someone down. She tied the strip of sheet around the remains of Beatrice’s right leg, secured it as tightly as she could, then used the heavy thread from her medical kit to tie off the ends of the pinched blood vessels. Beatrice was lucky that her femoral artery hadn’t been too badly damaged. Well not so lucky seeing as a maniacal robot had operated on her. Keelah realized something.

“You said she sprained her left toe but you cut off her right leg you dipshit!”

Andy stirred from his corner. “Should I rectify my mistake?” He powered on his saw hopefully.

Keelah growled. If her hands weren’t currently occupied, she would have shot the loony robot.

At that moment, Amata and Butch raced into the office. Each had two fistfuls of cigarette lighters.

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“Seriously?” Keelah asked.

“It was all we could find,” Amata gasped. She’d clearly sprinted back to the office. “The only person who would know where to find a blowtorch is Stanley, and we couldn’t find him.”

“He’s probably in his room,” Butch supplied. “His headaches keep him in bed most days. But I didn’t think you’d want us to run all the way there.”

“The lighters will have to do then. Grab that flat metal pan over there and start heating it up with the lighters. Once it’s hot I’ll use the pan to cauterize the wound.”

Amata and Butch went to work heating the metal pan with the puny lighters. It wasn’t an easy task and Keelah began to panic as the seconds ticked by.

“Hurry it up!” she commanded.

“Give us a break doll face. We’re working as fast as we can. There’s only four thumbs between us,” Butch complained.

Keelah made a mental note to punch Butch for the doll face comment later.

“Here.” Amata used the remainder of the bedsheets to pass the hot pan to Keelah.

“Great. Now Amata, see if you can find some antibiotics we can put on the wound. And bring as many pain relievers as you can find. Butch, you come over here and help me. As I cauterize the bleeding points, I need you to wipe the blood so I can see.”

Butch visibly blanched. “Can Amata and I trade jobs?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a big bad Tunnel Snake?” Butch sneered at the gibe but he hustled over and grabbed a rag to clean the oozing blood. “And be gentle,” Keelah commanded.

“Duh.”

And shockingly enough, the gang leader worked meticulously to wipe the wound, removing any foreign matter he found and gingerly placing gauze at sections that had already stopped bleeding. Keelah raised an eyebrow at his gentleness but then remembered that Butch was a barber. He was accustomed to working with delicate material.

“Am I doing this right?” he asked Keelah. He looked surprisingly expectant, like a student hoping for high marks from a teacher.

“Am I doing this right?” he asked Keelah. He looked surprisingly expectant, like a student hoping for high marks from a teacher.
“Yeah,” Keelah responded. And she couldn’t help but notice the relieved smile that appeared on Butch’s face as he applied that last of the gauze.

When they’d finally finished with everything—dressing the wounding, applying antibiotics, and placing a freezer pack over the stump—the trio took a few minutes to clean themselves and clear the bloody mess Andy had made in the clinic.

Beatrice looked much better. She was still in critical condition but with ongoing care and a bevy load of Stimpaks, she had an improved chance of survival.

Keelah marched over to the hovering Andy and positioned the robot so that she could access his control panel. Now this was something she was an expert at. Enabling and disabling tech.

“What are you doing?” Amata asked. The young leader looked exhausted. She pushed away from the wall she’d been leaning against and moved to Keelah when she saw the woman picking through Andy’s wires.


The Tunnel Snake slid a pair of heavy duty scissors across the floor to her.

“Wait a minute, you can’t disable Andy. He’s the closest thing we have to a doctor,” Amata commented.

“That’s not saying much.”

“Keelah…” Amata warned.

“He nearly fileted Beatrice!”

“God damn this is a big gun,” Butch exclaimed from behind them. He was studying Keelah’s sniper rifle with rapt attention. “Can I hold it?”

“No!” Keelah snapped. She turned back to Amata. “Doctors are supposed to fix people not break them. He’s dangerous. You can’t just jury-rig a robot and expect it to perform without the proper software.”

Kealah moved to cut a tangle of blue wires. Amata grabbed her wrist.

“Wait! You don’t understand. When your dad left and Jonas died, we lost all our medical expertise. And when you left, we lost our backup technician. Really our only technician. Stanley’s health has deteriorated to the point that he can’t do much anymore. If you disable Andy, we lose the closest thing we have to a doctor and a technician.”

Keelah sighed and dropped the tangle of wires. She could see Amata’s point. “I suppose I could reprogram him. Turn him back into cake-cutting Andy. But if somehow his wires get crossed or he endangers another Vaulter, I’m going to have to put him down. That’s just the way it is.”

Amata put a hand on Keelah’s arm. “Thank you for understanding. And for saving Beatrice. I knew asking you to come her was the right thing to do. You’ve always gone out of your way to help others. Could be why the GOAT declared you our next chaplain.” Keelah groaned loudly and Amata smiled warmly at her reaction, her eyes doing that glowy thing that made Keelah’s insides liquefy.

Amata seemed to realize that her hand had been resting against Keelah’s arm for a long time. She
pulled it back with an embarrassed smile. “I’ll let you finish up here and then we can talk, okay?”

Keelah nodded and watched as Amata strolled out of the room. When she turned from Amata-watching, she saw Butch studying her with a small smile on his face.

“No problem,” Butch responded. He settled himself into a rolling chair and spun himself in half circles as he watched Keelah work. “You’re damn good with needle and thread.” Keelah only grunted. “And handy with a handybot.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“What’s the matter Butch? That hairspray you use finally penetrate your brain and give you a better personality?”

Butch laughed out loud. “That was actually funny.” He stopped spinning in the chair and fixed Keelah with a serious look. You’ve grown up a lot on the outside. I can tell. But we’ve grown up too. Against our will.” He nodded at the wooden memorial outside the door. “I made that. Had to tear apart the countertop from the dining hall.”

“It’s a nice memorial.” She was being sincere. Butch could tell and he nodded thankfully.

“You know, Paul Jr died. Nearly torn to pieces by radroaches. And Wally Mack defected from the gang not too long ago. He was pretty broken up when his brother Stevie died. That was kind of the end of the Tunnel Snakes. It just didn’t feel right anymore.”

Keelah looked up from her repair. “Stevie Mack died?”

She knew their confrontation in the Overseer’s office had been especially violent, but she still halfway expected the officer to survive his injury.

“Yeah, he caught some kind of a bug a few weeks back. Had trouble breathing. Andy performed a tonsillectomy.”

So he hadn’t died by her hands. Good. Still, Keelah gagged at the imagery of Andy’s unnecessary throat surgery. She’d hated Stevie Mack but damn.

“Why didn’t you guys shut Andy down then?”

Butch shrugged. “No one knows how to work that thing. Not even to turn it off. And Stanley’s essentially homebound.”

Keelah sighed. Reworked the final wire and stepped back when Andy sputtered back to life.

“There. He should be back to normal. And if it turns out he isn’t, forget technical training, a metal pipe against his mainframe should suffice.”

“Got it.” Butch stood up and stretched. The movement put him in closer proximity to Keelah and the young woman sidestepped him, moving to the table to organize her weapons and supply.

“So...you know, I’m sort of Amata’s lieutenant. The first line of defense for the rebels. It’s my responsibility to keep the enemy at bay.” He puffed out his chest a little at the comment.

Keelah was sure he couldn’t keep flies away from shit, but she didn’t quash his enthusiasm. He would need it if the standoff with the Overseer became a gun battle.
“That’s good,” she muttered as she checked her ammo supply.

“So what’s it like out there?” Butch sidled up close to her like they were friends sharing secrets. He seemed fascinated by her weapons and was so focused on the firearms that he didn’t notice Keelah scowling at him. “Are there a lot of people left out there? Are there like…irradiated monsters or something?”

She was holding a gun and Butch was invading her personal space. For a lieutenant, he had a poor sense for danger.

“Butch, I’m not really in the mood for story time. Besides, shouldn’t you be tending the front line?”

“Shit! You’re right. We’ll catch up later.”

He threw her an awkward salute before dashing out of the room. Keelah could only shake her head in confusion. What in God’s name had happened in this place? Good-natured Andy was mutilating people and quarrelsome Butch was being nice? What was next? Overseer Almodovar baking everyone cookies?

Speaking of. She needed to speak to Amata. She still hadn’t gotten a complete rundown of what was going on here.

She left her weapons alone for now. Checked Beatrice for any positive or negative changes (there weren’t any) and exited the office to find Amata.

She didn’t have to go very far. Amata was in the med clinic entertaining a large group of Vaulters. They were all outfitted in 101 jumpsuits so Keelah figured they represented the rebel faction.

“There she is!” someone shouted. Keelah couldn’t recognize the face but the tone was familiar. Pure hatred.

“I told you she was back. Heard Officer Taylor mention it to one of the guards.”

“I can’t believe she’d have the audacity to come back here.”

“What’sa matter Keelah? The outside too tough for you? Daddy run off again?”

A cacophony of angry voices surged around her. Keelah crossed her arms. Steadied herself against the barrage of criticism. She’d been expecting this.

“Traitor!”

“You and your dad have something coming!”

“Everyone stop!” Amata raised her hands, trying to draw everyone’s attention back to her. “Now I told you, I invited Keelah here. She’s going to help us end this dispute with the Overseer.”

“How can she help us? She’s the one who started this mess. Her and her bastard father!” It was Wally Mack. He gripped a baseball bat in his hand as he stared her down. The irony wasn’t lost on Keelah.

“What happened that night wasn’t Keelah’s fault!” Amata had to shout to be heard over the din of raised voices.

“Of course you’re going to take up for her, she’s your best friend.” That was Pepper Gomez, Freddie’s mom.
Freddie seemed embarrassed by his mother’s hostility. “Mom, come on,” he groaned.

“No, Freddy! She’s the reason you joined those Tunnel Idiots. She’s the reason the entire Vault is in jeopardy.”

“Did I also launch the atomic bomb?” Keelah replied sarcastically.

Pepper pointed a finger at her. “Listen, you…”

“Now everyone just stop!” Amata yelled at the top of her voice, silencing them all. “This isn’t helping. We need to work together.”

“Screw that. I’m not working with a traitor,” Wally Mack sneered. There was an chorus of agreement from the crowd. Only Old Lady Palmer and Freddy seemed uncomfortable with the hostile treatment Keelah was receiving.

Another dissenter separated from the pack. “You’re all being idiots. We should be focused on the people pointing guns at us. Not the person trying to help us.” It was Susie Mack.

Keelah goggled. Susie Mack had disdained her since childhood. Now the sassy blonde was coming to her defense? She watched as Susie wrestled the baseball bat out of her brother Wally’s hands.

“You can’t even beat me at arm-wrestling Wally,” Susie chastised him. “Now either help us fight the real bad guys or go back to your room and read your comics.”

Wally glared at his sister. “That bitch gets no help from me.”

A muscle ticked in Keelah’s jaw. “You should do what your sister says and go home like a good boy.”

Wally moved forward, his fists clenched. “Or else what? You gonna tell daddy on me? I bet that puss can’t even take a punch.” Keelah’s eyes narrowed and Wally grinned triumphantly at the response. “I know what you did to my brother, bitch. My sister obviously has forgotten, but I didn’t.” He pressed close enough until their foreheads were centimeters apart. “I should kill you right now.”

“What’s stopping you?”

Amata quickly stepped between them. “I am. Wally, take a walk or something. Cool yourself down.” She used her arm to push him back a few steps, but the former Tunnel Snake resisted.

“You’re not the Overseer yet Almodovar. Bossy bitch, you’re just trying to protect your girlfriend.”

Keelah had his arm twisted behind his back so fast, Wally never even had a chance to react. He swore out loud and dropped to his knees.

“Keelah stop!” Amata demanded. But Keelah only twisted harder.

“Apologize,” Keelah snarled, adding pressure to his elbow. Charon had taught her this move. It supposedly hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.

“I apologize!” Wally exclaimed. His right hand scuffled at the ground for purchase.

Keelah smirked. He really was soft. He’d only been in the lock for a few seconds and had already caved. She’d had a slaver last an entire hour in the painful hold before revealing the location of his slave pen.
“And who exactly are you apologizing too?” Keelah purred softly. Maybe it was sick, but she quite enjoyed watching the big-mouthed bully squirm. She lifted her head to see if any of his fellow dissidents would intervene. But they could only watch in horror. And Susie Mack only looked mildly interested. She probably realized that the torture was more about humbling Wally than hurting him.

“I apologize to you. And your dad. For calling him a bastard.”

“Thanks but my dad and I don’t need your apology. Apologize to your next Overseer.”

“Keelah, please stop. I don’t want this,” Amata pleaded. Always an ambassador of peace, that one.

“I’m sorry Amata. Future Overseer of Vault 101,” Wally cried. “Now let me up, alright? My fucking arm’s breaking here!!”

Keelah let him go. Wally scrambled back to his feet, rubbing his shoulder moodily and looking simultaneously embarrassed and murderous.

Freddie cackled. “At least it wasn’t your right hand. I mean, since we’re speaking of girlfriends and all.”

There was a smattering of laughter from the crowd.

“Shut up Freddy the Freak.” Wally pushed him forcefully, but then scurried for the exit, shooting another threatening look at Keelah before leaving the room.

Freddie’s joke was just enough to ease some of the tension in the room. Keelah shot him a grateful smile and he gave her a double thumbs up.

Amata gave Keelah a disapproving look before turning her attention to the crowd.

“Listen everyone. I know things are strained right now. We’re exhausted. We’re frightened. And there’s always a chance that a battalion of armed guards will come rushing through the door at a moment’s notice. But we have to stay calm. And civil.” She raised an eyebrow at Pepper Gomez. “We’re outnumbered and outgunned. It’s going to take all of us to mount a proper defense if this things goes bad and becomes a violent altercation.” There were murmurs from the crowd. Worried looks. “Now we’re hoping it doesn’t come to that. I’ve been communicating with my father. Through a liaison. And while we haven’t made much progress, I still have hope that this can be resolved peacefully.”

“Peacefully?” an orange haired woman Keelah didn’t recognize asked. “Those officers murdered my daughter.”

“Mine too,” another voice rang out.

“We should be storming the Overseer’s office!”

“Right on!”

There was more shouting. They were working themselves back into a fury.

“Storming it with what?” Amata countered. “Most of us don’t have weapons. And only a few of us have any sort of combat training. Rushing the guards would be a suicide mission, and I can’t allow that.”
Keelah marveled at her friend’s poise; her self-assured demeanor. Amata had always been an effortless leader. It suddenly became clear to Keelah why the rebel faction had elected her their champion.

“Now we’ve all lost family and friends,” Amata continued. “All of us. Nothing I can say will change that or will remove the names from that wall. But let’s not lose another person. Fighting amongst ourselves will only risk more casualties.”

Most of them didn’t look convinced and more than a few openly glowered at Keelah, but no one complained when Amata advised that they break for dinner. The crowd quickly dispersed leaving Keelah alone with Amata, Susie and Freddie.

As soon as his mother was out of sight, Freddie hugged Keelah. “What’s the problem Goldilocks? You go out into the world and you don’t write, you don’t call.” He feigned a crestfallen look. “I’m hurt.”

“Good to see you too Freddie.” When they broke the hug, she punched him softly in the shoulder. “But what’s with the leather coat? I thought you gave up on joining the Tunnel Slugs.”

“What can I say…they had a vacancy. I kinda outgrew the need to belong a long time ago, but…I dunno…Butch was kind of bummed when Paulie died. And Wally became an insufferable jerk and left him, so I guess I sort of joined out of pity. But don’t tell Butch that,” he said quickly.

“Why? He wouldn’t roughhouse his only remaining Tunnel Snake would he?”

Freddie averted his eyes. “No, it’s not that. Butch doesn’t really…meddle people anymore. I guess I just don’t want to hurt his feelings. So mum’s the word, yeah?”

**Hurt Butch’s feelings?** Keelah suddenly had the feeling that she’d go back to the wastes and discover that the Capital Wasteland had transformed into an island paradise. Things were that off-kilter.

“Mums the word,” she told him. She pulled Freddie to the side so that they could have a private moment. Behind them, Amata and Susie started their own conversation. “Hey Freds, you really should talk things out with your father. He’s worried about you.”

Freddie snorted. “If he was worried, he wouldn’t let his security guard buddies shoot at me.”

“He can’t control the other guards’ behavior. You know that. Cut him some slack. He’s one of the good guys.”

“Then he should be on our side. I tried to recruit him when all this started and he said no.”

“So all the bad guys are over there and the good guys are here? I don’t think it’s that black and white Freddie. Hell, your good guy Wally just tried to pulverize me.”

Freddie grinned. “Not like you couldn’t handle it. That was a wicked move by the way. Think you can teach me?”

“Sure thing.” Freddie’s grin widened. “As soon as you talk to your dad.”

“Blackmail?” he whined. “Come on Keelah, that’s so third grade.”

“Whatever. Listen to me Freds. I lost my dad a month ago. I wasn’t very nice to him in the weeks before he died. I thought he was wrong and that I was right. He was bad and I was good. Then he died and I realized…fuck…he wasn’t any of those things. He was just my dad. I wish I’d apologized
to him before he died. I wish I’d given him the chance to apologize to me.” She rubbed an agitated hand across her brow. Thought about all those missed opportunities with her father. The times they would walk from Rivet City to Jefferson Memorial in stony silence. She fixed wide eyes on Freddie. “Just don’t make the mistake I made, okay. Your father loves you.”

Freddie sighed. “I know. It’s just…this whole rebellion has really skewed things you know? Up is down. Right is left. Family is enemy. The Overseer has really fucked us.”

“Well, you heard your fearless leader. There may still be a chance to resolve this peacefully. Get up to be up again.”

Freddie glanced over her shoulder at Amata. The young woman was talking animatedly. It looked like she was recounting her earlier conversation with the Overseer. Freddie gave Keelah a sly smile.

“You know the real reason Wally’s so pissed at her? He asked her out. Right after you left. I guess he figured he’d have a better chance once her buffer zone was gone.” Keelah’s brow wrinkled in confusion. Buffer zone? “But she turned him down. She actually implied that she was already taken.” He gave her an impish grin. “Now who could our fair Amata be so taken by?”

Keelah swatted him playfully. “It’s probably you. I mean, look at how that leather jacket accentuates your manly muscles.”

“Tis true. Tis true.” He flexed his thin arms and Keelah could barely contain her laughter. Freddie had always been a charmer. She never could figure out why he couldn’t make friends.

“I’d better go. I need to make nice with my mom. Otherwise I’ll end up on the receiving end of a very long and very loud lecture.” He gave her a dimpled smile. “Thanks for coming to helping us out. I know coming back here can’t be easy for you.” Keelah gave a tight smile and did her best to keep her face impassive. “And I’m sorry to hear you dad passed. He was a pretty cool guy. Everyone assumed I was a head case because of my vault depressive syndrome but he talked to me like a normal person. Helped me feel less weird.” He rocked back and forth on his heels anxiously. Things had been difficult for him without a doctor to prescribe his required anti-depressants. But not even a second later he was back to his cheery self. “I’ll take your advice about my dad.” He gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze before heading for the door. “Hey Susie? You want to split a dinner tray?”

Susie said her goodbyes to Amata before joining Freddie at the door. “Later hero,” she murmured in Keelah’s direction as she and Freddie left the clinic. But the comment sounded affectionate rather than harsh.

That left Keelah alone with Amata. She turned to face her old best friend.

“Thank you for showing restraint with the rebels. If we’d have had an altercation, it could have been really bad.” Keelah nodded. “With that being said, what you did to Wally wasn’t really called for.”

“He started that fight. I only defended myself.”

“You don’t need to defend yourself against Wally. He’s all bark and no bite.”

“I seem to remember him and Butch biting a lot when we were growing up.”

“Things have changed Keelah.”

“I’ll say. You’re defending Wally Mack. From me.”
Amata’s face reddened in embarrassment. Still, the young leader steeled her features and straightened her shoulders as she addressed her old friend. “The rebels are under my leadership. It’s my job to defend them. All of them. Even Wally Mack.”

“Fine,” Keelah snapped. She was angry at Amata for being so chummy with Wally but she found that the longer she stared at Amata, the less angry she became. After a while, the only emotion that remained was fondness.

Amata seemed flustered by the intense perusal and she broke eye contact.

“I heard what you said about your father. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

“How did he die?”

“Radiation poisoning.”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “Oh Keelah! I’m so sorry.” Amata took a step forward but then stopped. Their staring contest continued.

“I’m sorry to hear about your father,” Keelah murmured.

Amata waved her hand dismissively. “He stopped behaving like a father a long time ago. I’ve tried to talk sense into him, but he refuses to be persuaded. He’s gotten even more punitive, if you can believe that. He eliminated most social activities. Set a curfew. He even prohibited us from congregating in groups larger than three people.”

“He was afraid the Vaul ters would overthrow him?”

“He was afraid people would rush the gate. The Vault door that is. We found out that they’d been lying to us this entire time. The Vault wasn’t always closed Keelah. Years ago, before we were born, people went outside to explore and to do a little trading. But something happened and they locked everything down. Lied to us and force fed us that “born in the Vault, die in the Vault” nonsense.” Amata hesitated. Cleared her throat. “You weren’t born in the Vault. Your father brought you here when you were an infant.” It seemed to pain her to admit it.

“I know.”

“Of course you know. Your dad wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Oh, he did. He just fessed up near the end. No use keeping it a secret when I’d already escaped.” Keelah crossed her arms. This was still such a touchy subject. Her hands twitched. She needed something to do. She’d re-inspect her weapons. That would keep her hands busy.

She strode past Amata into the back office. Amata trailed her, stood in the doorway watching her. Keelah could feel the other woman’s eyes on her. The scrutiny made her long for a drink. A nice, cool bottle of whiskey. It would burn at first. It always did. But afterwards. Oh man. Mind-numbing bliss.

“So what exactly do you want me to do here Amata? I’m pretty low on the list of people your dad will listen to.”

Amata slid into the space beside her, watched carefully as Keelah examined her guns; checked chambers; swiped at imaginary blemishes.
“He may not like you, but he respects you.” Keelah snorted. “You went out there and survived. His main concern is that all of us will be killed the moment we step outside. You’re proof that a Vaulter can make it.”

“So I’m some sort of visual aid to show off to your dad?”

“No. I just thought with your experience on the outside you’d be able to help him see reason.”

Keelah turned to her friend. Now that they were facing each other without distraction and the initial discomfort, they let their eyes travel freely, re-familiarizing themselves with the other.

“I don’t know Amata. Diplomacy isn’t really the way people handle things in the waste.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Amata’s gaze zeroed in on the sniper rifle Keelah was handling; the heavy SMG. Her eyes narrowed. “Well, I didn’t ask you here to kill my father if that’s what your insinuating.”

“Geesh! Of course not! I would never…!” Keelah huffed in exasperation and dropped her head in her hands. “Why did you bring me here?” She raised her head and fixed Amata with an intense look.

“Because I knew you would come.”

Keelah grunted. Flopped down into the rolling chair. “Yes, I came. But a word of advice Amata. The next time you send a distress signal, try to warn a person that a lynch mob awaits them.”

Amata actually looked offended by her words. “That was no lynch mob.”

“Wally had a bat. A few others had knives. They would have torn me apart with a second thought.” She raised a hand to halt Amata’s interruption. “You want me to be your hero Amata but all anyone sees when they look at me is a villain.”

“These are your neighbors Keelah. People you grew up with. They’re just afraid. It’s been awful here. The guards have killed several of us already. And sometimes they fire randomly just to scare us and keep us on edge. There have been raids at night. Just the other night they came in while we were sleeping and took Mr. Brotch and a few others. It’s making us go a bit crazy.”

“That’s probably the point. Have you all so freaked out that you turn on each other or simply give in. I have to give it to your dad. He’s a hell of a strategist.” Amata just sighed. “What are they doing with the captives?”

“We heard that they killed a few by the Vault door. We don’t know about the rest. I don’t think they’re hurting those they catch in the hallways. I think their aim is to thin our numbers. Beat us by attrition.”

Keelah massaged her temples as she thought things through. “How many guns do you have?”

“They’re just afraid. It’s been awful here. The guards have killed several of us already. And sometimes they fire randomly just to scare us and keep us on edge. There have been raids at night. Just the other night they came in while we were sleeping and took Mr. Brotch and a few others. It’s making us go a bit crazy.”

“We heard that they killed a few by the Vault door. We don’t know about the rest. I don’t think they’re hurting those they catch in the hallways. I think their aim is to thin our numbers. Beat us by attrition.”

Keelah massaged her temples as she thought things through. “How many guns do you have?”

“We don’t want to engage in a gun battle. And none of us are trained. I think Ms. Palmer knows how to use a gun but that’s it.”

“This is just information gathering so I can plot a course. How many guns?”

“None. Well, two, if we count yours.” Keelah stared at her, mortified. “What do you expect? Security’s the only one with access to the armory. We have switchblades, a few baseball bats, and some of the rebels fashioned clubs from some of the table legs.”
Keelah felt a full-fledged headache coming on. “I still don’t know what you want me to do here Amata. You’re not equipped to engage in a fair fight. Your dad’s not open to dialogue. I suppose I could just open the Vault door so that you all could leave. I could cover your exit so that you won’t be mowed down from behind.”

“No, that won’t work. If we leave, they’d lock us out, and we don’t want to leave the Vault forever. Most of us don’t want to leave at all.”

“Then what’s the purpose of this rebellion?”

“We want to open the Vault up. Do some trading. Interact with outsiders. Don’t you see? Their lie has jeopardized our survival. This Vault wasn’t built to sustain a population for this long. In another ten or twenty years, we’ll run out of food and supplies. Without Stanley, we can’t even maintain the water purifier. God forbid something happens to the air filtration system. We need connections to the outside. Otherwise we’re doomed.”

“What you’re saying makes sense to me. It’s just getting it to make sense to your father.”

“I’ve discussed it with him many times. He’s so fixated on the dangers outside the Vault door that he’s completely ignored the fact that there’s probably more danger inside.”

Keelah exhaled tiredly. “And I thought exploring Yao Gui tunnels was hard. This will be my toughest mission yet.”

Amata lifted her chin proudly. “If you’re still undecided, we can pay you. I don’t know what passes for currency in the wastes, but we have plenty of food. And we can spare some medicine. Not much but you can select what you need. And there’s so much tech we don’t use—”

“I didn’t come here for payment. This isn’t a job.”

“Then why did you come?”

Keelah looked away. Rubbed the back of her neck nervously. But what else could she say but the truth. She turned back to Amata.

“Because it’s you.”

The moment was big. Significant. And the smile that came upon Amata’s face at Keelah’s words was so soft, so heartfelt, that it momentarily took Keelah’s breath away.

Amata extended a hand in invitation.

“Come here.”

Keelah stared at the hand for a second. Amata’s hand was so steady where hers was still trembling madly against her thigh. Keelah was almost ashamed to touch her. To infect her friend with the dust and depression she’d carried from outside.

But when Amata continued to stare at her with nothing but love and affection in her eyes, Keelah couldn’t help but acquiesce. She took her friend’s hand.

And for the first time since reentering Vault 101, Keelah felt like she was home.
**By now you may have realized that the book the Lone Wanderer and Amata are so obsessed with is Madeline L'Engle's "A Wrinkle in Time." I tried to leave breadcrumbs for readers to figure it out. The book will continue to play a minor role in the fic.**

Additional notes:
a) Credit to worldturnupsidedownblog for details about treating a severed limb. b) Some of Office Taylor’s and Officer Gomez’s dialogue was taken from game to add story continuity c) Chapter title inspired by song of Mike Skinner/"The Streets"
Tender Love

Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer and Amata take a moment away from the Vault rebellion to reconnect in their old hideout. Smooching ensues.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is rated "M" for Mature. There will be F/F sexy times. If that's not your thing, you may wanna skip. Nothing too explicit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four – Tender Love

Amata led her to the reactor room. To their old hideout of blankets and pilfered snacks. Keelah flopped down on the cotton covers and sighed happily. It might have just been a thin coverlet against metal flooring but after a long trek across the wastes and the emotional toil of reentering Vault 101, it felt like paradise.

Amata fell into the space beside her and grinned when she saw Keelah’s fluttering eyes.

“Comfortable?” she teased.

“Would you think less of me if I took a nap?” Keelah answered drowsily.

Amata laughed and offered her a box of Sugar Bombs. “This should pep you up. Do they have these on the outside?”

“Boy do they ever.”

Keelah chuckled as she thought of the frequent Sugar Bomb deliveries she made to Murphy at Seneca Station. The teenagers at Big Town loved the sugary cereal too, requesting it more often than any other food item Keelah delivered.

Keelah tore into the box of cereal ravenously. She hadn’t eaten since early that morning and felt positively starved.

“Want some?” She extended the box to Amata. Her friend took a few kernels and watched in amusement as Keelah wolfed down another handful.

“You chew with your mouth open.” Amata commented.

“Do not.”
“And you talk with your mouth full.”

“Only because I’m responding to you.” Her words were garbled by a mouthful of cereal and Amata only laughed harder.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Amata said softly. She turned her body so that she could get a better view of her reclining friend.

Keelah shot her a quick glance. “It’s good to see you too.”

Amata stared at her, a tiny smile on her face and Keelah blushed under the intense scrutiny. Though her brown skin hid the embarrassed flush, Amata knew her too well. She smiled knowingly and put a hand on Keelah’s knee.

There was nothing unusual about them sitting this close. About them touching one another. But the time apart, the heightened emotion of their present circumstances, intensified the feeling somehow. Keelah did her best not to shift awkwardly under Amata’s touch.

For her part, Amata seemed unaffected. She tilted her head against the wall and let her eyes fall closed.

“I guess we won’t bother trading Sugar Bombs since they’re so plentiful in the wastes. What about Choco Puffs? They have those outside?”

The chocolate version of Sugar Bombs? “No.”

“Great. The Vault will make its fortune in chocolate puffed cereal then.”

Keelah smiled at her friend’s playfulness. “So you all really intend to go out there?”

“No all at once and not immediately. We need to plan and devise some sort of training to prepare whichever vaulters decide to serve as scouts and traders. But once we have said plan in place, yes, we’re opening the vault. We simply can’t survive in isolation any longer.”

Keelah placed her hand on top of Amata’s. It was an unconscious move. She enjoyed the feel of Amata’s hand beneath hers; the warm pressure against her knee. A contented smile spread across Amata’s face.

“Your father is wrong about a lot of things Amata, but he’s right about the dangers in the wastes. Once you open that door, you’re placing yourselves at risk. Part of the reason the vault has been safe from the outside is its obscurity. Once people know this location, they’ll want in. And it’s not as difficult as you think to breach a Vault door. I got through the two main doors in five minutes flat.”

“You had the password.”

“Any good techie worth her salt can hack a Vault security terminal. No problem.”

Amata opened her eyes. “So why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t I what?”

“Why didn’t you come back to the vault? It’s been five months. You could have let yourself back in at any time.”

Keelah removed her hand. Used it to massage a throbbing temple. “What would have been the point? Everybody here hates me.”
Amata reclaimed the hand. Tugged it into her lap. “You know that’s not true.”

The way her eyes gleamed made something loosen in Keelah’s chest. All of a sudden she felt the urge to kiss Amata; to place her hands against that smooth brown skin; to do other things that would be downright foolish and untimely considering they were in the midst of a civil uprising.

“Are there any more Sugar Bombs?” she asked lamely, hoping to redirect her increasingly prurient thoughts.

“I’m afraid that was the last of them. Still hungry?”

“Mmm hmm.” She was distracted by Amata’s lips. The fullness of them. How they curved attractively when the young woman smiled. Keelah was so distracted by her friend’s mouth that she didn’t notice Amata noticing she was distracted.

“I’ll get you something more substantial when we go back upstairs.”

“Ummph.”

Amata used her thumb to trace the pulse point of Keelah’s wrist. “Keelah?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any friends out there?”

“Uh…not really. There’s this guy I get dinner with from time to time in Megaton. That’s the town I live in. His name is Leo. He’s cool. And there’s this guy I travel with. Charon. I wouldn’t call them friends exactly, but I suppose there are people out there who would notice if I stopped coming around.”

Amata’s skin-tracing had migrated to Keelah’s inner elbow. “But no one special?”

Keelah was a wasteland wonder. She could take down a Yao Gui with melee weapons; pick any lock she came across in the wasteland; disable turrets and landmines; and hit an armored target from more than seventy yards away. But when she felt Amata’s fingers transition from her elbow to the soft skin of her neck, the battle-hardened sniper nearly fainted. She garbled out some gobbledygook that made Amata pause her exploration.

“What did you say?”

“I said that there is someone special.” Amata’s hands beat a hasty retreat from Keelah’s neck, and her face fell in disappointment.

“Oh.”

“His name is Dogmeat. He’s still a puppy, but he’s a damn good fighter. Got me out of a lot of scrapes in the wastes. He’s really smart too. I always get lost when we go scavenging in abandoned buildings. It’s embarrassing, really, since I have a Pip-boy and all, but Dogmeat has a nose for direction. He always gets us back to the entrance. He’s a good dog. Probably the person who likes me the most out there. Well, he’s not a person, but you get what I mean…”

She stopped rambling when she realized Amata was smiling at her again. “So your special someone is a dog?”

“A damned fine dog,” Keelah answered, somewhat defensively.
Amata only laughed cheerfully and clasped hands with Keelah again. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

“I’m sure he can’t wait to meet you. He has a thing for pretty women.” And it was the truth. Dogmeat did seem to have a particular affection for the ladies; always nosing around Vera in Rivet City and content to lie at Nova’s feet whenever they took their dinner at Moriarty’s Saloon.

“Pretty women, huh? Tell Dogmeat I said thanks for the compliment.”

Keelah seemed to realize what she’d said and she blushed again. She’d never been this flustered around her best friend before. It was a dramatic departure from their nearly two decades of friendship. Keelah watched as Amata began tracing the brown lines that bisected her palm. This new thing between them wasn’t bad or unwelcome. It was just different. More touchy and libidinous somehow. And with the way Amata was stroking her hand, it seemed like the young leader would make a romantic overture at any moment.

“Your hair looks awful,” Amata declared suddenly.

“Hey!” Keelah snatched her hand from Amata’s grasp; used it to pat down her thick mane. She knew her hair probably looked like a mop at this point, but battle helmets weren’t designed to maintain a person’s hairdo. “Hair care isn’t exactly a priority in the wastes, you know. And there aren’t a ton of stylists out there. The only barber I’ve come across is a ghoul who likes to play in my hair.”

“I can’t blame him. You have good hair texture. Very conducive to playing.”

“You just said it looked awful.”

“It is a bit all over the place, but I’m sure it still feels wonderful. Come here.”

“No. You just insulted me.” And the wasteland sniper actually pouted.

“Keelah…”

Keelah huffed theatrically, but how could she resist that look? She settled back against Amata, the position she would take whenever her friend would braid her hair back in the day. Amata’s hands quickly found a new location, moving through Keelah’s thick hair, pressing softly against her scalp.

“At least it’s not dry,” Amata commented.


“Be that as it may, I’ll be sure to give you some of my coconut oil to use from now on.”

“Snob,” Keelah said playfully.

“Rat’s nest,” Amata quipped. She reached for the plastic comb she kept in their tiny supply chest.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to fix you up like old times.”

“Aren’t we in the middle of a revolution?”

“We have time. Besides, we can’t have our squad leader look so unkempt.”
Amata laughed as she began combing through Keelah’s thick tresses. “That’s probably true. But don’t tell Butch that. He thinks he’s the muscle for this operation. He literally wants to bring a knife to a gunfight.”

“Has he gotten out of line at all? ‘Cause I can check him if need be.” Butch may have seemed like a more pleasant person, but Keelah hadn’t forgotten the way he bullied Amata during their adolescence.

“No. A lot has changed since you left. With all of the infighting and death, we had to reprioritize things. Those childhood animosities seemed so trivial when we were in the midst of a rebellion. Butch was actually the first person to support me when I decided to challenge my father. He’s been very…loyal.”

Keelah nodded slowly, digesting her friend’s words.

“Stop moving. You’re messing up my parts.”

“Sorry.” Keelah tilted her head until it rested against Amata’s shoulder. With this angle, Amata would have better access to her scalp. And she could have better access to…well…Amata. “And your father? He never hurt you again, did he?”

Amata’s hands stilled for a moment. Then she began combing again. Twisting the hair into large braids.

“No. He seemed genuinely sorry about what happened with Officer Mack. He apologized. Said it wouldn’t happen again. And it didn’t. But I kept the pistol.” Her octave dropped, became impossibly soft and sad. “Is that wrong?”

“No. That’s smart. I should teach you how to shoot.”

“I don’t want to learn how to shoot my father Keelah. Or anyone for that matter.”

“I know. But you should know how to defend yourself.”

“Guns are defensive weapons now?”

Keelah thought about her first day in the wastes. How she’d been accosted by a raider almost immediately and had only survived because the bloodthirsty attacker had had terrible aim.

“Yeah, they are.”

Amata breathed quietly behind her; the steady rise and fall of her chest hypnotizing and soothing.

“Fine. You can teach me. But not now.”

Keelah hummed in the affirmative and allowed her mind and body to relax under the push and pull of Amata’s fingers. Amata’s hands were nimble and sure, and every now and then she’d pause in her activity to knead the back of Keelah’s neck. The hair-braiding was cathartic for both of them. It was also serving as a sort of reconciliation for the estranged friends.

“What about your father Keelah?”

“I already told you what happened to him.”
“Yes, but how are you handling it. Are you okay?”

Keelah shifted uncomfortably against her friend’s body. It was nice to know that Amata worried about her, cared about her well-being; but her grief over her father’s loss was something she kept sublimated; that she worked through via binge drinking and overexertion.

“There’s this kid I met in the wastes. Bryan Wilkes. Eight years old. He witnessed his father and best friend get slaughtered by mutant fire ants.”

Amata’s hands went still again. “Mutant fire ants?”

“Yeah. The big ones are the size of a small Brahmin. The shoot fire from their antennae. It’s the craziest thing. They’re ferocious. Extremely dangerous. They killed everyone’s in Bryan’s small town except him. The kid had to hide in a Preservation Shelter until I found him someplace to go.” Amata hummed in distress behind her. Pressed a chaste kiss against the back of Keelah’s neck. Encouragement to continue the story. “So you see, everybody has a horror story. Has a loved one that they lost to the violence of this new world. What happened with my dad isn’t unique. I’m not some victim or damsel you need to worry about.”

Amata wrapped her arms around Keelah. Hugged her tight. “I know that. But obviously you worried about this Bryan Wilkes, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Worried about him so much that you found him someplace safe to go?”

“Yeah. He’s with his aunt now. In Rivet City.”

“That’s good. Just like you cared about him, I care about you. I want to make sure you don’t get stuck in some Preservation Shelter waiting for someone to come find you.”

Her words were figurative and Keelah felt tears spring to her eyes at the implication. When she moved her hands to wipe away the tears before her friend noticed, Amata stopped her. Grabbed her roving hands and held them in her lap until she was full out holding Keelah in her arms.

“You don’t have to hide from me,” Amata said softly.

Keelah tilted her head until her face was pressed into Amata’s neck. Cried softly into the lilac-scented skin she remembered so fondly.

Wrapped in her friend’s embrace, surrounded by so much love, it wasn’t long before Keelah dozed off. Amata held her. Kissed the top of her friend’s half-braided head and let her sleep.

. . . . . .

“There were so many bodies Keelah. So many.” Amata’s strained voice drew Keelah from the semi-doze she’d fallen into. “The Vault had never had so many deaths before. We had to put them in cold storage. There were too many to inter at once.”

Keelah roused herself from her nap. She checked her Pip-Boy. They’d been in their hideout for several hours already. Goodness knew how long she’d been asleep. She clicked her Pip-Boy off and focused on her friend’s words.

*Internment.* That was Vault speak for incineration. Due to the limitations of their enclosed residence, vaulters didn’t have funerals or burials. They cremated their dead. Left the painful task of disposing
of bodies to maintenance.

“It was a difficult time. The Vault got quieter as we lost more and more people. You could hear the incinerator running at all times. I think that’s what pushed Stanley over the edge. He had to inter all of those bodies. Including his daughter Mary and his granddaughter Monica.” She sighed. Rested her chin on Keelah’s shoulder. “I think that’s why some of Vaulters want to get out of here so desperately. They want to be away from those memories of death.”

“They may be headed the wrong direction Amata. There’s even more death in the Capital Wasteland. And no one disposes of the bodies. They’re just there. They’re there until the dust covers them or the wild dogs pick them clean. And even then they’re still not gone. It’s a veritable graveyard out there.”

Amata pulled away from her friend. Keelah could feel her body tense.

Keelah turned so that she could meet the other woman’s eyes. “I’m not saying that to be mean or to be insensitive. I just want you to know what you’ll be getting yourselves into when you go out there.”

“It’s that bad?”

“Yes.”

“How do you manage it?”

The answer was whiskey. The answer was by being an irritable cynic. But Keelah had already forced unwelcome truths on her friend so she lied.

“I avoid looking down.”

. . . . .

They’d been sitting in companionable silence for little more than an hour. Keelah had turned her Pip-boy back on and was pleased to discover that she could still pick up Agatha’s radio station. They listened to the plaintive violin music as Amata twisted the final braids.

“Keelah?”

“Hmm?”

“How come you never kissed me?”

“What?!” Keelah nearly squawked.

“You’ve had ample opportunity.”

“Uh…you’ve wanted me to kiss you?”

“Many times.”

“Is this one of those times?”

Amata sighed. “I can’t believe you were an honor student once upon a time. You’re stubbornly obtuse. A girl would practically have to—”

Keelah interrupted her with a soft kiss. She’d closed her eyes in order to keep her courage. But she
opened them as their lips pulled apart. The two of them were so close that she could see the hazel flecks in Amata’s eyes.

Amata smiled at her. “About time. It only took you four years.”

“You could have initiated something.”

Amata rolled her eyes. “Keelah, I wrote you love poems. I left them under your pillow. Dozens of them.”

“That was you?”

“Who else did you think it was?”

“Beatrice.” Amata stared at her like she’d grown a second head. “She’s the vault poet! She gave me a poem every single year for my birthday.”

“My adorable little dunce,” Amata said affectionately.

Keelah scowled at the gentle jibe but her reaction only made Amata laugh and lean in to kiss her pouting lips.

“I should have known,” Keelah continued. “Beatrice’s poems were always so dark and sinister. The poems I found under my pillow were…” Keelah shivered remembering the flowery words. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I did. In iambic pentameter. And in perfect script, I might add.”

They both laughed heartily before their eyes caught and held. They leaned forward at the same time. Shared a sweet kiss.

“I’m sorry,” Keelah whispered. “If I had known, I would have reciprocated. One kiss for every beautiful word.”

Amata’s hand tightened on her arm. “Pay me now.”

Keelah kissed her mouth. Kissed the curve of her beautiful jaw. A sweet kiss for every freckle. Another to her temple. She kissed Amata until the woman trembled in her arms. When she pulled back from her worship of Amata’s face, she noticed tears in her friend’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Keelah asked nervously.

Amata put a shaking hand to Keelah’s face. “Nothing. It’s just…I’ve loved you for so long. I didn’t think it could get any stronger. But somehow…”

Keelah understood perfectly. She smiled her way into another kiss, putting every bit of emotion she felt into the contact. Her lips wandered. She found the hollow of Amata’s throat and sucked softly. The sound Amata released at her action made Keelah’s toes curl. She wanted to hear every possible variation of that sound. But first…

She pulled back. “Are we…?”

Amata opened her eyes. They’d slammed closed in ecstasy when Keelah had teased her neck. “Are we what?”

Keelah could only blush. Geez! She was bad at this initiating romance thing.
Amata seemed to intuit her question. “Oh. Yes. We are.”

She pulled Keelah close for another kiss. This time she added tongue and Keelah was, once again, afraid that she would faint.

It was Amata who pulled back this time. “I’ve never done this before. Have you?”

“A few times,” Keelah admitted. “But it’s never felt like this.”

She thought about the unsatisfying trysts she’d had in the past few months. Usually over too fast and partaken in enclosed spaces that didn’t allow for much exploration. During those encounters, she’d been having sex to purge bothersome emotions. What she was about to experience with Amata would be something entirely different.

Amata studied her quietly. Keelah assumed the silent perusal was judgment.

“If it makes you uncomfortable that I’ve been with other people, we don’t have to—”

“No, that’s not it. I just got lost in my head for a second there. I was trying to decide which part of you to touch first.”


“Agreed.”

Amata pressed another kiss to her lips. And then surprised them both by pushing Keelah down on the pallet and straddling her hips in one deft move.

“Wow,” Keelah sputtered, looking up at her with wide eyes. “That was damn hot.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

This time it was Amata who got to focus on neck kissing and sucking. The garbled sounds that fell from Keelah’s mouth put Amata’s moans from earlier to shame.

Keelah put a hand on Amata’s shoulder to stop the sensual assault on her neck. “I don’t think we should do this here,” she panted.

“I thought we were focusing on action.”

And Amata clearly meant it because suddenly she was palming Keelah’s breasts. Even through the heavy material of her leather armor, Keelah could feel the heat of her friend’s hands and a high-pitched moan escaped her lips.

“I know what I said,” Keelah managed. “But wouldn’t you prefer this to happen in a place with less machinery and more…I don’t know…romance?”

Amata halted her movements and sat up. “More romance? Like what?”

“A bed for starters?”

“My bedroom is not exactly in my jurisdiction at the moment.” Oh yeah. It was in the Overseer’s quarters.

“What about mine?”
“Wally’s been using it.”

Keelah wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Ugh. God I hope he hasn’t been going through my things. I still have bras there.”

“Do you really want to talk about Wally right now?”

Keelah stared up at Amata. At the picture she made, straddling her hips. Her lips kiss-reddened and wet. “I just thought you might want to do this on something softer.”

Amata flexed her hips, pressing her pelvis into Keelah’s. “I think you’ll do just fine.” She smiled lustily when Keelah moaned and mirrored her movement. She leaned down and drew a finger along Keelah’s arm, her shoulder. “Although, you have gotten more muscular since I last saw you.

Keelah laughed. “That’s me. All the muscles.”

“We’ll see.”

Amata began unhooking the metal fasteners that kept Keelah’s armor together. Keelah’s hand trembled without a purpose. Of course Amata noticed.

“You can touch me if you want,” Amata said softly.

She’d finished unbuttoning Keelah’s top armor and pulled the heavy fabric back revealing Keelah’s plain undershirt. And Keelah’s clearly protruding nipples. Amata bit her lip and took several deep breaths.

“What’s wrong?” Keelah asked worriedly.

“Nothing. I’m just having a hard time exerting self-control.”

Amata’s honesty helped relax Keelah. And just like that, her jitters went away. She remembered that of the two of them, she was the experienced one, and she should be working hard to ensure her best friend’s first time was special and enjoyable.

She reached her hands up to Amata’s jumpsuit. Clasped the tiny zipper and pulled. The skin revealed was honeyed brown and flawless, and Keelah’s eyes widened appreciatively at the heavy breasts supported by black lace.

“That’s not a Vault-issue bra,” she whispered reverently.

Amata grinned. “No, it’s not. It’s nightwear. And it’s a matching set.”

Keelah’s eyes traveled down to the portion of Amata’s body still hidden by her jumpsuit. “I’m sure you wear it well.”

“Yes. But for how long?”

That was an invitation if she’d ever heard one. But Keelah hesitated. She was wildly attracted to Amata. And madly in love with her, if she were being honest with herself. But they were about to cross a major line. There would be no going back from this. And though she looked forward to becoming Amata’s lover, she worried about what sex would do to their friendship.

Amata seemed to sense her conflict. She took Keelah’s hands in hers. Held them to her face and smiled down at her visibly torn friend.
“I love your hands. I always have, but they’re a bit rougher now from your time outside. You can’t imagine how good they feel against my skin.” She placed a kiss into Keelah’s left palm. “These hands can deprogram a security system. Can break a bully’s nose. And can make me feel like the most cherished person in the world.” She pressed a kiss into Keelah’s right palm. “I love you. I love everything about you.” In her final move, she placed Keelah’s hands against her breasts. They both moaned at the sensation, and Keelah shook violently from the heady emotion that was running roughshod through her.

Amata leaned down and pressed a kiss to Keelah’s right ear. Keelah could feel a warm vibration that could have been words.

“I can’t hear you.”

Amata leaned back. “Hmm?”

“I can’t hear from that side. I lost hearing in that ear after the fight with Officer Mack.”

Amata looked devastated. “I didn’t know. I’m so sorry Keelah. It’s my fault he did that to you.”

“Shhhh.” Keelah interrupted any more discourse with a hard kiss of her own. Her tongue found its way inside Amata’s mouth and they both lost themselves in kissing and touching and murmuring each other’s names.

“No more talk of Macks, okay?” Keelah asked when they came up for air.

“Okay.”

Amata settled comfortably on top of her. They resumed their languid kissing.

But after a few seconds of bliss Keelah pulled away again. “What did you say before? That I couldn’t hear?”

Amata pressed teeth into a Keelah’s neck. A playful nip followed by purposeful kissing downward.

“Let me show you.”

. . . .

Keelah awoke with Amata sprawled half on top of her, her face tucked into her neck. They’d divested their clothes ages ago and the air circulating through the enclosed room was cold, so Keelah appreciated the extra heat against her body. She pressed a quick kiss to Amata’s forehead.

Amata stirred. Smiled into Keelah’s neck.

“You planning on spending the entire day on top of me?” Keelah quipped.

“Is that an option?”

Keelah laughed and tightened her embrace on her old friend and new lover. She hadn’t felt this good in ages.

“What time is it? Keelah asked.” Her Pip-Boy was hidden somewhere in their tangle of clothes.

“I don’t know, dear.”

“Ooh, we’ve progressed to pet names already?”
Amata lifted her head. Her curly hair was mussed, her eyes still heavy-lidded from sleep and other activities. Keelah found her absolutely stunning.

“Do you mind?” She asked. Somewhat nervously. It was clear she thought Keelah had regrets.

“Not at all. You can call me whatever you’d like, pumpkin.”

Amata rolled her eyes before leaning down to steal a kiss. Things quickly escalated and Keelah sat up so that she could lean against the wall and bring Amata’s hips into alignment with hers. Amata groaned from her perch in Keelah’s lap. Leaned forward to bite down on Keelah’s bottom lip.

“Keelah?”

“Yes, sugar lump?”

“I’d love to keep going…oh my, that feels wonderful… but…uh…eventually someone’s going to come looking for us.”

“That’s the beauty of a hideout, my Sugar Bombshell. No one knows where we are.”

“It’s not that hard to find.”

Keelah slid her hands down Amata’s back. Cupped her ass and pressed forward. Amata quivered in her arms.

“Touch me like you did before”, the future overseer commanded breathlessly. And Keelah complied, moving her hand between them in the steady circles she’d discovered Amata liked. She wanted to kiss Amata’s mouth but the sounds the other woman was making were too intoxicating to stifle, so she settled for placing open-mouthed kisses on Amata’s torso, her breasts. Lavished her nipples with indelicate strokes of tongue.

Amata came quickly. Her fingernails leaving half-moon impressions on Keelah’s arms. Keelah hissed in satisfaction, moving her lips from Amata’s breasts to her mouth. She greedily swallowed Amata’s throaty exhalations.

“I love you,” Amata moaned. Her hips moved shamelessly against Keelah’s fingers. She slid her fingers into Keelah’s hair—how she loved that thick texture—and rode herself to a second orgasm while spilling a litany of pet names into Keelah’s mouth.

Keelah held her friend close as her body quieted. The stickiness between them was a pleasant mix of sweat and desire.

When her body stopped trembling, Amata leaned back and studied Keelah’s face. Her eyes tracked from the caramel-colored eyes to the wide bridge of her nose to the tiny scar above her lip. Keelah blushed under the inspection.

“What?” She said hoarsely.

“I don’t want you to leave me.” Amata’s grip in Keelah’s hair tightened. It wasn’t painful. Just forceful enough to show her sincerity.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“No. I mean…after this thing with my dad. I can’t lose you again Keelah. It almost killed me last time. Watching you run out of here. Not knowing if I would ever see you again. Promise me you
Keelah turned her face from the desperation she could see in Amata’s eyes. Her friend’s voice was sandpaper rough and her eyes glittered with unshed tears. The transition from lust to sadness was too much for the wastelander. She felt like she would be sick. Pass out or worse.

Amata declaration was putting them on a path to an ugly confrontation. One they may not be able to recover from. Yes, Keelah loved Amata; and the depth of emotion she felt for her friend after their lovemaking was more powerful than anything she’d ever felt; but there was part of her that was still angry at her friend. Still hurt that Amata had sent her off into the wastes alone.

She turned her eyes back to Amata and saw that Amata was openly crying now. The young woman had always been someone to cry softly, almost as if she were censoring her emotion. Keelah had always suspected it was a habit developed from having an emotionally unavailable father.

But as much as Keelah wanted to comfort Amata, to pull her close and kiss away her tears, she knew they needed to hash things out. To settle the unresolved tension that had suddenly bloomed between them.

“You chose the Vault.” Keelah murmured. “You knew I wanted you to accompany me outside, yet you chose the Vault and your father over me.”

Amata wiped at the moisture clouding her vision. “It wasn’t like that Keelah. I told you. The people here needed me. Things were falling apart so fast. I needed to stick around to add some stability.”

“Bullshit. You’re not the Overseer. The Vault could have survived without two of its teenagers.”

“It’s not that simple. I’ve been trained since childhood to prepare to lead the Vault, and a leader doesn’t abandon her post. Especially during a time of crisis.”

Keelah rolled her eyes at Amata’s words and folded her arms across her chest. It was obvious she was trying to create distance between them. Amata pressed on.

“I had to stay to talk sense into my father.”

“How’d that work out of you?”

Amata flinched at Keelah’s tone but didn’t move from her position in Keelah’s lap. She could sense Keelah throwing up emotional walls, but she wasn’t sure how to get her friend to see her side.

Keelah had quickly worked herself into a righteous anger. The more she thought about it—how her dad had left her; how the Vault had turned against her for no fault of her own; how Amata had sent her away—the angrier she got.

“Your fucking father let Stevie Mack beat you for information, yet you still chose him over me. I’ll never understand that.”

She was angry, but she was more hurt. And Amata could see that hurt in the way Keelah wrapped her arms around herself and avoided her gaze.

“I chose you Keelah.”

“Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart.”

The pet name delivered in such a derisive tone made Amata’s face fall. Realizing that Keelah had
made her body all angles (jutted jaw, crossed arms, tilted head), Amata removed herself from the other girl’s lap. Dropped tiredly into the space beside her.

Just a few minutes ago they’d been making love, saying love words. Now Keelah wouldn’t even look at her.

Amata was a calculated person. She’d been taught from an early age to be eloquent and composed and to carefully consider the import of her words before speaking. But she struggled now, twisting her fingers together nervously as she tried to find the words to articulate what may be the most important speech she’d ever give.

“Keelah… the night your dad escaped, my father locked me in my bedroom. He thought there would be violence. And he wanted me to be unharmed.” Her eyes darkened. “At least at first. I used a hairpin to pick the lock on my door so that I could come to you. I knew he kept a gun in his office. I broke into his desk and stole it. For you. And later, when Officer Mack had me in that chair and he… threatened to harm me unless I told him where you were…I chose you. He hit me… several times. I think he was just warming up. I think he would have hurt me more severely if I didn’t comply. And I think my father would have let him.” Her eyes watered. Remembering. “I would have let him. For you. You’ve always stood up for me. Against the Tunnel Snakes and all those people who called me a Vault princess behind my back. Stood up for me against my father.” She laughed weakly. “He told me about that time you confronted him in his office. He was livid that you would challenge him. He demanded I stop being your friend. But of course I couldn’t. I was already in love with you by that point.”

The tears fell again.

“You were the best thing I had in what was a miserable childhood. You were my best friend. My protector. And when the rest of the vault dubbed me a spoiled princess, you happily joined me as an outcast. Things would have been so much easier for you if you’d not been my friend. But you kept choosing me. I wanted to choose you for a change. That night your father escaped, I would have done anything to protect you. Even betray my father. And that’s what I did. He hated me for it. And now it seems like, well, you hate me too because you think I chose him. But it was always you Keelah. Maybe I could have come with you, outside, but I didn’t want to be a burden for you. I didn’t want you to have to protect me out there. For once, you needed to look out for yourself. I’m sorry if it felt like I didn’t care. I did. I do. Sending you away was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

She stared at Keelah, her eyes blanketed with tears.

Keelah clenched her jaw tightly in an effort to keep her own emotion in check. She was mostly unsuccessful and heavy rivulets of wet streaked down her cheeks. “It felt like being abandoned. Again,” she choked out. “It’s a terrible feeling.”

Keelah rubbed her hands across her face, trying to catch the renegade tears. Amata helped her. Cupped her face. Used her hands to thumb away the moisture.

“I know,” she said softly. “That’s why I can’t lose you again. I can’t live without you Kee’.”

Keelah stared into her eyes. Saw that Amata was sincere. “I don’t want to live without you either.”

“Well don’t.”

Amata pulled her close. Kissed her so softly that Keelah’s hands trembled. Amata glanced down at the twitching appendages.
“Your hands have been doing that a lot.”

“They’re happy.”

Keelah moved to kiss Amata again, but Amata held back, kept her hands against Keelah’s face, stared deeply into her eyes.

“Butch’s mother’s hands used to do that. We all knew why.”

“Amata—”

Amata’s gaze was intense, her eyes moving back and forth across Keelah’s face, so intent on discerning the truth.

“I know you were mostly alone out there and you probably had to find ways to make things easier. But things are going to be different from now on.”

Keelah lowered her head, embarrassed. “It’s not that big a deal. Really.”

Amata used a hand to raise her head. “I’m not judging you. I just want you to know that I’m available. You’re not alone anymore.”

They both started crying then. Amata crying loudly this time, her depth of emotion breaking down whatever walls remained from her childhood upbringing.

They pressed close together, tears mixing, and sobbed for the lost time, the lost parents, the lost childhood. Perhaps they would have cried forever had not a loud clearing of throat interrupted them.

It was Butch.

His hands covered his face and his body was angled away from the women so that they could only see his profile.

Both women scrambled for their clothes. Keelah let out a loud curse.

Butch was forced to direct his commentary to the wall. “Uh…sorry to interrupt…but there’s been shouting coming from upstairs. From your father’s office. I figured you’d want to check it out.”

He edged closer to the doorway, as if waiting for permission to flee the awkward scene.

Amata tugged her Vault suit on in record time. By the time Butch had finished speaking, she’d already straightened her clothes, smoothed back her hair, and assumed the professional persona of rebel leader.

“Thanks for letting me know Butch. We’ll be up in a moment. Keep everyone calm until I get there. And don’t let anyone go near the Overseer’s office.”

“Aye aye.” Butch responded lamely. He marched out of the room like the proud lieutenant he imagined himself to be.

Keelah snapped her final button. Checked to make sure her Pip-Boy was functional. Then turned to her friend.

Amata was gazing at her softly. “We’ll finish this later,” she said with a smile. Her eyes were still red from where she’d been crying, but she looked happy.
“Hopefully in your bedroom.”

“Our bedroom,” Amata corrected.

Keelah beamed. Moved closer so that she could embrace her friend/lover. “I guess Megaton will be our vacation home.”

Amata laughed. Kissed Keelah on the mouth, then her cheek before stepping back and composing herself.

“I’ll go talk to my father. See what the fuss is about.”

“Let me.”

“Don’t you need more time to plan?”

“Perhaps. But Officer Gomez said earlier that the guards have a raid planned in a couple of days. It’s better to get this over with.”

Amata nodded her agreement. “Keelah, I know the Overseer has done bad things, but he’s still my father. Don’t do anything rash or hurt him, okay?”

Keelah hesitated. “Okay.”

“And don’t get yourself hurt either.”

“Yes, dear.” Keelah smiled playfully. Amata couldn’t help but kiss her again.

The pair moved towards the door. Towards the conflagration they’d been able to avoid for several hours.

Keelah didn’t know how her conversation with the Overseer would turn out. He was opposed to new ideas and he hated her. But she was newly motivated to resolve things with him and get the Vault back to normal. Vault 101 had been her home once before. Maybe it could be her home again.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title inspired by Force MD song.
Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer confronts the Overseer. An angry mob confronts her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Five – Remember the Tin Man

By the time Keelah and Amata made it back upstairs to the med clinic, the entire rebel force had assembled. The rebels huddled in small groups talking fiercely amongst themselves and gesticulating wildly. They seemed harried and close to breaking.

“Amata, thank God,” Old Lady Palmer said as she rushed over to the young leader. “Everyone’s panicking. They think the Overseer is planning an attack on the clinic. They want to storm his office and strike first.”

“What?! We’ve discussed this already. We are not equipped for a head-on battle with the security team.”

Wally Mack, who’d somehow re-armed himself with a metal pipe, stepped forward. “We’re not going to engage the security team. It’s going to be a stealth mission. I’m going to sneak into the Overseer’s office and assassinate him.” He gripped his metal pipe and grinned evilly.

Amata’s eyes widened in shock and a ripple of noise went through the crowd. It seemed that not everyone agreed with this new, violent course of action.

“I’m not going to let you murder my father,” Amata snapped.

“Why not? How many of us has he killed? How many more will he kill in his attempt to preserve his power?” Wally turned to the crowd, attempting to rile them up. “Jenson, he had your son executed for straying too close to the Vault door. And what about your husband, Ellen? Died from a leg infection because we didn’t have a doctor to treat his wound? How many more have to die before we make our move?”

Wally’s words seemed to have an effect. Rebels began nodding along, pumping their fists, giving in to their anger, letting it morph into rage.

Amata moved to the head of the group, waved her arms in an effort to command their attention.

“We won’t meet violence with violence,” she declared. “Attacking the Overseer is the surest way to get the security force to retaliate and siege this clinic. We have no protection against their weapons. Diplomacy is our best option.”

Wally interrupted her. “Fuck diplomacy. She’s only defending that tyrant because he’s her father. Just like she defended the traitor bitch, Keelah. I say we kill Keelah and the Overseer.”
There was a roar of approval from the crowd and Keelah had to use every fiber of her being to keep from tackling Wally Mack and beating him senseless. Did this buffoon never learn? She’d just kicked ass not even eight hours ago. But Keelah steadied herself; calmed her nerves. She knew that attacking Wally would turn the crowd on her and possibly Amata. Their festering anger and Wally’s propaganda had made them irrational. The slightest provocation would set them off.

It was Butch who ultimately intervened. He pushed Wally hard, made the former Tunnel Snake lose his footing and crash to the ground. The metal pipe rolled away from Wally and Old Lady Palmer quickly scooped it up. The elderly woman clenched the pipe between her hands and joined Keelah, Amata and Butch in staring down the hostile crowd.

“What the fuck, Butch?” Wally cried from his sprawl on the ground.

“You’re losing it man. If you want to play chicken with the security guards and get yourself killed, so be it. But don’t drag everyone else into it.”

Wally pushed himself back to his feet and pointed a finger in Butch’s face. “You’re not the boss of me anymore Francis!” Butch frowned at the use of his real name but stayed put. “The rest of you may be too chicken shit to take on the Overseer, but I’m not. I’m going to kill that conniving bastard and then you’ll see who the real badass is around here.”

Keelah decided to end the nonsense. “So go kill him then.” Amata made a noise in protest but Keelah sent her friend a meaningful look before returning her gaze to Wally. “Take your metal pipe and assassinate your target. You just have to make your way through the atrium and past the armed guards. If you’re quiet enough, you should be able to get past the guards on the first floor. That is, of course, unless they’ve set trip wires and other alarms to alert them to your presence. Once you make it to the second floor—if you make it—be sure to avoid the guards who patrol the hallways. I think there are six of them. At least, that’s how many shot at me when I left the Vault. Fight your way into the Overseer’s office and past his personal guard. And hope that after all that you still have the energy to take down the Overseer himself. Amata, does your father still keep a 10 mm in his desk drawer?”

Amata knew that her father’s pistol was now in her possession but she nodded anyway. “He also has a panic button near his desk. One push and it activates a laser rifle above the doorway.”

Keelah silently praised her girlfriend’s devilish imagination. There was no such thing as a laser-activating panic button, but the mere possibility of one made Wally’s eyes widen and his face turned a sickening yellow.

Old Lady Palmer decided to get in on the fun. She extended the metal pipe to Wally. “Here you go, dear. This should help you deflect all those bullets. Be sure to give your mother a kiss before you leave. I’m sure she’ll want to say her goodbyes.”

Wally stared at the pipe, his eyes twitching in a way that was almost comical. It was clear he was trying to exhibit bravado, but he was failing miserably. And publically. When none of the other rebels jumped to his defense, he finally gave up.

“Fine! Let the fucker live. But don’t come crying to me when he sends his guards down here in the middle of the night to take more of us.”

He eyed Keelah with fresh hatred, but it was Butch he bumped into on his way out of the med clinic. Amata sighed in relief and gave Keelah a grateful nod before turning back to her flighty rebel unit.
Alright. Here’s what we’re actually going to do. Keelah has graciously volunteered to serve as a liaison to the Overseer. She’s going to go talk to him and see if she can negotiate a ceasefire. She’s armed, so she should be able to handle any threats she encounters. But violence is the last resort. With luck, we’ll be able to settle things peacefully, and we can all get back to the business of running our Vault the way it’s supposed to be run.”

None of the rebels seemed particularly enthused by the pep talk, but they also didn’t appear as rabid as before. They just looked tired. And stressed to the point of being zombie-like. Manic.

Keelah actually felt bad for them. She knew they all despised her, but she could sympathize with their plight. They’d had their lives completely upended because of the actions of another. Many of them would never recover from the losses they’d incurred since the Vault door had been opened. They’d lost family and friends; they’d lost the security and stability they’d been privileged with for decades.

As she watched Amata make her rounds through the group, Keelah wondered if her commitment to helping the Vault was an attempt to atone for her father’s mistakes. Yes, she was here primarily because Amata summoned her. But she would be lying if she didn’t admit that she hoped the vaulters would eventually forgive her and welcome her back home.

After getting some face time with their leader, the rebels slowly dispersed, leaving to complete the daily work assignments that still required their attention. Butch stayed behind to guard the clinic door, and Old Lady Palmer joined him at the clinic entrance; the metal pipe still clenched in her weathered hands; her eyes hard and watchful for any sudden movements.

Keelah turned to Amata. “Despite your assurances, it looks like everyone is bracing for an attack.”

“I wouldn’t put it past my father. I said what I had to, to keep them calm, but if what you said about the raid is true, the security officers may be planning to end this standoff once and for all. People could be killed. Please hurry Keelah.”

“Let me get my gear.”

Keelah hastened to the back office, Amata trailing her. The wastelander took a second to check Beatrice’s temperature and her bandaging. The wounded woman was still unconscious, but her complexion looked much better than it had the day before.

“Have Butch change her bandaging while I’m gone. And give her another dose of pain relievers.”

“Okay.”

Amata watched as Keelah strapped on her sniper rifle; holstered the formidable-looking SMG. She blinked in confusion when Keelah fastened on her bulky Crowbot helmet.

Keelah grinned bashfully. “I’m hoping that with the armor and guns and this menacing ass helmet, the guards will be too intimidated to accost me. Maybe I’ll be able to stroll right to the Overseer’s office and have that civil chat.”

“I hope so.”

Fully equipped, and with her nerves mostly in control, Keelah turned to her best friend. “This is it then.”

Amata seemed distressed but resolute. “This is it,” she repeated. “Please be careful.”
“Sweetheart, I’ve crawled headfirst into Yao Gui tunnels with little more than a cleaver in my hand. I’ll be fine.”

Amata moved closer. Put her arms around Keelah’s waist. “I love it when you do that.”

“When I regale you with my past exploits?”

“No. When you call me sweetheart.” Amata stared up at her. Bit her bottom lip. “That helmet makes it really hard to kiss you.”

“You know what else it makes hard to do? Breathing. I’d better get a move on.”

Keelah gave her girlfriend a gentle squeeze before breaking away from her embrace and heading for the office door.

“I love you,” Amata called after her.

Keelah turned. “I love you too.”

Amata’s face melted into a smile. “That’s the first time you’ve said that.”

She stared at Keelah with such unbridled adoration that the wastelander simply had to retrace her steps. Keelah removed her helmet and gave Amata a sweet kiss on the lips.

“I’ll see you soon,” Keelah whispered. “And I’ll come bearing good news.”

“I have full faith in you.”

Keelah smiled and put her helmet back on. She gave a firm nod to Old Lady Palmer as she passed through the clinic door, but she didn’t get very far before Butch stopped her.

“Hold up a sec,” he said, jogging over to her. “Just in case this is the last time I see you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Keelah said wryly.

“Well, you never know...” Butch ran fingers through his hair in an anxious gesture, making his usually well-kept locks stand on end. “I have something I need to ask you.”

“If I get axed Butch, you can have the helmet, alright?” She turned to leave him but Butch touched her arm, stopping her.

“No, that’s not it. I’ve been wanting to ask you something since you got back, but didn’t know how to...” He fidgeted. “It’s just...I was a real jerk to you when we were growing up. And to Amata. I suppose I was pretty awful to everyone.” He scratched a spot above his eye. He couldn’t seem to stop twitching. “Yet, that night your dad left and I asked you for help with the radroaches, you came with me to save my mom. Why’d you do that when I’d been so horrible to you? Why not just tell me to fuck off and leave my mom to the roaches?”

Keelah stared at him, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Cause it was your mom.” Clearly that was enough reason for her, and Keelah stared at her former nemesis like she was surprised he had to ask such a question.

“Oh...” Butch stared at her with wide eyes. It was like he was seeing her for the first time. And maybe he was. “Okay. Well...uh...thanks again.”

He tore his eyes away from Keelah’s penetrating stare. He couldn’t look at her, and she could barely
look at him; but it wasn’t antagonism that kept the duo from avoiding each other’s gaze. It was the realization that a decade’s long enmity had thawed, leaving behind something curious and delicate that would have to be closely inspected at a later date.

The two of them weren’t friends now. Not by any stretch of the imagination; but they both seemed to realize that they could no longer call the other an enemy. The realization made both of them squirm.

Keelah gave Butch the closest thing she had to a smile. “If this thing goes bad, you’ll watch out for Amata, yeah?”

Butch straightened, like a soldier reporting for duty. “You defended the woman I love. The least I could do is return the favor.”

Keelah didn’t bother challenging his words. He’d seen her and Amata in the reactor room. And at this point, everyone in the Vault probably knew what the two women meant to each other.

She gave Butch a final nod before making her way to the Atrium steps. There were a hundred feet and nearly a dozen guards that separated her from the Overseer’s office.

The last time she’d walked this route, she’d had to defend herself with a splintered baseball bat.

She had deadlier weaponry this time around and a whole hell of a lot more combat training, but it didn’t make her feel any more safe walking that long and empty metallic hallway. All it took was one bullet. One well-timed blow and she’d be yet another body, crumpled and forgotten.

The vaulters hated her so much, they probably wouldn’t even incinerate her. They’d return her to the waste. Dump her outside the Vault door like they did the first time.

Keelah released a breath and made her ways towards the Overseer’s office.

. . . . . . .

The wastelander’s hunch had been right. The Vault security officers had been so surprised to see her in full battle armor and armed to the teeth, that they let her pass unmolested. It also helped that Officer Gomez accompanied her most of the way. He’d seen her pass through the atrium and had run to catch up with her so that he could guard her flank. It was a decision that would do little to salvage his reputation as a “soft” guard; but being a senior officer had its perks. With Gomez as a personal escort, no one attacked Keelah or tried to intercept her. She made it to the Overseer’s door with only the occasional threat hurled her way.

She stopped Officer Gomez before he could follow her into the Overseer’s office.

“Leave me. Things are already going to be bad for you since you helped get me here. If you walk in there with me, the Overseer’s going to think you’ve joined our side. You’ll be dubbed a traitor.”

Officer Gomez shook his head sadly. “There was a time when the only sides were ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’ Now everything’s turned all around. I wonder sometimes if things will ever be the same.”

Keelah knew that there had been too much death and too much ruthlessness for things in Vault 101 to ever be the same, but, for the friendly officer’s sake, she tried to channel Amata’s optimism.

“Probably not the same, but hopefully better. Not better than before. But better than now. That’s progress.”

Officer Gomez nodded. “Good luck in there. I’ll wait within earshot. Just in case…”
Keelah paused a few moments before entering the Overseer’s office. She could hear him banging things around in his office and swearing loudly. The Overseer never used foul language. Something must have set him off. It sounded like he was destroying his office. That must have been the commotion the rebels heard that made them think he was planning an attack.

Keelah pressed the entry panel on the Overseer’s door and entered his office.

Overseer Almodovar was hunched over his computer terminal, banging wildly on its side and screaming at it as if the computer was an uncooperative employee.

Keelah smirked. “Computer troubles again?”

The Overseer rose to his feet when he saw her. He was momentarily stunned by the fearsome figure in front of him, but when Keelah removed the Crowbot helmet and revealed her identity, he scowled at the teenager.

“It’s you. Done with the dust and ruins of the Wasteland, are you? Given up looking for daddy? Or have things gotten so bad that you thought you could slink back into the Vault like a teen missing curfew?”

Keelah let the barbs slide off her back. “Neither. I’m here to talk.” She set her helmet down on a metal table and took a step towards the Overseer. He flinched as she approached, and Keelah put up her hands in a reassuring gesture.

“I’m not here to hurt you. A conversation, that’s all.”

“If you’re here to request readmission to the Vault, don’t waste your time. You have no place amongst us anymore. And you’ve been tainted by the outside. I never should have let you and your father in here. It’s a mistake we continue to pay dearly for.”

“You can’t blame me and my father for what’s going on in the Vault. We didn’t kill those people by the front door. All those vaulters on the memorial in the med clinic. Have you seen it? Seen the dozens of names of the lost?”

The Overseer folded his arms across his chest. Stared at Keelah with derisive eyes. “If they had listened to me and submitted to my authority, they’d still be alive. But sometimes you have to separate the wheat from the chaff…The rest of them will capitulate soon enough. And things will be back to normal.”

Keelah took a seat in the chair opposite the Overseer’s desk. “I suppose Amata is chaff too?”

“Amata is operating under the pitiful delusion that a group of teenagers and layabouts know what’s best for this Vault. She will see reason soon enough. And if she doesn’t…well…I suppose she really has no one to blame but herself for whatever…consequences her ragtag group incurs.”

Keelah’s lip curled in distaste. To think that Amata had beseeched her not to hurt her father. And here he was, open to levying punishment on all the rebels, including Amata. He would never be a compassionate leader. Or parent. It simply wasn’t his nature.

Keelah left her chair and moved towards the Overseer. He shuffled backwards in alarm, but she was only moving to his computer terminal. She pushed a few buttons, began trying to diagnose the malfunctioning machine.

The Overseer watched her, his eyes cold and hard, his posture so stiff that he looked like he would break in half.
“If you’re not trying to get back into the Vault, why are you here disturbing me?”

Keelah didn’t look up from her work. “Amata sent me. You could say that I’m a walking, talking olive branch.

The Overseer snorted. “Amata. Of course. I assume she summoned you from the outside.” He chuckled darkly. “Catherine, my dear, don’t you ever tire of being my daughter’s pet?” Keelah’s head whipped around at the Overseer’s words and her hands automatically clenched into fists. The Overseer smiled at her reaction. “She only kept you around, you know, because you were an outstanding guard dog. Kept the bullies off her in grade school. Now it seems you’re playing lap dog again.” He smirked. “Wouldn’t your father be thrilled to see where his hard work got his precious daughter? All those brains and you’re just still just a glorified mule.”

Keelah bit into her own hand. She needed the pain, the skin-tearing savagery. Otherwise she would hurt the Overseer.

Overseer Almodovar had unknowingly stumbled onto one of the teenager’s most potent insecurities. Keelah often worried that the associates and maybe-friends she’d made in the vault and Capital Wastes only saw her as an errand girl; a hired hand who could fetch supplies and eliminate targets. She wouldn’t be able to bear it if Amata saw her that way too.

Keelah snarled at the smirking man. “I promised Amata I wouldn’t kill you. But a few carefully aimed slugs shouldn’t be fatal.”

The Overseer laughed, revealing a line of perfect white teeth. “You’re a violent one, aren’t you? I bet you fit right in, in the barbaric Wasteland.”

He was one to call her violent. Hadn’t he ordered the murder of his own people? Keelah had never killed anyone who hadn’t first endangered her or someone else.

The Overseer silently studied the tense teenager. His eyes flicked carefully over her heavy armor, her weapons, her battle posture. “You could be useful to me. I saw the way you handled Officer Mack all those months ago. And you’ve clearly picked up some new skills during your time in the wastes. I need someone like you. My security team is gutless. And clearly incompetent since you managed to make it to my office unscathed. Join me. Serve as my personal guard, and I’ll allow you back in the Vault.”

Keelah laughed so hard she nearly choked. “Are you fucking kidding me? Why would I ever work for you?”

The Overseer put his hands behind his back; straightened his spine. “The rebels won’t hold out forever. As a matter of fact, once we apply a little more pressure, they’ll fold. I’ll have them all court martialed. Some will be made example of. To ensure something this foolhardy never happens again.” There was a dangerous threat in his eyes and Keelah shivered, horrified that he could actually consider executing his own daughter. “However, we can avoid some of that unpleasantness if you join me. With you out of the picture, the rebels will have no other cards to play and they’ll concede defeat. We can get the Vault functioning again and you, my dear, will have a clean slate. A new start as a Vault 101 lifer.”

He smiled that wily grin of his again and Keelah almost lunged at him.

“You’re out of your fucking mind,” she spat.

“No. You and those rebels are out of yours. I know what’s out there in the wastes. I know what’s
lurking behind that Vault door, and I won’t allow that taint to get in here. I won’t allow you to undo 200 years of stability and safety.”

“You’ve undone it. Almost a quarter of our population, gone!”

“And we would risk more if you open that door.”

“I’ve been out there. I survived. They can too.”

“You don’t count. You’re just a bit of wasteland trash that blew in nineteen years ago. The other vaulters aren’t like you.”

“You’re doing a hell of a job recruiting me to your side.”

“Should I hold your hand like Amata does? Should I plait your hair?” He laughed cruelly. “I deal only in the truth. It may be harsh but at least you know where you stand with me, little girl. Amata’s playing you. This isn’t some well-meaning revolution. This is a power grab. My little girl grows impatient with playing second fiddle. She decided to skip to the head of the line for vault leadership and she’s using you to achieve that goal. Join me and you’ll never have to worry about an Almodovar using you again.”

Keelah’s head was spinning. The Overseer was lying, she knew that. He was just trying to muddy her thoughts so that she could second guess Amata and jeopardize their mission. But he was so damn smug as he recited his lies. He was so damn steady and self-assured. He was the perfect con man. He could make even the most cynical person believe him.

Keelah massaged her temples. Tried to get her thoughts together. She was here to reason with the Overseer. Not fall victim to his claptrap.

“Look, cut the bull, alright? I wouldn’t join you for all the caps in the wasteland. You should be ashamed, lying on your own daughter. Preparing to hurt her. Again.”

But the Overseer only smiled. Picked lint off his well-pressed uniform. “You’re a fool, Keelah.” The teenager startled at his use of her preferred name. “Amata’s going to turn on you. You’ll see. And you’ll regret not recognizing who your real friends are.”

The Overseer brushed past her. Settled back into his chair in front of the computer terminal. He made a happy noise when he realized Keelah had fixed his computer.

“So, what will it take to get you out of my office and out of this Vault?” He’d clearly already dismissed Keelah and spoke with his back to her as he began to access his files.

“Open the Vault. Give the residents clearance to trade. And leave, if they choose.”

“Absolutely not.”

Keelah moved in front of the desk. Slammed her hands down on the surface of the table to get his attention. “Why so stubborn? The Vault was open before. What the rebels are asking for isn’t unprecedented.”

“The rebels don’t know what they’re asking for. They’re spoiled brats with fragile immune systems and expensive tastes. How well do you think they’ll fare once they realize hot water isn’t pumped through pipes in the wasteland? What do you think their reaction will be when they eat their first bit of irradiated food and get radiation sickness? If the food doesn’t kill them, the natives will. I can’t send them to their deaths. I won’t!”
He slammed his fist on the desk and stared her down. There was fire in his eyes and Keelah quirked an eyebrow at the man’s passion. The Overseer was a terrible father and a questionable leader, but he seemed to truly care about the vaulters’ well-being. She needed to appeal to that emotion.

Keelah leaned forward, her voice whisper-rough, and spoke in the most congenial way she could manage.

“Have you noticed how quiet the Vault has gotten? Have you seen the empty living quarters? The empty settings in the cafeteria? The Vault barely has enough people to manage its day-to-day tasks. You don’t have a doctor or a technician. And the youngest person, Monica, died the night of my dad’s escape. There aren’t any more children in the vault, or haven’t you noticed from this glass tower? Your people are dying. They’re dying out. How much longer will the Vault survive with such a compromised population?”

The Overseer stared at her, his eyes pinched in evaluative slits. He was considering her words, trying to find fault in them so that he could dismiss her argument.

Keelah pressed her advantage. “You once told me that a good leader makes hard choices. Opening the Vault is a hard choice, but it’s the right one. A good leader would recognize that.”

The Overseer sighed. Looked away from the earnest teenager. Seconds passed. A minute. Then the Overseer stood.

“You’re right. We won’t last another hundred years under these conditions. If that long, it may be time for a change. A new direction.” He rubbed a frustrated hand through his hair and Keelah realized for the first time that his head was a sea of gray. “I’m afraid I’m not cut out to be the leader the Vault needs in this new era. But I know who is. I’ll inform Amata that she’s the new overseer, effective immediately.” He moved towards the office door but then stopped suddenly. Turned to Keelah. “I was their leader for thirty years and they turned on me. They’ll do the same to you. You may want to leave. Quickly. The person who could have protected you is no longer in power.”

He strode out of the office without a backwards glance.

The Overseer’s words were ominous, and they made Keelah fidget. She couldn’t tell if the stern man had been making a threat or giving her a warning.

She knew the Overseer would need time to announce his resignation to the guards and to Amata. She wasted time by reading his private journals for old time’s sake. She didn’t access his journals out of nosiness; she just knew that the Overseer was a skilled deceiver. She wondered if there was crucial intel she needed to pass along to Amata in preparation of her new role of overseer. She had no doubt that Overseer Almodovar would wipe his private terminal before allowing his daughter access to it.

She skipped past his personal journals and focused on the files that looked to be related to Vault operations. She took note of security orders; personnel records; and any files that mentioned the Capital Wasteland. One in particular struck her as significant:

*The Vault recently received unexpected radio contact over the governmental Vault-Tec frequency, from an organization calling itself "The Enclave."

*This Enclave put forth an offer of amnesty and unity with the official remnants of the American government, in exchange for access to the Vault and its data stores.

*After brief negotiation, I have refused entrance to this "Enclave." I cannot trust my Vault and its
inhabitants to an unknown factor, much less one that would so gallantly suggest abandoning our
vault's great mission.

All the more reason to prevent the rebels from opening the Vault to the likes of them.

Keelah reread the journal twice before grabbing her helmet and racing out of the room.

The Enclave had contacted the Vault. And recently. She and the Brotherhood of Steel had worked
hard to eliminate the militaristic organization from the Capital Wastes, but there had been evidence
that remnants of the Enclave had survived and were working tirelessly to regroup and rebuild. The
Overseer’s journal suggested that the Enclave intended to use Vault 101 as a staging ground. She
needed to warn Amata.

She almost fell down the stairs in her haste to get back to the med clinic. When she finally burst
through the door, Overseer Almodovar had just finished speaking with his daughter. Keelah waited
for the retired leader to leave the clinic before hustling over to Amata.

Both teenagers spoke at once:

“I have something to tell you!”

“My father just named me acting Overseer. You did it Keelah!” Amata smiled broadly and gave her
friend a quick hug.

“That’s great. Congratulations. But I need to talk to you about something. There’s this group…the
Enclave. I’ve had run-ins with them before. Well, run-in is a bit of an understatement seeing as they
kidnapped me once before and they essentially killed my father.”

“What?...”

But Keelah’s explanation was interrupted by a commotion behind them. A throng of Vault rebels
had arrived at the clinic. They were soon joined by a battalion of security officers.

“Excuse me Keelah.” Amata stepped towards the two disputing groups, just in case an altercation
broke out. But the security officers were headed by Officer Gomez, and he nodded politely as Amata
approached.

“Overseer Almodovar…I mean…former Overseer Almodovar told us to report to you, Amata. We
are now under your leadership. Overseer.”

Amata scanned the faces of the dozen or so security officers who had crowded into the small med
clinic. They were men and women who operated according to law; who pledged undying loyalty to
the Overseer. She found no trace of hostility or resentment on their faces. They’d been trained well.
Submit to the Overseer above all else.

Amata nodded at her new squad. “I look forward to serving as your Overseer.” She turned to her
senior officer. “Officer Gomez, I would like you to go to the holding cell and release any Vault
residents currently detained there.”

Officer Gomez nodded. “Yes ma’am.” He quickly left the room.

Amata surveyed the throng of people in front of her. Rebels, security officers, teenagers, parents.
There were at least seventy people crammed into the small space. They were all just vaulters now.
They were once again on the same side.
Amata smiled happily. “It’s been a tough few months for us. And there’s still a lot of work to do. We have to restore the Vault to order. Repair all that’s been broken. And make a plan to deal with the outside. All that will come later. Today we’ll celebrate. Ms. Palmer, I think there’s a box of wine in the kitchen supply storage? Will you fetch it please? Freddie can help.”

Old Lady Palmer and Freddie slid past their neighbors and exited the room. The pair chatted excitedly as they practically skipped down the hallway. Amata beamed at their enthusiasm. Things were finally turning up in the Vault.

“Before you break out the champagne, Overseer, there’s still one more matter to discuss.” It was Senior Officer Hannon, and he moved to the front of the group as if he were the vault spokesperson. “The doctor’s daughter has to go. The officers have exercised a great deal of restraint in not confronting her, but her time has run out. She needs to leave the Vault immediately. Or else.”

Security officers and rebels alike murmured their agreement. Amata moved backwards to Keelah’s side. Attempted to show solidarity with her friend.

“Or else? Senior Office Hannon, did you just threaten me?”

“No ma’am. That comment was directed at the doctor’s daughter.”

“Her name is Keelah. And she helped us. She’s the one who negotiated the truce with my father.”

Officer Hannon nodded in agreement. “And that’s the only reason why we haven’t put her on a pike.” Keelah stepped forward angrily but Amata shot a hand out, stopped her best friend.

Officer Kendall’s stared daggers at Keelah. His hand was already on his sidearm. He was clearly itching to take aim at the wastelander.

“Don’t forget my Agnes,” Officer Taylor chimed in. “She killed my Agnes.”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Keelah snapped. “When I left this place, you guys were the ones gunning for me. I swung a baseball bat a few times, but no one died by my hands.”

“You tried to kill my brother!” Of course Wally Mack had materialized and was instigating again.

“I defended myself.”

A chorus of nastiness overrode Keelah’s words.

“You should have never come back!”

“It’s all your fault. You and your father!”

“Traitor bitch!”

“She should pay for what she did!”

The crowd surged towards her and Keelah instinctively stepped back. Butch, Amata, and Susie Mack stepped in front of her. Tried to stave off their neighbors with outstretched hands.

“This is how you repay her?!” Amata shrilled. “She stuck her neck out for us and now you want to turn on her?”
But the vaulters didn’t listen. They pushed forward. They hadn’t resorted to violence yet. They were just shouting and swearing. But Keelah knew it was only a matter of time. There was too much hate; too much bitterness; too many weapons.

Overseer Almodovar had been right, Keelah thought as the surging crowd pushed her closer to the far wall. The vaulters had turned on her the moment she’d outlived her usefulness.

“Step back!” Butch yelled, positioning his body in front of a particularly hostile rebel. The orange haired woman from before.

Susie Mack gripped her brother’s arm and tried to tug him away from the fray, but the belligerent teenager wrenched away from his sister and pressed his way to Keelah. He hawked a glob of spit directly into Keelah’s face.

Keelah immediately reached for her SMG.

Amata grabbed her arm. “Don’t,” she warned. “They’re trying to incite you into attacking first. They want an excuse to kill you.”

Keelah wanted nothing more than to shoot the smug look off of Wally’s face, but she knew Amata was right. The vaulters wouldn’t defy their Overseer’s orders and attack her outright; but if they could get her mad enough to strike out, they’d kill her and claim self-defense.

Keelah rubbed her soiled face into the fabric covering her arm. She needed to put some distance between herself and the crowd and quick. Her time in the wastes had habituated her to retaliating against hostile forces. If someone else assailed her, she might react out of pure instinct.

She looked to Amata for help. The wastelander’s eyes were wide and desperate, and the new Overseer quickly decided she’d had enough.

“Quiet!” Amata roared. “Stand down now or prepare to face charges of sedition.”

Rebel and security officer alike balked at Amata’s tone. The younger leader was red-faced and quivering with rage. Despite her youth and diminutive stature, she looked downright scary.

Officer Gomez returned at that moment. He was trailed by a half dozen prisoners, including the Vault school teacher, Mr. Brotch.

“I think I was safer in the cell,” Mr. Brotch quipped as he surveyed the room. The tension was thick. The potential for violence palpable.

Officer Gomez hurried over to Amata. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“Looks like you may be making a return trip to the holding cell.” Her tone was severe, her expression thunderous. Even the most seasoned officer on her staff had trouble meeting her gaze. “Does anyone wish to defy my orders?”

There were muted murmurs; more than a few grumbles. But this time no one spoke up.

Officer Hannon shook his head at his fellow officer’s sudden silence. He moved forward in their stead.

“No one wishes to challenge you Overseer. Our training is clear. You are indisputably the most important person in the Vault. She who shelters us from the harshness of the atomic wasteland, and to whom we owe everything we have, including our lives. All of the officers live by that code. But I
cannot serve you if Keelah stays.”

“Nor can I,” Officer Taylor added.

“Me either,” echoed Officer Wilkins.

One by one, every single security officer outside of Officer Gomez voiced their intent to resign their post if Keelah remained in the Vault.

Officer Hannon raised a hand to silence his compatriots. He gave Amata a long, hard look. “She stays, and you’ll have to run this place without a security force.”

“And without a cook!” Pepper Gomez suddenly shouted from the crowd.

Officer Gomez moved to his wife’s side, tried to hush her. “The Gomez family supports the Overseer,” he countered.

“Not if that traitor stays. Good luck getting a decent meal in this place. I’m sitting out until she’s gone.”

More rebels chimed in, threatening to boycott their work assignments unless Keelah was ejected from the vault immediately.

Just hours ago, the security officers and rebels had been facing off—primed to kill each other—now they’d united over a common enemy.

And just that quickly, Amata had another mutiny on her hands.

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When Old Lady Palmer and Freddie returned to the med clinic with a box of dusty wine bottles, they found Keelah, Amata, Susie, Butch, and Officer Gomez facing down the remaining population of Vault 101. Amata had Keelah pressed into a corner for her own safety, and she was engaged in a fierce war of words with Senior Office Hannon.

“What the hell are you people doing?” Old Lady Palmer asked as she pushed her way through the crowd.

Freddie tottered under the weight of box of wine. When it became obvious that no one cared about the alcohol, he plopped the heavy box on the ground and made his way to his father’s side.

“What’s going on, dad?” he asked softly.

Officer Gomez leaned over to whisper in his son’s ear. “Get your mother out of here Freddie. She’s riling people up. She’s going to get someone hurt. I’ll try to get the officers calmed down.”

Freddie wrapped an arm around his shrieking mother and tried to usher her out of the clinic. Officer Gomez made his way to some of the more reasonable security officers and tried to get them to retreat. Neither Gomez had much success. It was hard to deter the rebels and officers when the object of their ire was right there in front of them; close enough to touch.

Amata was doing her best to stay composed and professional but the strain of leading such a passionate and irrational group was beginning to take its toll.

Even though she didn’t have a clear look at Amata’s face from her position behind her, Keelah could tell her friend was quickly reaching her breaking point. The wastelander removed her SMG. Pointed
it at the ceiling and fired.

A hush immediately fell over the crowd and several of the officers reached instinctively for their weapons. But no officer returned fire. To get to Keelah they would have to go through Amata. And no security officer in the history of the Vault had ever betrayed their overseer.

Keelah holstered her weapon. Moved to Amata’s side so she could openly address the angry mob. She wasn’t accustomed to hiding. She damn sure wasn’t going to use her best friend as a shield.

“You’re all furious with me. You claim that I’m the reason your friends and family are dead. You say that my dad and I put the Vault in turmoil, jeopardized your future. You even blame me for this civil war that didn’t even start until well after I’d left this place. But I wasn’t the one who killed Jonas. Stevie Mack did that. Yet you didn’t run him out of the Vault. And the two teenagers at the front door? Jim and Steve? I didn’t kill them. The security officers did that. But no one’s braying for their blood.”

The vaulters exchanged glances. Some of them shifted uncomfortably.

Amata gripped Keelah’s arm. “What are you trying to do Keelah? Start another war?”

“No. I just want them to see how hypocritical they’re being.” She turned pained eyes on the group of people who had once been her community. “Why do you hate me so much when I haven’t done anything to you?”

No one answered her. But then again, what could they say? Hatred was an irrational emotion. One that operated like a bush fire, consuming with no plan or purpose or respect of victim.

The vaulters hated Keelah because she was the easiest person to hate. Because of their small population, many of the vaulters were related by blood or marriage. If they started pointing fingers at one another, it wouldn’t be long before their blame landed on a loved one.

But Keelah had no relatives in the Vault. Had no true allies beyond the handful of people that shielded her now. The vaulters could hate the teenager effortlessly. She wasn’t truly one of them. She was the ideal effigy.

When she looked out over the sea of familiar faces and saw only hostility and resentment, Keelah felt a sudden urge to cry. The wastelander tilted her head in an effort to halt the onslaught of tears. She was devastated by the vaulter’s animosity, but she’d be damned if she gave them the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

When Amata saw her friend’s vulnerability, she released a sigh so corrupted in misery that every set of eyes in the room, save Keelah’s, turned to her.

“Everyone return to your stations. Now. We have a lot to clean up and reorganize. I expect everyone to pitch in. No one is excused from their work assignment.” She cut angry eyes at Pepper Gomez and Officer Hannon. “Any dereliction of duty will be treated as aggression towards the Overseer, and I will respond accordingly.” Her tone brooked no argument, and even Wally Mack knew when to keep his mouth closed. “We’ll reconvene in the main hall in two hours’ time. I’ll have more information for you then. Dismissed.”

When everyone remained rooted to the spot, Amata raised her voice. “Now!”

It took a surprisingly short amount of time for all seventy bodies to move through the single exit door.
Officer Gomez addressed Amata before he left. “I’ll speak with the other officers. Try to get them to soften their position.”

Amata nodded gratefully. “Thank you Officer Gomez.”

“You’re my superior now. Call me Herman.”

Amata gave him a strained smile and Officer Gomez left the room.

That left Keelah and Amata with their small group of defenders: Old Lady Palmer, Butch, Susie, and Freddie. Mr. Brotch had found himself a comfortable seat in the corner, and he sat there quietly; clearly baffled by the ruckus.

“Sorry about my knucklehead brother,” Susie apologized to Amata. “It’s like he’s channeling Stevie or something. All rage and no sense.”

“Could you get your parents to speak to him? I’d hate to confine him to a holding cell, but if he continues to be aggressive, that’s where he’ll end up.”

Susie shook her head. “I’m afraid my parents won’t be much help. They’re pretty angry themselves over…” She gave a Keelah an apologetic look. “That’s why you haven’t seen much of them lately. Dad’s a hothead. And he’s pretty handy with a rifle. Mom thought it would be best for everyone if they stayed in their quarters.”

“I see,” Amata murmured. “Well, thank you for trying. Meet me in the Overseer’s office…” that is…my office in fifteen minutes. There’s something I need to speak with you about.”

Amata’s eyes were pained and Susie clasped her friend’s hand before nodding and leaving the room.

“The rest of you: thanks for your help with that crowd. I appreciate it. Now please go back to your work. I’ll be available in my office if you need me. Otherwise, I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

Old Lady Palmer hugged Keelah before she left. And Freddie gave her a hearty clap on the back before nabbing two bottles of the discarded wine and skipping out himself.

Butch was the last to go. Amata turned to him with a genuine smile. “You’ve been a terrific lieutenant Butch. Thank you.” The former gang leader seemed to swell in pride at the Overseer’s praise. “There’s no front line for you to defend anymore, but I do have a promotion in mind for you, if you’re interested.”

“What’s that?” Butch asked.

“I could use a personal guard. Someone I trust to watch my back. It pays well and you get your own living quarters.”

Butch scratched the back of his neck nervously. “That’s a hell of an offer, but I don’t know…”

“You’re under no obligation, Butch. I know you like being a barber. You’re more than welcome to return to that.”

“No, that’s not it. It’s just…I wasn’t kidding about getting out of this place. As soon as you decide we’re ready to open that Vault door, I’m outta here. Gonna start me a new gang out there in the wasteland.”

Amata smiled affectionately. “Just make sure that it’s a gang of good guys, Butch. You’re pretty
good at being one of those.”

Butch’s cheeks turned pink and he mumbled a warbled thank you before leaving the clinic.

That left Amata with Keelah and a pensive-looking Mr. Brotch.

Amata had been using her words all day to direct her team, but the new Overseer didn’t seem to have any words for her friend. She avoided Keelah’s questioning gaze and made her way to Mr. Brotch.

“How you holding up Mr. Brotch?” she asked.

The brown-skinned teacher leaned forward in his chair, placed tapered fingers on his kneecaps and cracked his fingers one by one as he considered the question. He’d always been a bit of an introvert and oddball, which made the role of teacher the perfect job for him. He enlivened the dull classes with his off-color humor and acerbic wit.

The teacher looked worn-down after his prolonged stint in the vault jail, but his eyes twinkled as he gazed up at Amata.

“I actually think the holding cell is a step up from the classroom. There’s a lot less belching and bellyaching in jail, if you can believe that.”

Amata laughed. “I can actually. Why don’t you go to the cafeteria and get yourself something to eat? I know they weren’t feeding you much in the holding cell. Tell the cook to give you extra portions on the Overseer.”

Mr. Brotch rose from the chair. “That sounds like a plan. Keelah—will you join me?”

But Keelah was still waiting for Amata to acknowledge her. The Overseer hadn’t spared her a single glance, so Keelah knew she was being ignored. “That’s okay. I’m not really hungry. And I need to speak with Amata.”

Amata continued to smile at Mr. Brotch. The slash of her mouth was fake and pained and every person in the room knew it.

Mr. Brotch cleared his throat. “It would be nice to catch up with you. Just a quick bite?”

Keelah tried again. “Amata?”

“Go with Mr. Brotch, Keelah. You can find me later. In my office. You know where it is.” Her words were clipped. Her tone brusque.

Keelah released a frustrated breath. “What if your officers attack me? Or Wally Mack comes at me with a table leg?”

“No one will bother you.”

Keelah looked ready to argue the point, but Mr. Brotch interrupted smoothly. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

Keelah returned his smile with a strained one of her own and followed him to the clinic door. She turned at the last moment to study her friend.

Amata stood in front of the wooden memorial, and her eyes moved slowly across the carved lettering as if she were memorizing the jagged script. The young leader’s wavy hair had escaped her bun; her
shoulders drooped heavily; and she'd wrapped her arms around herself, tightly and desperately, as if she were literally trying to hold herself together.

Keelah took a step towards her haggard-looking friend, but Mr. Brotch touched her elbow, stopped her.

“She needs some time,” he said softly, his eyes clear and kind.

Keelah swallowed a sudden lump in her throat and nodded.

She had a bad feeling…a whisper in her subconscious; a curdling of her gut. It was similar to the feeling she’d had when she first spotted the Enclave Vertibirds at Jefferson Memorial. Right before the Enclave soldiers landed and sieged Project Purity. Right before her father died.

It was the feeling that all hell was about to break loose and there would be nothing she could do to stop it.

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Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Tracy Chapman song.
Cheers Darlin'

Chapter Summary

With Vault 101 poised to erupt in another civil war, Amata has to decide whether to allow the Lone Wanderer to stay in the vault.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six – Cheers Darlin’

As Amata predicted, no one harassed Keelah in the Vault hallways or in the dining hall where she and Mr. Brotch took their lunch.

The vaulters ignored the teenager completely. Not because their fury had dampened or because they’d had a sudden change of heart; but because—like most lynch mobs—their anger was best expressed in pack form, where they didn’t have to contemplate their violent actions. Where they could blame their vicious rampage on delirium or group think.

Keelah and Mr. Brotch sat at a corner booth in the cafeteria and ignored the heated stares levied by other diners.

The usually pristine dining hall was a mess. Chairs overturned and unattended garbage cans full to the point of spilling. There could only be one reason the waste management crew had neglected such necessary duties. They were among the dead.

Keelah fought the impulse to scrub the ramshackle room. The uncleanliness of the Vault was beginning to get to her. Her skin prickled and itched, reminding her that she needed to take advantage of the Vault’s hot water heaters and take a long bath.

While she stewed, Mr. Brotch ate his lunch and peppered her with questions. He’d already made it halfway through his meal of cramwich and potato crisps and was eyeing Keelah’s untouched plate.

Keelah tried to be polite and answer the teacher’s queries, but she found herself responding in monosyllable. She certain that she was repeating herself, saying the same answer again and again in robotic fashion, but Mr. Brotch didn’t seem to mind her reticence. He plodded along in conversation and frequently interrupted his enthusiastic chewing with warm smiles and jokes that didn’t land.

Keelah poked her cramwich with her fork. The food looked appealing enough, but she couldn’t muster an appetite. She’d been surprised that the fry cook, Pepper Gomez, had even handed her a tray. But Amata’s authority as Overseer was already cementing. The angry cook had cursed under her breath when Brotch requested trays for both of them, but she’d slid them their trays regardless.

Keelah put her fork down. Pushed the tray away. She felt nauseous. On the verge of dry heaving. When she noticed Mr. Brotch eying her meal lustily, she slid her tray over to him.

Mr. Brotch dug in happily. “Is there good eating on the outside?” He asked around bites.
“Pretty much the same as here. Although food is harder to come by in the wastes. And a lot of it is irradiated. I find most of my food while scavenging.”

Mr. Brotch nodded as he slurped down an entire bottle of Nuka Cola.

“You plan on leaving when they open the Vault?” Keelah asked him.

Mr. Brotch wiped his mouth delicately with a napkin. “Goodness no. I’ll leave exploring to the young folk and the foolish. I have a bad knee from an accident I had when I was a kid. Don’t think I could outrun the dragons or whatever the hell else kind of monsters are out there.”

In spite of her gloom, Keelah managed a smile. “There are monsters. But no dragons.”

“As far as you know.”

Keelah thought about the creatures she encountered on her excursions across the wastes; each more deadly than the last and some genuinely horrifying due to their sheer size and deformity.

“I once ran across a ghoul with a tree growing out of his head,” she said, whimsically. “I suppose finding a dragon wouldn’t be too far-fetched.”

“I’d love to have you co-teach some of my classes. The students would pay attention for once.” He bit into his sandwich; spoke around a mouthful of thick bread and cram. “We haven’t had classes in months. Due to the rebellion obviously. I can only imagine how long it’ll take to straighten my classroom and get things back in order. But at least we’ll have a better curriculum now that Old Man Almodovar is gone. We can finally have a legitimate GOAT exam.”

Keelah nodded half-heartedly. Mention of the GOAT reminded her of her dad. His gentle instruction that she needed to apply herself and do well on the mandated test. It also reminded her of Amata. Her friend had been the only student to study for the standardized test. The rest of the class knew the exam was a bit of a joke—a way to pigeonhole teenagers into Vault jobs. But Amata had taken the test seriously; had stayed up late for weeks scouring textbooks; practicing essay questions. She’d been dismayed to discover that the GOAT was a ten question multiple choice test.

Keelah laughed to herself as she took a sip of water. Amata had always been so earnest about her responsibilities. She was overly committed to doing the right thing. The GOAT had put Amata on the leadership track, but even if she’d been given the Vault’s most unpleasant job of garbage burner, Keelah knew her friend would have performed her tasks with fervor and grace. Duty was that important to Amata. It was why she would be an excellent Overseer.

Mr. Brotch was saying something to her. Keelah broke from her reverie.

“What did you say?”

“I asked if you planned to stay?” He’d finished his meal and folded his arms on the table, getting more comfortable as he studied his former student.

“Didn’t you hear that crowd say they want to put me on a pike?”

“Eh…they say that now, but they’ll calm down. Rebellion makes people crazy. Give things time to settle down, we’ll be one big happy family again.”

Keelah made a non-committal noise. Toyed with the label on her water bottle. “Never took you for an optimist,” she said.
“I’m not. But I believe in the power of suggestion.” His gaze traveled over the unkempt dining hall; the stern-faced diners who glowered openly at his lunch mate. “Fancy dessert?”

Keelah smiled at his attempt to cheer her up. “Only if it’s chocolate.”

“I’ll see what I can rustle up.” Mr. Brotch cleared the trays from the table and walked over to Pepper Gomez to see if he could procure a decent dessert.

At that moment, Susie Mack made her way into the dining hall. The blonde strode purposefully towards Keelah.

A few Vaulters grumbled in Susie’s direction, clearly annoyed that the young woman continued to associate with Keelah, but Susie ignored them; stood before Keelah with her arms folded behind her back.

“Finished with your meal?” Susie asked.

Keelah looked up at the young vaulter, puzzled by her sudden appearance. “Yeah?”

“That’s good. Amata wanted to be sure that you’d eaten. She said you were hungry from before. So I can wait a few minutes if you need more time. Or if you’d like another serving.” She said it in a breathless rush and Keelah immediately knew something was wrong.

“Cut to the chase Susie. What’s up?”

Susie’s cheeks reddened in embarrassment. “Amata wants to see you in her office. ASAP. She sent me to get you.”

Keelah clenched the water bottle between suddenly quivering fingers. She had to clear her throat a few times to find her voice. “It feels like I’m being summoned to the principal’s office,” she managed.

She gave a forced laugh, but Susie didn’t respond to the joke; the vaulter simply fixed her gaze on one of the self-esteem posters hanging on the wall above Keelah’s head.

Keelah put the bottle on the table. Rose to her feet. “Give me one second,” she said as she made her way to Mr. Brotch.

The teacher was leaning against the raised bar and was engaged in a spirited conversation with Pepper Gomez. He had several ration cards in his hand and after a head shake from Pepper, he grumbled and pulled even more of the wrinkled cards from his pocket.

“I have to take a rain check on dessert,” Keelah told Brotch.

The teacher straightened and tried to shield the half dozen ration cards with his body. “But Pep’ was just about to sell me an entire box of choco crème bars. At a deep discount.” He gave Pepper a severe look. The fry cook scowled but didn’t respond.

“Find me later,” Keelah told him. “The chocolate will go well with that sweet wine they left in the clinic. We’ll have a party. Get me tipsy enough and I’ll even help you clean the classroom.”

Keelah smiled warmly at Mr. Brotch, but her enthusiasm was faked and the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. The wastelander was pretty certain she’d never get the opportunity to enjoy the chocolate let alone congregate with her former teacher again.
The nervous twitch of Susie Mack’s fingers; the blonde’s inability to meet Keelah’s eyes; it was more than enough evidence that her time in Vault 101 had run out.

Keelah gave Mr. Brotch a friendly wave before following Susie out of the cafeteria and through the dark hallway towards the Overseer’s office.

Keelah found herself counting her steps—seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three. It was something to do to distract from all of the contemptuous faces; it was a way for her to memorialize her impending banishment.

How many steps between here and Megaton? She was sure she would find out soon enough.

They’d reached the Overseer’s office. Keelah stared blankly at the metal door; silently cursed it for being the gateway to so much of the bullshit that had occurred in her life.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Susie said softly.

Before the vaulter could walk away, Keelah put a hand on her shoulder, stopped her. “Thank you Susie. For putting your neck on the line for me down there. You didn’t have to do that.”

Susie blushed; shrugged half-heartedly. “Amata’s a good friend. I try to have her back.”

**Oh.** So Susie’s support against the mob had nothing to do with Keelah. The wastelander tried not to feel hurt by that.

Susie seemed to read her mind and rushed to reassure her. “I just mean that Amata really cares about you. She still thinks you’re one of us. And I agree. I don’t blame you for anything that happened here.” Her blue eyes were almost hypnotizing in their sincerity. “If it means anything, I’m sorry for how you’ve been treated. And I’m sorry that…”

The vaulter’s words trailed off and her eyes flickered towards the Overseer’s office. She looked sad all of a sudden. It was a peculiar emotion to see from the usually brash blonde. But Susie blinked back the emotion; gave Keelah a wobbly smile.

“Take care of yourself,” she murmured softly.

Keelah was sure that Amata had instructed Susie to remain stoic and to not let on that the wastelander would soon be banished from the Vault; but the blonde had failed that assignment spectacularly. Her facial expressions alone had hinted Keelah’s fate.

Still Keelah could only smile fondly at the vaulter. Susie Mack had crossed her own family to support her. And even now she was trying to project an air of confidence that was meant to reassure Keelah.

“You do the same,” Keelah husked.

“Later hero.”

Susie gave her a playful hand salute before walking away.

Keelah turned towards the Overseer’s office; pressed the door release button; then entered.

. . . . . .

Amata sat behind her father’s oversized desk. Her head was down and she was riffling agitatedly through a sheaf of papers. The Overseer’s office had a freshly-scrubbed look. Light fixtures had been
replaced; furniture reorganized; and the metal floor and walls gleamed in a way that was blinding and superfluous. Amata had obviously been hard at work. Probably working off excess energy or some other troublesome emotion.

Amata lifted her head when Keelah entered the office. The young Overseer shuffled her paperwork into a neat stack then set it down on the desk.

Amata nodded her head towards the chair opposite her desk. “Have a seat,” she said primly.

The professional tone made Keelah’s lip curl, but the wastelander dutifully sank into the chair; adjusted her rifle so that she could sit comfortably.

“Thank you for coming,” Amata began. She folded her hands on top of the desk and leaned forward. She looked so much like her father in that moment that it startled Keelah. But Amata’s tone was soft. Her eyes were wide and brown and filled with unchecked emotion. Keelah found herself momentarily lost in their depths. She exhaled softly; felt her right hand spasm on her thigh.

“Keelah…” Amata continued. “You’ve been a godsend for the Vault. You stopped my father. You saved Beatrice’s life. You’ve given this dusty old place a new beginning.” Her eyes dropped. “However, things in the Vault have grown untenable. There are renewed calls for rebellion. Half the staff has threatened to resign their posts. And there’s great potential for more violence. More death. As Overseer, I cannot allow such…instability to continue.”

The words were hard for Amata to say, Keelah could tell. The young Overseer fidgeted uncharacteristically and her voice quavered on every word. But Keelah vowed not to make make things easier for Amata. She would be silent. She would let her friend recite the words that would forever alter their relationship.

Amata fixed Keelah with wet eyes. “On behalf of the Vault, I thank you for all that you’ve done. But there are still many who blame you for everything that has happened. You’re not safe here. And the Vault risks its stability if you stay. For those reasons, I have to ask you to leave.”

Keelah had been expecting it. Had seen the expulsion coming the moment Amata turned from her in the med clinic a couple of hours ago. But it didn’t stop the words from hurting; didn’t stop Keelah from feeling like a giant hole had been punched in her chest. The wastelander put both hands to her face, breathed into her palms; warm tufts of breath that steadied her; that kept her calm. Or maybe she did it to keep herself from screaming.

Both women were quiet for long moments. Both trying to corral their emotions. Amata tried to affect the cool air of a politician; Keelah, the stoicism of a warrior. Both were only partially successful.

Amata cleared her throat. “I had Susie gather some supplies for you. As a way of saying thank you.” She gestured at a large sack by her office door. “There are some med supplies. Some food.” Her voice trembled. “I made sure she put in several boxes of Choco Puffs since you don’t have those on the outside. And there’s some high-end tech that you should find useful. Items you can use to upgrade your Pip-Boy. Maintain your weapons.”

She trailed off when she realized Keelah wasn’t paying attention. The wastelander stared off into space, her eyes vacant pools of russet brown.

Amata opened a desk drawer. Removed a folded uniform. Slid it towards Keelah. “This is a modified Vault suit. It has a higher armor rating. It should come in handy during your travels. It’s also something to remember us by.”
Keelah laughed then. A dark chuckle that floated between them, further souring their tense exchange. “I already have something to remember this Vault by.” Keelah pointed angrily at her deadened right ear before scrambling to her feet. “Keep your goody bag. I’m not interested in any farewell gifts from you.”

Keelah pushed the chair out of her way; strode angrily towards the office door.

Amata hastened around the desk and rushed over to Keelah before she could leave.

“Keelah, wait!” Amata grabbed Keelah’s shoulder, spun the wastelander towards her. “Please don’t be angry with me. My hands are tied here. I don’t have any other choice.”

Keelah refused to be swayed by her friend’s blotchy face; by the barely contained emotion she could see in those beloved eyes. “You’re the Overseer. Your word is law. You could have petitioned for me to stay. The other vaulters would have listened to you.”

“No. I’ve tried and there’s no compromise where you’re concerned. Having you stay is too much of a risk. Your presence would cause more problems, and the Vault can’t withstand any more infighting.”

“But I didn’t do anything to them! Why the fuck am I getting blamed for everything bad that’s happened in this place? Your father ordered the execution of God knows how many vaulters. It was his tyranny that led to the rebellion in the first place. Yet, he gets to retire quietly to his quarters while I get run out of the Vault again.”

Amata pinched the bridge of her nose. Tried to keep her composure. “I know it doesn’t make much sense—”

“Damn right it doesn’t!”

“But if we’re assigning blame to fathers, let’s not forget that it was your dad who put all of this in motion. None of this would have happened if he’d just stayed put. If he’d followed the rules.”

Keelah stared back at Amata, her eyes wide in shock. She’d heard such allegations from everyone else but not Amata.

“Don’t compare your dad to mine,” Keelah hissed. “My dad may have done a piss poor job planning his escape from the Vault, but he did what he did so that he could get clean water to the people of the wastes. Your dad did all those fucked up things just so he could maintain his power. It’s apples and oranges, my dear.”

Amata’s mouth twisted at Keelah’s derisive use of the pet name. Keelah glared down at her friend. They’d never done this before. Attacked the other with their father’s mistakes. They’d never attacked each other period.

They both looked away at the same time. Bit back more accusations and recriminations. But they also suppressed the softer words that would have immediately mended their flagging relationship.

“I have to get my gear from the clinic,” Keelah said after a sustained period of strained silence. “Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

Amata nodded. “I’ll keep the vaulters busy. We have a meeting in the main hall in a few minutes. That should give you time to leave quietly.” And safely she didn’t say. But they both knew.
Keelah made for the door again. And again, Amata stopped her.

“I really am sorry,” the young Overseer confessed. Her hand clenched on Keelah’s waist, and she clung to the wastelander desperately like she didn’t want to let go.

Keelah placed her hand on top of Amata’s. But she was simply removing her friend’s hand from her body so that she could leave the office. She didn’t bother to respond to Amata’s apology. Didn’t even slow her pace when she heard Amata call her name.

She had been chased out of this place too many times. Had been abandoned too often by people she loved. After a while, it wore a person down. Made them so brittle that only husk remained.

She had no words to appease Amata’s guilt. Didn’t even have enough left to manage a goodbye. The most she could do after such an anguishing dismissal was count her way out of the Vault.

She headed briskly towards the med clinic, putting more distance between herself and her short-term lover.

Eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety.

.......

Keelah had just removed a small cache of medical supplies from her pack, when she heard the roar above her. There was a commotion coming from upstairs, from the main hall. She could discern a faint din of applause, foot stomping, jubilant cheers. Amata must have announced her excommunication.

Keelah shook her head sadly; cinched her supply pack closed; checked her weapons; then slung her bag over her shoulder. It was time she got out of here. The vaulters were raucous; freshly drunk off news of her banishment. Some of the more vocal ones might decide to give her a malicious going-away party.

No sooner did she have that thought than a vault resident burst into the back office. It was good for her that it was only Butch.

The former gang leader was breathing heavily and sweating. He bent at the waist to catch his breath and gave Keelah a self-conscious smile.

“I was hoping to catch you before you left,” he panted. “We just heard the news.”

“Did you run all the way here?”

Butch nodded tiredly before straightening up and mopping at his sweaty brow. “I didn’t realize how many steps this Vault has. Far too many if you ask me. What’s an underground bunker need two flights of stairs for?” He exhaled a heavy breath and fixed Keelah with a concerned look. “You okay?”

“I don’t need a hug if that’s what you’re asking.” Keelah shifted under the weight of her weapons and supply pack. And Butch’s gaze. “I’m fine,” she said, too sharply. “I lasted six months outside the Vault. I’ll manage it again.”

Butch nodded again. Didn’t challenge her bravado. “Who’d want to stay in this hell hole anyway? You’re the lucky one.”

“Yeah. Lucky.” But the words didn’t match her tone. She kicked at the office rolling chair, sent the
wheeled seat spinning chaotically across the room. “Butch, even with its dwindling numbers, the Vault has more people in it then you’ll find in a hundred mile stretch of the Capital Wasteland. I know you’re eager to get out of here and all, but it’s barren out there, man. There are a few watering holes here and there and settlements passing for cities, but most of them have closed door policies. Armed guards to keep non-residents out. Wastelanders are lucky to find someplace to sleep let alone a community to be part of. You have all that built in here. Friends. Family. A job. Home. I hope you don’t leave the Vault only to discover that you were the lucky one.”

Butch seemed discomfited by her words. He scratched the back of his neck nervously.

“Anyway,” Keelah continued. “I’m leaving a few things for Beatrice.” Keelah pointed at the medical supplies she’d removed from her pack and placed on the table. “Some Stimpaks. The sewing kit. I don’t know how long she’s going to be out of it, but she’ll need ongoing care even after she wakes up. You saw what I did to treat her. Just try your best.”

Butch looked uneasy at the thought of treating Beatrice, but he nodded. “Okay.”

“And I didn’t get a chance to see Stanley. I wanted to. But now…well… these syringes are Med-x. They should help with his headaches. They’re chems so don’t let him have more than half a dose a day. Hopefully they’ll get him back on his feet. Back to tinkering with the water purifier and supervising Andy.”

“I’ll see that he gets it. I know he’ll be grateful.”

Keelah nodded. Cast one final glance around the office before making her way to the door. “Oh yeah,” she said. “One more thing.” She removed her Crowbot helmet from the hook on her waist; extended it to Butch. “For when you do leave. It’s kind of hard out there, your first night. This should come in handy.”

Butch took the helmet gingerly. He stared at it with unabashed awe. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Besides, it’ll cover up that awful hairdo of yours.”

Keelah grinned playfully and Butch laughed out loud. “Takes one, doll face.”

When no urge to punch Butch came, Keelah laughed too. Her infectious chortle only made Butch laugh harder.

It was an odd sensation. To feel so completely devastated and light-hearted at the same time. Keelah calmed herself before she fainted from the confusing mix of emotions. She waved goodbye to Butch before leaving the office.

The wooden memorial caught her eye. There was a new impression on the large display. Her own name stared back at her; carved deep and evenly near the top of the memorial. Keelah turned wide eyes to Butch.

“I didn’t do it,” he said immediately. “It was Amata. I think she did it why you were in the cafeteria.”

“But I’m not dead.”

Butch joined her by the memorial. Turned mossy green eyes on the dozens of names of the fallen. “This memorial isn’t just for the dead. It’s for all the lost. For the people we don’t want to forget.”

Keelah stared at her name. At the deep impression that must have required tremendous effort and concentration to perfect.
“Amata loves you,” Butch said, his eyes never leaving what amounted to an oversized headstone. It wasn’t a question but an answer. To a question Keelah had carried for nineteen years.

“I have to go Butch,” Keelah stuttered.

She didn’t pull away when he hugged her. He smelled of sweat and spice and the alcohol-like scent of the aftershave the men of the Vault wore.

“Maybe I’ll see you out there,” he murmured into her hair before letting go.

Keelah left him with the memorial; added more steps to her mental countdown. As she made her way towards the Vault door, she passed over-exuberant vaulters. It seemed many had tracked her to the med clinic so that they could taunt her as she left. She let their jibes bounce off her; only barely grimaced at the multitudinous “Good riddance!” hurled her way.

She was stopped twice on her way out. Once by Mr. Brotch, who forced a box of chocolate crème bars into her hands and told her to beware of dragons. And again by Old Lady Palmer, who hugged her a full five minutes before giving her more treats: a pan of still-warm sweet rolls.

“I had a feeling this would happen,” Old Lady Palmer whispered, her leathery cheek soft against Keelah’s face. “I got to baking as soon I could. I’m so sorry, dearie.”

With Butch, Keelah had been stiff in the sudden embrace. With Old Lady Palmer, she relented. Wrapped her arms around the thin frame and squeezed tight.

“Thanks for being so good to me,” Keelah murmured.

When they let go, both women had tears in their eyes.

“Now you enjoy those sweet rolls, my dear. It’s the last batch I’ll ever make. These good-for-nothings don’t deserve any more of my desserts.”

Keelah laughed in spite of her roiling emotion. “You’re going to start another revolution Ms. Palmer. Your sweet rolls are to die for.”

Old Lady Palmer squeezed her shoulder. “And you have access to an unlimited supply Keelah Bee.” Keelah smiled broadly. That was a nickname Jonas had given her when she was a baby. “You make sure to stay alive out there, and I’ll make sure to keep some sweet rolls warm for you.”

The old woman kissed her cheek once more, and Keelah had to do her best not to have a public breakdown as she walked the final yards to the Vault door.

Freddie and Office Gomez were waiting for her at the secondary doors.

“You here to escort me the rest of the way?” Keelah asked the senior officer.

“Nope. Just wanted to say goodbye.” The officer seemed to struggle with maintaining a professional demeanor. “We lobbied for you, you know. Me, Butch, Ms. Palmer, and some of the others. Freddie. There were just too many dissenters.”

He looked sad and guilty. And not for the first time, Keelah wondered if being a security officer suited Officer Gomez. The man simply could not stomach conflict.

“It’s okay Officer Gomez. I’m not even that surprised, to be honest.”

“Send a postcard this time, yeah?” Freddie said, punching her softly in the shoulder.
“How do you expect me to do that Freds? There aren’t any postcards left in the wastes. Let alone mail carriers or postage stamps.”

“Well, slip a note under the door or something. Geez! I’m trying to stay in touch with you, here.”

Keelah laughed softly. She didn’t protest when Freddie nabbed one the sweet rolls from her pan. But Officer Gomez smacked his son’s hand. “Hey! Those are her going-away presents!”

“She still has eleven of them.” The lanky teen bit into the flaky dessert and waggled his eyebrows at Keelah.

“See y’all later,” Keelah said, stepping past them into the chamber room. She wouldn’t see them later but saying that lie felt better than saying the truth.

She was surprised to see Amata waiting for her by the Vault door. The heavy door was already open and Amata stood there, frozen, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Dogmeat lay near Amata’s feet, but he immediately perked up when he saw Keelah enter the room. Let out a happy bark.

But all Keelah could see was Amata. With her friend silhouetted against the Vault door like that, Keelah could almost imagine that Amata had decided to leave with her. But as the wastelander drew near the door, she saw the heavy supply pack near Amata’s feet—the supplies Amata had tried to offer her in the office; the unwanted consolation prize. The modified utility jumpsuit rested on top of the bag, mocking Keelah.

Amata’s arms tightened around herself as Keelah moved closer, and her face went awash with a wave of emotion she couldn’t hide.

Keelah stopped in front of her friend.

The Vault door yawned behind Amata; wide and dark like an open mouth; the dusky pathway that led to the wastes reminiscent of an open throat ready to swallow Keelah whole.

“I’ve been making nice with your dog,” Amata said softly. “He’s very friendly.”

“Yeah. I told you.” Keelah clicked her tongue and called Dogmeat to her side.

“I brought these down for you,” Amata continued. Her voice was strained. Barely there. She tried to nudge the heavy sack towards Keelah.

“I told you I didn’t want it.”

“I had hoped you would reconsider.”

“I haven’t.”

Keelah made to move past her.

Amata gripped her friend’s arm. Stopped her forcibly. “You’re just going to leave like that?”

Keelah extricated herself from her friend’s grasp but didn’t move from her close proximity to her. “What do you want me to do here ‘Mata? Cry? Beg you to let me stay? We both know it wouldn’t change your mind. So what’s the point?”

Amata moved even closer. Put her hands out as if she were going to touch Keelah. But the wastelander stepped back clumsily. Amata’s face contorted, but she swallowed down the emotion.
Fixed Keelah with determined eyes.

“This doesn’t have to be permanent. The residents are angry now, but things will cool down eventually. You can check back in six months. Maybe a year. There’s still a chance that you can move back in. And we…” She trailed off, afraid to hope. But her hand fluttered towards Keelah again, unbidden. Again, Keelah moved away. The wastelander had put three feet between them in a matter of seconds. The figurative distance between them, however, was much more substantial.

“So you want me to drop in from time to time to see if I’m less hated?”

“I won’t change the password. We can set a schedule to meet here at the door. Every six months. Every year. I’ll keep you updated. Let you know when you can return.”

Keelah snorted disdainfully. “Amata, you’re giving away time like it’s guaranteed or something. In six months’ time, I could step on a landmine. Or get ambushed by a pack of raiders. Or stumble into a Deathclaw den.”

Amata looked mortified at the thought. “I’m just trying to envision a way for us to be together.”

“This was the way for us to be together. Here. In the Vault. We could have made this our home. But you chose them over me. Again.”

“Keelah, please.” Amata reached for her again. This time Keelah was too slow and Amata was able to cup her friend’s face. The young leader pressed close enough that their foreheads nearly touched. In her haste to get close, she nearly upended Keelah’s sweet rolls and box of chocolates. But Amata didn’t care. She stared into Keelah’s eyes. Spoke in a distraught tone that was so unlike her; that conveyed her distress. “I told you before. I can’t live without you. Please don’t walk away from me like this.”

“I’m not walking away. I’m following directions. You told me to leave.”

“But not forever. You can come back.”

Keelah pulled away again. Shook her head vigorously. “No. I can’t put myself through this again.”

“I’ll talk to the residents. Make them see reason. Just give me some time.”

“No Amata.”

“Come here.” The soft demand from before. The outstretched hand. An invitation to touch, to hug, to love.

“No.”

The devastated look that came upon Amata’s face unnerved Keelah. Made her resolve weaken. To distract herself from the dejected gaze, she turned to the supply pack on her back. Removed a cotton rag that she used to bundle her sweet rolls and chocolate. She couldn’t walk into the wastes with a heavy pan in her hand. She needed her hands free to defend herself, to reach her weapons.

As she stuffed the bundle of sweets into her bag, she noticed something. A rectangular item near the bottom of the bag. It had been concealed by the sewing kit she’d left in the med clinic. Keelah pulled the item out of the sack. Stared at it morosely.

It was their favorite novel. A book about magic women and absent fathers. Three tiny figures against a burnt-orange sky.
Keelah extended the book to Amata. “It’s your turn to have this.”

Amata took the novel with trembling hands. “You kept it all this time?”

Keelah nodded. “I take it wherever I go. It’s been sort of like a talisman.” She sighed heavily. “It helped me better understand my father. Maybe it’ll help with yours.”

Keelah pulled something else out of her bag. Her goggles. She pulled the dark plastic over her eyes, preparing herself for the dust and wind from outside.

Amata blinked curiously at the striking figure her friend made. She watched as Keelah reaffixed her pack. Patted her weapons into place.

“Can I ask you something?” Keelah suddenly asked.

“Yes,” Amata responded immediately. Her voice was hoarse; her eyes downcast. Yet, she seemed relieved that Keelah was prolonging the conversation.

“Did you invite me here just so I could help you become Overseer?” Keelah stared at her. Her eyes penetrating and curious. “When I talked to your dad, he suggested that you were just using me. Pulling my strings so that I could muscle him out of the way for you.”

Amata gasped. “How could you possibly think that Keelah?”

Keelah shrugged. “I don’t know. You beg me to come back home. I do your bidding and encourage your father to step down. And not even two hours later, I’m banished. There are dots one could connect.”

Amata’s eyes flashed in anger. “I didn’t use you! I didn’t even know my father was going to step down as Overseer. All I wanted him to do was cease hostilities.”

Keelah nodded slowly, considering Amata’s words. She believed her. The young Overseer was furious, quietly seething. Keelah averted her glance. Gazed down the dark pathway that would take her…home.

“Gotta go,” she said, making her way towards the open door. Dogmeat followed dutifully.

“Wait,” Amata hastened after her. The young woman was clearly still upset by Keelah’s accusation, but her love for her friend quickly overrode the negative emotion. “So…will you come back?”

Amata asked hopefully.

Keelah stared at her. Her eyes moving rapidly across her friend’s face. Those beautiful hazel-flecked eyes; the freckled nose. Keelah memorized.

“No,” she said simply.

It was only because she’d been trained since childhood to hide her emotions that Amata managed not to cry out. Even so, her eyes visibly watered and she stumbled backwards as if she’d been struck.

“Will you at least take the supplies?”

“You keep them.” Keelah glowered at the sack of goods as if their very presence offended her. “There is one thing you can do for me though.”

“Yes?” Amata lifted her eyes. Stared at Keelah through glittering brown orbs.
“Promise me you won’t contact me again. I don’t care if the Vault floods or if super mutants break down the front door. You’ve all made it clear that I’m not one of you. That I’m not welcome here. Promise me you’ll leave me out whatever drama unfolds next time. Figure out your own shit.”

Keelah’s eyes were watering now.

“You want me to promise to never speak to you again?” Amata whispered shakily.

“Yes.”

“I can’t make that promise Keelah.”

“If you care anything for me, you’ll do it. And you’ll change the Vault password.”

“Kee’…”

“Say it Amata.”

Amata stared at the ground. Fought for the composure she would need to make such a gut-wrenching promise. The beloved novel shook in her hands.

When Amata found her resolve, she lifted pained eyes to Keelah. “I promise.”

“Thanks.”

“Keelah…?” Her voice was so soft that it felt to Keelah like wind; like the feathery touch of a ghost.

“Yeah?”

“You gave me the novel. Will you at least take this?”

Amata pushed a plastic tin into her hands. It was a small jar of coconut oil. The hair product Amata had promised when she’d braided her hair in their hideout. Right before they’d made love for the first time. Keelah stared at the jar of oil; her lips trembling from the sudden onslaught of memory.

“Please?” Amata asked.

Keelah took the coconut oil. Shoved it into her pack.

Then the wastelander squared her shoulders. Took one last look of Vault 101 and its new leader.

“Goodbye Amata.”

Keelah clucked her tongue again. Entered the darkened cavern with Dogmeat at her heels.

She pretended not to hear Amata cry out behind her. And she reasoned that the moisture currently soaking her face weren’t tears but sweat resulting from the humidity of the wastes.

And if she tried hard enough (and she did) she could almost swear that the loud, grinding noise behind her was the sound of a Vertibird landing nearby not a Vault door closing decidedly.

Keelah resorted to all manner of delusion and self-deception as she left Vault 101 forever.

End?
Thanks everyone for continuing to follow this story. I have a few story ideas for future chapters, but I'm not sure how many chapters this entire fic will be. Drop me a line if you're interested in seeing more chapters. Thanks!

**Chapter title inspired by Damien Rice song.**
Three years after her exile from Vault 101, the Lone Wanderer struggles to find her way in the world.

Keelah bit savagely into the dried pork stick. She hadn’t eaten since this morning when she’d set off from Megaton. According to her Pip-Boy, she’d been traveling for nearly seven hours, always due north. The steadiness of her pace, the restlessness of her mind, had discouraged her from taking respite. She hadn’t stopped at the first pangs of hunger. Had ignored the pinch in her belly, the scratchiness in her throat that demanded relief.

It was hard to swallow the toughened meat. She was beyond dehydrated which made it difficult to swallow. It felt like chewing glass. It felt like eating for the sake of eating.

The twenty-two year old swallowed her final bite and reached past her well-worn flask for a bottle of Aqua Pura. She needed her wits about her on this journey. The whiskey would have to wait until she broke camp during the night or until she happened upon a settlement or tent city in this dusty stretch of inhospitable terrain.

She hadn’t seen a living person since that trader a few miles back. And for a salesman, the man had seemed oddly skittish; noticeably hesitant to sell her any goods. It was more than likely that the sloe-eyed trader was an imposter—a wanderer who had murdered a traveling merchant and stolen both goods and identity.

But Keelah had no time for investigations or retributions. She bartered for a tin of meat and resumed her trek across the sand.

Nearly four years of living in the Capital Wasteland had conditioned her. She’d grown accustomed to strangers wearing ill-fitting clothes that bespoke of deceased owners. She’d learned to avert her eyes and bite her tongue.

She couldn’t judge anyway. Her Megaton home was full of items she’d collected from dead bodies and hollowed out homes. Her living quarters were a veritable mausoleum. She hadn’t killed the people whose items she scavenged, but the young woman could admit that she profited from death. She survived because other people hadn’t.

But it was beginning to take a toll on her, the constant foraging and death-watching. The gleaming
white of a skull in a bedroom she ransacked. Tiny bones on a bottom bunk positioned in such a way to suggest sleeping. The tell-tale impressions left on stairways of scurrying victims, moving too slowly, eviscerated in milliseconds by the flash-hot of an atom bomb. Their remains were like a chalk outline but black. Those ash shadows everywhere. But it was never enough to keep her from plundering.

She avoided the bones, sidestepped nuclear shadows, and used trembling hands to fill her pack to bursting.

In three years times she’d amassed a fortune. Thousands of rusted caps in a safe at home; shelves upon shelves of neatly stacked canned goods; dressers full of wasteland attire she couldn’t fit; ammunition for guns she didn’t even own. Her Megaton home was replete with her spoils.

Her scavenging was excessive, instinctual. It had no purpose. Sometimes Keelah wondered if she was building her own vault.

She didn’t know why she did it: kept exploring these old buildings; kept tiptoeing into vacant houses with gun drawn and eyes searching. Perhaps it was something to do to keep the drinking at bay. Or maybe it gave her reason to leave her overstuffed metal home.

There was a restiveness about her now—an insatiable agitation. Keelah suspected that there was something in this damnable wasteland that would make her feel...more. So she scavenged. Tried to find happiness in a faded novella; tried to pretend that a tattered spring dress would flatter her skin.

She had an entire house full of things to keep her occupied. Still, she felt so empty. She felt unsatisfied. The wastelander kept telling herself that the next haul would placate whatever itch this was that tormented her so.

She traveled so much these days that she had to leave Charon and Dogmeat behind for their own benefit. Her companions didn’t complain often but the duration of her travel and the intensity of those silent marches had begun to tire them. Dogmeat’s tongue would loll on the ground like the sticky sweet taffy candy Vault 101 children used to eat. And Charon would sweat profusely in a way that made his broken skin look like melting.

She would take her companions out for two days, maybe three. Then travel the rest of the week on her own. She liked the solitude; the acute sweetbitter loneliness. She would go days without hearing a single human voice including her own.

She stood now between the wreckage of a family farm; drank her warm water and took in the brown of her surroundings. Dead grass; a splintered fence; a rotting Brahmin. There were few people left in this world and even fewer colors.

Tiny flies swarmed the Brahmin corpse, feasting hungrily, and for a moment Keelah marveled at the insects’ ferocity.

We’re all scavengers, she thought.

She finished her Aqua Pura, stored her bottle, and moved on from the desolate farm, the ravenous flies.

She was on an exploratory journey. One that would probably take her weeks.

In the three years post-Vault, Keelah had explored as far west as she could. It was boredom and heartache that encouraged her travels; that kept her restless and moving. She’d encountered nothing past Girdershade and had turned east. Beyond Rivet City, she’d come across the ocean. Witnessed
how the blue-green water acted as curtain and admitted defeat. She’d been south only to be stopped by mountains. Now she was headed north. Curious and expectant.

She was on edge and weary and more than a little depressed. So she walked the wastes endlessly. Or maybe she haunted it.

The loud sound of gunfire stirred her from melancholic thoughts. She hadn’t seen action all day or encountered a single threat. Keelah immediately dropped into a defensive crouch and removed her SMG. The fight was to the left of her and sounded below. She would be able to ease closer and investigate without revealing her position.

When Keelah peered down the incline to survey the gun battle, she saw a familiar shade of green that sent her running.

The heavy armor was distinctive—swords crossed over a four leaf clover and a green coloring so polished that it nearly sparkled in the sun. It was one of Reilly’s Rangers, and whoever the intrepid explorer was, he or she was currently outnumbered by a horde of gun-toting raiders.

Keelah jumped the final few feet, landing in a practiced somersault near the Ranger’s feet.

“What the…?” the startled Ranger stuttered.

*Donovan.*

Keelah grinned at him as she bounded to her feet and added her gunfire to his. The sounds of bullets hitting flesh, glass, stone was cacophonous; unnerving in a space that had been so eerily quiet just moments before.

Keelah and Donovan were seasoned fighters. The overambitious raiders didn’t stand a chance. Those who didn’t succumb to gunfire quickly scuttled off and Keelah and Donovan let them flee. One raider hobbled away on a blood-soaked leg, constantly looking over his shoulder as if expecting the pair to finish him.

The hobbling raider’s wounds were serious and his friends had deserted him. Donovan made a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat and lobbed a Stimpack at the limping man.

“Heal now. Run later,” the Ranger instructed.

The raider caught the medicine and immediately took a seat on the cracked ground so that he could tend his wound.

Keelah turned her attention to her friend but kept her weapon at the ready.

“You know, every single time I let a raider go, they come back a few minutes later, aiming for my head,” Keelah told Donovan.

Donovan smiled at her. His winter-gray eyes piercing and bright in the auburn backdrop that was the Capital Wasteland. “You have to give them a chance. Reilly taught me that.”

“You Rangers…a bunch of sweethearts,” Keelah said affectionately. And Donovan burst into laughter.

Keelah turned her gaze to the battle field. There were three casualties; still clutching shoddy weapons.
“Ambush?” she asked him.

Donovan removed his helmet. Scratched his head so roughly that a lock of curls fell into his eyes.

“Yeah. I didn’t think raiding parties traveled this far north. Not enough quarry up this way. This group must have been desperate. Maybe a splinter group that got pushed out.”

Keelah moved closer to the twisted bodies; bent down to inspect them. These three were young. Little more than teenagers. Maybe a couple of years younger than her. Now dead.

She sighed tremulously. “This godforsaken place turns kids into raiders,” she said softly.

She tried to ignore the fact that two of the dead raiders looked alike. Maybe brother and sister.

Donovan knelt in the space beside her. Tilted his head and closed his eyes. Mumbled something indistinct.

“You praying?” Keelah asked him, surprised.

Donovan opened his eyes and turned to her. “It’s something we used to say in the Brotherhood of Steel when we lost someone. Life has not forgotten you. It holds you in its hands.”

Keelah stared at him; at those bright eyes that always seemed like miniature stars; the boyish face and floppy hair. The easy smile that contrasted his booming voice.

Donovan smiled back at her, ever-cheerful, before rising to his feet; offering his hand.

Keelah allowed him to pull her to her feet then holstered her weapon. The injured raider had tended himself as best he could. Applied the Stimpack and wrapped his ratty shirt around his damaged leg. He remained in his sprawl on the ground though, his eyes wide with pain and fixated on his fallen friends.

Keelah sighed and turned back to Donovan. “What are you doing way out here Donovan? The Rangers usually travel as a team when they’re mapping new territories.”

Donovan plopped his helmet back on his head; removed a bulky item from a hook near his back. “I was actually looking for you. I tracked you using your geo-mapper. Reilly sent me to give you this.”

He handed her the heavy item.

“A mini nuke? Seriously?” She was a stealth fighter not a combat trooper. She could level an entire block with this thing.

“Yeah. Once a ranger always a ranger. We take care of our own.”

He gave her a broad smile, clearly pleased that he’d completed his mission.

The young ranger was sweating heavily. And his audible breathing told Keelah that he probably hadn’t rested at all during his long trek to find her. Reilly’s Rangers were notorious hard workers. They risked their lives for their mission and for their fellow soldiers. To the Rangers, sending someone on an errand to deliver a mini nuke was a worthy cause.

Keelah chuckled and placed the mini nuke (delicately!) into her satchel. “Thanks Donovan. I appreciate it.”

“Sure thing,” he replied, wiping his brow. The man looked positively parched and Keelah suddenly
realized that, besides his assault rifle, the ranger had no other items on hand.

“Donovan? Where’s your supply pack?” she asked.

“Uh…” The ranger blushed a pretty shade of pink and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked away from Keelah as he answered. “I was sort of in a rush when I left the compound. I went off and forget my travel pack. I was already halfway here when I realized that I only had my gun, the mini nuke, and a single Stimpack.”

“You mean the Stimpack you just gave that raider?”

“Yeah.” If it was possible to doubly blush, the ranger did just that.

“Why were you in such a hurry? I’ve done tons of jobs with you guys over the years. You’re usually the most prepared one.”

“I appreciate that.” He flashed her a sincere smile. “This time…well… this was a volunteer mission. And Brick was eager to come herself. I figured I’d get a head start. In my haste I left my gear.”

He fixed his eyes on the horizon as if there were something interesting there. But Keelah noticed how his flushed skin remained and how the pinky finger on his right hand jumped against his thigh. She’d been in such a state before. Those moments when she was around Amata and overcome with feeling.

Keelah felt a pleasant warmth in her chest—a dizzying sensation she usually only experienced when Dogmeat was curled against her feet and snoring softly. Or when Charon laughed out loud at something she said, his scratchy timbre pressing pleasantly against her working eardrum.

It was the feeling that she had someone. A well-liked… (Ugh…just admit it, Keelah), a well-loved someone. A friend.

Keelah had always enjoyed the company of Reilly’s Rangers. The group was good-natured and gracious and charitable to a fault. They never forgot that she saved them from the super mutant siege on top of the Statesmen Hotel, and they’d accepted her as one of their own. Keelah spent more time with the small band of explorers than she did with the Brotherhood of Steel. They were always so happy to see her and adamant that she stay longer with them.

You know you have a bedroll here, right? Reilly would always ask in her unassuming voice.

And the latrine’s usually clean, Brick would add, winking at Keelah and laughing mischievously.

Butcher, the Ranger medic, was the quietest of the quartet but no less welcoming. He would offer his medical services to Keelah each time she arrived or exited, even though the wastelander was pretty experienced in medicine herself. And Donovan would volunteer to repair her weapons and tech even though they both knew tech was her area of expertise.

Keelah would let Butcher fuss over her temperature and Donovan fuss of her Pip-Boy (an item he had never even seen before meeting Keelah). She’d give detailed reports to Reilly and shoot the shit with Brick (Brick’s words not hers); and for those hours or days she was with the Rangers, she felt contented. She felt more at home than she did in Megaton.

But it wasn’t until the saw the pink of Donovan’s neck, the trembling of his pinky finger, that Keelah realized her feelings were returned. The Rangers saw her as friend (family?) too. The sweat on Donovan’s brow and the mini nuke weighing down her supply pack proved that.
“How about a water break?” Keelah asked Donovan, motioning him over to a felled tree, dead for probably decades. She settled noisily onto the wooden surface and Donovan followed her. He sat close enough that the heat of his power armor warmed her left leg.

Keelah handed him three bottles of water from her pack.

“One for now. The other two should get you back to the compound.” She reached into her pack again. “And here. A few Stimpacks and some food. Hopefully that’ll be enough.” She pushed the supplies into his hand. But Donovan resisted.

“I can’t take all of this from you. Aren’t you on a long journey?”

“I actually think I’m going to turn around. I haven’t run into anything interesting yet, and I’m tired of walking.”

She pressed the items into Donovan’s hands again and the ranger relented. Stuffing the supplies into the heavy pockets of his armor.

“Where were you headed?” he asked, before gulping down his Aqua Pura.

“Nowhere. Just scouting.”

Keelah leaned back against the weathered tree. Closed her eyes against the sun and studied the red patterns behind her eyelids. Donovan studied her.

“You cut your hair,” he commented.

“Yeah. It was getting too long. Couldn’t fit it under my helmet.” She brushed at her shoulder length locks. They’d twisted and hardened in the past few years, spun into an easy-to-manage style that Charon called dreadlocks.

“I like it,” Donovan continued. “You can see more of your face.”

Keelah smiled without opening her eyes. It was sweet that Donovan was so quick with a compliment, but she knew her face had collected its share of scars. A gash below her right eye from a Deathclaw swipe. A still-healing burn scar on the angle of her jaw from a frag grenade explosion. And the deep cut above her lip—her first ever scar—courtesy of Butch DeLoria at her tenth birthday party.

And there were more scars; beneath her armor; within her. But the blemishes didn’t bother Keelah. She’d survived those maelstroms. She’d survive more.

“I’m going to go to Rivet City,” she declared suddenly. “The cook there, Gary, figured out how to make ice cream from wild punga fruit. I’m going to head there and get me the biggest bowl I can.”

Donovan laughed. “You’re going to abort your mission for ice cream?”

Keelah opened one eye to study him. “Is there any better reason?”

“I suppose not.” He drained the rest of his water and crossed his legs, clearly relaxed.

“You want to join me? When’s the last time you had ice cream?”

“I don’t think I ever have. But as tempting as that offer is, I have to get back to the compound. I have orders.” Keelah nodded in understanding. “Rain check?”
“Sure thing.”

They both watched as the wounded raider climbed to his feet; hobbled over to his fallen comrades. Keelah assumed he was going to remove any valuables from his friend’s bodies—it was the Wasteland way: salvage and repurpose—but the injured man simply knelt beside the bodies; closed each pair of frozen eyes and patted the shoulder of one raider tentatively as if the action would stir the fallen man.

Donovan grimaced; repeated the words from before from the Brotherhood of Steel.

“Do you ever miss it?” Keelah asked him. She needed a distraction from the grim scene in front of her. “Miss being a part of the Brotherhood of Steel?”

“Sometimes. I like where I am now. With Reilly and Butcher. Even Brick. But the Brotherhood was my family for a long time. I learned a lot from them. I miss them.” His voice had grown soft; contemplative. “I was a member of a special unit. The Lyon’s Pride. Soldiers who were even tougher than Brick if you can believe that.”

Keelah smiled warmly. “I’ve met them. They’re a good group. Saved my ass when I got caught in an explosion at Jefferson Memorial.”

Donovan turned to her. His silvery eyes bright. “You didn’t join up? The Brotherhood clamors for people like you.”

“They offered. And I do jobs for them from time to time. But I’m not really interested in being a member of a group right now. I belonged someplace once. And then I didn’t. I don’t really want to go through that again.”

“I can understand that.” He dug dust-covered fingers into the bark of a tree; made a circling motion against the decaying wood. “Reilly’s Rangers are a group. You’re one of us.”

“The rangers are different. You’re a family not an institution or enterprise. It’s easier somehow.”

Donovan nodded. Watched as the raider struggled back to his feet. The blood from the raider’s gunshot wounds had soaked through the shirt tied around his leg. The red was blinding, too much.

“Think you can patch him up?” Donovan asked Keelah.

The two rangers were on the same wavelength. Keelah had already reached for her supply pack; her medical kit. The pair stood and made their way towards the shuffling raider.

“You know who I wouldn’t mind seeing again from the Brotherhood?” Donovan asked. “There was this scout in our unit. Gallows. A real buttoned-up type. Special ops and stealthy as hell. Never said much. But if you caught him in the right mood he was good for an interesting story. He’d seen a lot. Been all over. There was a pool going in the Pride to figure out what his first name was. I left before I learned what it was. I’m out a hundred caps.”

They’d reached the raider and Donovan held his hands up reassuringly to let the raider know that they meant no harm.

Keelah gestured the wounded man to the ground then knelt beside him to get to work. She handed Donovan her medical kit to hold and couldn’t help teasing her friend as she navigated through blood to find exit wounds.
“I know Gallow’s first name,” she said casually.

“What?!” Donovan squawked. He squatted down beside her. Put his free hand on the raider’s shoulder to keep him still while Keelah worked. “Tell me.”

“I dunno. What are you going to give me in exchange for that information?”

“I just brought you a mini nuke!” he exclaimed.

Keelah laughed. Worked a needle into rubbery skin and made a stitch. The raider hissed above her but remained still; watched in awe as the very people who had wounded him tended his injury.

“You’re right. As thanks for the mini nuke, I’ll tell you Gallow’s name. It’s Irving.”

She’d stopped the bleeding. Keelah studied her work. The zig-zagged stitching. What was it with her and leg injuries?

“Irving?” Donovan asked incredulously. He patted the raider on the back; his attempt to comfort. “I thought it would be something like Draco or Axelrod.”

Keelah laughed out loud. “You’re ridiculous,” she said affectionately. She applied a bandage to the raider’s leg. Gave him another Stimpack shot. “You want to know something else? I’ve seen Gallow’s face. And everyone knows he never takes off that helmet.”

Donovan stared at her with wide eyes. “What does he look like?”

“Oh no, Donovan. That bit of information is going to cost you way more than a mini nuke. I’m thinking Tesla cannon. Modified.”

Keelah laughed even harder when Donovan actually pouted.

She’d come north to discover something new—something fulfilling. Instead she’d run into her friend and found some much needed laughter.

Keelah felt the warmth blooming in her chest again and she welcomed it. She knew the feeling was fleeting—delicate—but she would cherish it for now; cling to it as long as she could.

Her happiness was contagious. Donovan smiled with her, his firelight eyes an interruption from the wasteland drab. And for a while Keelah was solaced.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I just had to write a chapter involving Reilly’s Rangers and Donovan. The Rangers were my favorite faction in FO3 and I thought Donovan schlepping across the wasteland to bring the Lone Wanderer a mini nuke was the sweetest thing ever. Thought this chapter would be a nice follow up to the glum of the previous chapter. More story on the way and no worries, Amata is in the future.

a) **Credit to Ranier Maria Rilke, an Austrian-Hungarian poet who wrote Letters to a Young Poet
b) Chapter Title inspired by Atlantic Starr song.
good kid(s), mAAd city

Chapter Summary

As promised, the Lone Wanderer goes to Rivet City for ice cream, but the fun trip doesn't go as planned. Angst aplenty.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: there are references to suicide in this chapter.

This is a pretty short chapter. There's a part 2 for this chapter in the works, but I wanted to go ahead and get something up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 8—good kid(s), mAAd city

“Hey Gary, can we get another round?”

The owner and head cook of Rivet City’s only restaurant shook his head at Keelah’s request and folded his graying menu under his arm. “No can do Ladybug. You and your pint-sized crew totally cleaned me out.”

Gary gestured at the empty bowls littering the scuffed table that was currently occupied by Keelah and her trio of adolescents: Bryan Wilkes, James Hargrave and CJ Young. Between the four of them, they’d consumed twenty-two bowls of punga fruit ice cream and had completely depleted Gary’s stock.

Keelah frowned at the cook. “Why must you insist on calling me Ladybug?”

“I offered to call you tulip and you refused.”

“That’s because my name is Keelah.”

Gary’s daughter Angela wandered over and began clearing bowls from the table. She smiled down at Keelah. “Giving you a nickname just means Dad likes you. He calls me Angel. And before Ma passed she was Sweet Pie. Don’t be mad Keelah.”

Keelah pursed her lips and pretended a few seconds longer to be offended by the nickname; but they all knew better. Keelah wasn’t an official resident of Rivet City, but she’d been around long enough to be considered one of the city’s own. The security team had given her a pass card so that she could enter and exit the ship on her own accord; Vera had set aside a permanent room for Keelah in her hotel upstairs; and every merchant had given her a respectable discount on their wares. Gary’s nickname was just another way for the citizens to show the young woman that she was welcome.
Keelah met Gary’s grin with a smile of her own. “How much do I owe you?” she asked, reaching for the pouch attached to her hip.

“Forty caps. Forty-five if you decide to give Angel a tip.”

“Pa!” Angela interjected. “Stop soliciting tips from everybody. We lose customers that way.”

Angela bumped her father with her hip as she carried her tray of dirty dishes towards the kitchen.

Keelah counted out fifty caps from her pouch; placed them in a neat pile on the table.

“Don’t listen to her,” Gary said as soon as his daughter was out of earshot. “She and Diego are expecting. I’m going to be a grandpop. She’ll need all the caps she can get her hands on to keep a baby safe and fed.” He bent down so that he could speak without his Keelah’s young tablemates hearing. “Diego spends all his time in that church sweeping and sermoning. And that’s good and all, but there’s no money in being a priest’s assistant, you know?”

He scratched his chin stubble and cast a worried glance at his young daughter. Angela was already hard at work scrubbing dishes. She was elbow deep in gray water but still managed to keep a smile on her face.

Keelah removed another thirty caps. Added it to the pile.

Gary’s eyes widened. “You don’t have to do all that. Five extra caps is plenty.”

“Consider it a belated wedding gift for your daughter and son-in-law.”

Gary smiled. “Sure thing Ladybug.” He gave Keelah an affectionate squeeze on the shoulder before moving to take an order from another customer.

Keelah turned back to her tablemates. CJ was busy licking her metal spoon, trying to find any lingering speck of flavored cream; and Bryan Wilkes was doing what he always did—staring intently off into space as if there was something fascinating that only he could see. But James Hargrave stared right back at Keelah; his eyes hard and tight—forever narrowed. The eleven-year old had a pink mustache from the half-dozen or so bowls of ice cream he’d devoured in the past hour, but the garish residue didn’t look cute on him like it did on most children. His eyes were too hard for that; his mouth too pinched. The ice cream mustache simply highlighted the incongruity that was the eleven-year old ruffian.

James Hargrave was a man-child. A boy, forced to grow up fast, who’d taken on adult responsibilities while still being trapped in a child’s body; a boy whose coarse language and eager fists stood at odds with his age and size. He had an absent father, an alcoholic mother, and a lifetime of disappointments and heartbreaks that left a permanent scowl on his face.

Keelah pitied him. She’d pitied him for nearly four years and hadn’t yet found anything useful to do with the heavy emotion. In her helplessness, she’d bought him ice cream.

“How’d you like the sorbet?” She asked James.

“It tasted like shit.”

Keelah startled at James’ words. He’d eaten more ice cream than any of them and had even tried to bully CJ out of her portion before Keelah intervened and gave him hers. Still the eleven-year old let loose the nasty comment with ease and uttered it loudly enough so that Gary could hear.
The cook grumbled under his breath but didn’t bother to chastise James. Everyone on the ship was accustomed to the adolescent’s surly temperament.

James’ vocal complaint drew Bryan from his reverie. He turned soft eyes on Keelah. “I enjoyed the ice cream,” he said sincerely. “Thanks again for treating us.”

The orphaned adolescent had always been a sweet one—painstakingly polite—and his mild manners were only amplified by the boorish company he kept.

CJ finished inspecting her spoon; set it down with a plop and gave Keelah a toothy grin. “Yeah, thanks! My parents never buy me treats. And you gave us lots!”

Keelah smiled at the precocious girl. “Just don’t get sick, okay? I’ll never hear the end of it from your mom.”

CJ waved a goodbye and scampered off to find her mother. She was a cheerful child. Deliriously happy in her ship-shaped home with her two good-natured parents.

Her friends weren’t so lucky.

Bryan scooted his chair closer to Keelah and situated his body until his posture mirrored Keelah’s. He was eleven years old now and several inches taller than when he’d first met Keelah near Grayditch. But he was still rail thin with too-wide eyes and there was a hollowness about his face that had nothing to do with malnutrition.

Bryan Wilkes was just a lonesome child. Or sad. Maybe both.

But he was fond of the lone wanderer. Had been ever since she saved him from the massacre at Grayditch. Whenever Keelah visited Rivet City, the eleven-year old would follow her around the ship like a second shadow.

Keelah thought of Bryan as something like a little brother. He’d lost a father just like she had. And he had a particular... unhappiness about him just like she did. And she’d never forgotten how tightly he’d held her hand as they made that long walk from Grayditch to Rivet City. How hard he’d cried when they left his father’s body behind. How his tears had made him seem even smaller.

She spoiled Bryan to make up for the weeks he’d been left alone in his burnt out town; for the days he’d spent huddling in that suffocating preservation chamber. Over the years she’d brought him catcher mitts; toy cars; shiny shoes. He’d been barefoot when he’d run up to her at the Super Duper Mart asking for help; his T-shirt had been torn and flecked with the blood of everyone he knew (He’d tried to resuscitate his dad and his best friend, Will. Eight years old and he’d scrabbled at burnt skin trying to find a pulse).

Keelah had never forgotten those images. The red of his shirt. His blistered feet. Even now it haunted her. She gazed down at her young friend. At the way his eyes stared unblinking; at the ashen skin that hadn’t regained its color even after three years of improved living.

She would bring Bryan every shoe she could find in the Capital Wastes, every toy and sweet treat, if it would supplant those memories of Grayditch; the memory of Bryan’s prostrate father, burned beyond recognition by murderous fire ants.

Bryan (and to a degree, James) was the reason Keelah returned to Rivet City so often these days. She had no close friends here. Did such an insubstantial amount of trading with the merchants that it didn’t warrant the long trip from Megaton. It was her concern for these two world-weary boys that made her put feet to pavement; that made her brave the dust and sand, the endless raiders between
Megaton and Rivet City. She was worried about them. Terrified that that most perfidious of ailments—depression/grief—would eat Bryan and James alive. Would kill them prematurely.

She knew. She knew how dangerous it could be. How many times had she nearly walked into the murky waters of the Potomac? How many times had she pressed stones into the pockets of her leathers and stood on the shore awaiting some sign? She could see it in Bryan and James’ eyes—the way Bryan stared off, the way James glared. There was an emptiness; a vacuousness that demanded to be filled in the worst way possible. An avalanche of water; a floating body; permanent stillness. Keelah knew.

Everyone in the wastes had sadness. Misery was free. But there were some who couldn’t carry that much despair. Who’d had their fill of melancholy and were tilting towards the Potomac; any sea they could find. Keelah could see that happening with Bryan and James. Bryan was too quiet and James was too vocal. And their eyes…God, it was in their eyes.

She couldn’t imagine it. Couldn’t stomach losing more people she cared about, so she purchased far too many bowls of ice cream; a surfeit of shiny shoes. She played baseball and hopscotch and any number of fantastical games Bryan thought up. She let the boys frolic with Dogmeat on the upper deck of the ship, their peals of laughter louder than any gunfire she’d ever heard. And she hoped. She hoped it would be enough.

Still she worried.

Bryan slipped into trances so often these days (He worries me, Vera would say, her eyes wide and wet. He doesn’t talk much anymore). And James fought anything that moved. Vera wanted Keelah to do something. (You’re a capable woman, Keelah. Can’t you…?). But Keelah didn’t feel capable. Didn’t feel useful at all. ‘Cause even though she knew how to perform surgery with a minimum of tools; even though she could breach a security complex with a single bobby bin, she still hadn’t figured out how to fix sadness. She hadn’t the faintest idea how to interrupt hurt. If she did, well, she would have done something about her own miserable ages ago.

She could only hope that Bryan and James’ youth would keep them from harming themselves; they didn’t have access to stone; they didn’t have access to sea. The Potomac had become grave to many of the wastes' fallen and disenchanted. It had nearly swallowed her. Keelah could only hope that it wouldn’t claim these two young ones.

She tapped Bryan’s elbow, drawing him from his fog. “Your stomach hurt?” she asked him.

“No.” He gave her a small smile. Then went back to staring into space. He’d become so uncommunicative in the past three years. Keelah sighed. Wracked her brain for questions that would get the taciturn boy to speak more.

“Why didn’t you bring your dog this time?” James Hargrave asked her suddenly. The ill-tempered adolescent barely tolerated Keelah, levying her with the same glares and insults he gave every adult on the ship; but he adored Dogmeat. He would press his face into the pup’s fur and hug him tight like he was the softest thing in the world.

“I’ll bring him next time. He was kind of beat from our last visit, so I left him with Charon.”

“The freaky looking ghoul?”
Keelah narrowed her eyes but Bryan interrupted any objection she might have made. “I like Charon,” he supplied.

“He likes you too,” Keelah commented. She swung her gaze back to James. “He likes both of you. So try to be nice the next time he comes around, hmm?”

James snorted; tilted back in his chair and balanced precariously on two legs. “So when are you going to teach me how to shoot a gun? You promised.”

“I said I’d teach you when you’re sixteen. And only with your mom’s permission.”

“My mom doesn’t care. You could teach me now.” He righted his chair and leaned forward, suddenly desperate to convince Keelah. “I already know how to work a slingshot. I’d be a quick learner.”

Keelah sighed and rubbed at her temples. James had been badgering her to teach him how to shoot for three years now. “Why does an eleven-year old need to know how to handle a weapon?”

“So I can protect myself.”

“James, you’re safe here. Rivet City has a draw bridge and guards. You even have Brotherhood of Steel soldiers around helping with Project Purity caravans. No one’s going to hurt you. I promise.”

James scowled savagely; hit his fist on his leg hard. “I don’t need your promises. I need lessons. So are you going to teach me or not?”

“In five years.”

“Hypocrite!” He slammed his hand on the table and ignored the red that bloomed on his hand; the blood vessels that protested the ill treatment.

Bryan snapped out of his daze and reached for his friend. “Don’t do that James.”

But James pulled away from him. “Can it Bryan! She’d teach you if you asked. She’s a hypocrite and I don’t like her anymore.”

The angry boy jumped up from the table, knocking over his chair in the process, and Keelah startled at his mottled face, his vicious tone. She put a hand out to stop James before he could stalk away.

“Why am I a hypocrite James?”

He turned on her. His hands balled into fists at his side; his body quivering with barely-controlled rage. “‘Cause everyone knows you went out to find your father. Now you won’t help me find mine.”


“It’s been six years since my dad left. If I don’t find him soon, he’s going to forget about me. Or get so far away that I can’t catch up to him. I can’t wait another five years for you to teach me how to shoot. I need to know now.”

It took a tremendous amount of effort for Keelah not to cry out, lose her composure, allow her face to crumble. This was just… Shit!

“You’re trying to find your father?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yeah.” Even Bryan was attentive; hyper-focused on his trembling friend. “And I have to go outside
to do that. I need to be able to protect myself. And protect my dad just in case he needs my help. He must be in a bad way. Probably kidnapped or something. He wouldn’t have stayed gone so long otherwise.”

Keelah thought about James’ violent tantrums; about the insults he would hurl at anyone who drew his ire; the way he would glare and scowl and needle people’s weaknesses; the way he would hug Dogmeat so tenderly; his face gentled and soft when pressed against the dog’s fur.

James was just a kid. A distressed kid with an unconcerned mother and a father who existed only in his imagination.

Keelah’s heart, what remained of it, broke, and the young woman had to turn away from those stony eyes; from the anguished expression that accused her of not doing enough to help.

“I’ll speak with your mother,” she said softly; her eyes on the watermarked table. “If she agrees, I’ll teach you. But we’ll start with a BB gun.” She turned her eyes back to the little boy, the not-quite man. “My dad taught me to use a BB gun when I was ten. I think that’s a good place to start.”

James nodded slowly. His fists were still clenched but his breathing had smoothed; the red of his face receded.

Keelah was a do-gooder. Bryan was a good friend. Bryan left the table and put a comforting hand on Jame’s back. “Come on James. Let’s go find CJ. We can play hide-N-seek on the upper deck.”

James frowned. “That’s a stupid game.”

“Only because you hide in the same places. I’ll show you some better spots. Come on.”

Bryan smiled at Keelah before walking away. James moved to follow but stopped at the last minute. Turned to face Keelah.

“Thanks for the ice cream,” he said. Not nicely but also not in his usually gruff tone. He still had his ice cream mustache; his razor eyes that made his face looked mismatched.

“You’re welcome,” Keelah said softly.

She watched as James joined Bryan by the stairs; as the two boys slowly climbed the metal incline. The boys were headed to play a child’s game but neither of them were children anymore. They’d grown old before their time.

She grieved silently for them both. For Bryan, who’d lost his father to fire and had never recovered. And for James, who didn’t even know that his father had already perished in Andale.

She’d stumbled upon a den of cannibals four years ago. Had almost been killed herself by the bloodthirsty group. The leader of the pack had admitted to murdering a man from Rivet City. He begged for his life, the cannibal had gloated. Said he had a son in Rivet City.

Keelah had been certain that the unfortunate victim was James’ father. She’d never told James. She’d never told anyone. Andale was a horror she couldn’t bear recounting.

James wanted to find a man who didn’t exist. And he wanted Keelah’s help with the impossible task.

Keelah would have fallen out of her chair if Gary hadn’t steadied her. Get some sleep, the cook instructed, pushing her towards the metal stairs.
Keelah took the same path Bryan and James had taken moments before; moving slowly up the ice-cold stairs.

It seemed no matter where she went, she encountered heartache. And not for the first time, she thought of the sea.

Chapter End Notes

This was a really hard chapter to write. I honestly did not mean to make this chapter so melancholy. It just wrote itself this way. The more I explored Bryan and James' state of minds, the bleaker it got. Sorry. But I promise this story will ultimately end on a brighter note.

**A reference to the writer Virginia Woolf, who committed suicide by putting stones in her pockets and walking into a river. In no way am I trying to make suicide a trope or storytelling device, but I am writing a lone wanderer who struggles with depression, suicidal ideation, and self-injurious behavior, and I want to be as sensitive as possible while also detailing how painful and perplexing such an experience can be.

Chapter title inspired by Kendrick Lamar song.
Scared of Beautiful

Chapter Summary

Still in Rivet City, Keelah encounters an unexpected acquaintance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9—Scared of Beautiful

Keelah shifted uncomfortably against the scratchy sheets of her twin-sized bed. She’d been lying there for hours, agitated and restless, waiting for a deep sleep that would put her mind to rest.

But her thoughts were too discordant, tortuous. And rapid fire images assailed her, deepening her gloom. Images of James’ torn apart father; Bryan’s vacant eyes; And her own demons: Vault 101. Amata.

Keelah stared up at the broken ceiling. At the cracked lines in the plastered surface. Spider-web shaped grooves that stretched onward then ended. She imagined the lines like tiny roads leading to nowhere. An entire township of cracks above her head. Thoroughfares and dead ends.

Where did she fit in all this? Where did she belong?

She was a perpetual traveler who’d encountered nothing but dead ends on her journey; inhospitable ruins; rifle barrels and expulsions. She was ready to settle down, rest, be still. But there was no place for her to go. And the location she most desired was prohibited.

*I’ll have to wander forever*, Keelah thought glumly. *I’ll have to walk until I find some place to be.*

She closed her eyes against the lines above her head. Lines that suddenly looked like the boundaries of a map.

In her distress, she dug fingernails into her own skin; left a ribbon of hurt across her forearm; drew parallel lines until she hissed at the contact. There were times, such as this, when she needed a familiar sting; a pain she could control and release. A self-injury that was friend.

The pain reminded her that she could feel. It also gave the illusion that she had autonomy over her misery.

Keelah rubbed at the sore spot on her arm—an apology—then shot a glance at her Pip-Boy. It was after nine o’clock. She’d wasted enough time in this bed. If she wanted to find sleep, she’d have to be more proactive. She swung her legs over the small bed and stood. Grabbed her coin purse and headed out the door.

Rivet City corridors were teeming at this time of night. The markets were closed and residents were settling down for the evening. The smell of food wafted through the air, sweet and spice mixed, and some residents shuffled towards the Muddy Rudder for their evening libations.
Keelah made her way through the crowd; gamely answering hellos and nods. She exchanged the occasional high five and made small talk when appropriate. When Abraham Washington cornered her near the stairway, she waited patiently as he gave her an update on the Capitol Preservation Society. Her hands twitched anxiously as the wizened curator went on about the “Evolutionary War” and the “Second Judgmental Congress.” The bastardization of facts nearly gave Keelah a headache, but she toughed it out another minute. The moment Abraham paused to take a breath, Keelah sidestepped him and raced down the flight of stairs.

She didn’t mean to be rude. Abraham was a nice guy and somewhat interesting, but the man was notoriously longwinded and Keelah didn’t have the time to spare. She needed a drink and bad.

She usually didn’t drink alcohol in Rivet City. There were enough inebriants on the ship, and the guards didn’t take kindly to public intoxication. Plus there was always Bryan and James to think about. One or both were usually underfoot and Keelah didn’t want to make a bad impression. James already had one addict in his life. Keelah thought it best to keep her weakness secret.

But tonight she couldn’t help herself. She wanted to sleep. She wanted numbness. It was either drink herself into a stupor or spend the entire evening lamenting at her ceiling.

She hastened down the final flight of stairs that led to the Muddy Rudder bar. She could almost taste the cool liqueur. She knew it would burn. Like irradiated water. A veritable fire in her throat. But there would be a chill immediately afterwards. A frozen tundra in her chest. A few glasses and she’d sleep like a baby. No ceiling maps. No dreams.

In her excitement, Keelah increased her pace and broke into a jog. She rounded the corner and ran straight into Trinnie Lutton, the Muddy Rudder’s most faithful customer.

“Oi! Watch where you’re going creep!” Trinnie shouted.

Keelah disentangled herself from Trinnie and apologized. The young woman swore at Keelah again and tried to regain her equilibrium. When Keelah noticed Trinnie struggling to stay on her feet, she reached out to steady the woman. She was immediately engulfed by the smell of beer and stale tobacco.

Trinnie cast bleary eyes on Keelah as she ran her hand across one of the smooth patches on her head. “Oh, it’s you. My favorite patron. You going to buy me a drink tonight?”

Keelah kept a loose embrace around Trinnie’s waist, silently praying the woman wouldn’t fall. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“Fuck you outlander! You don’t tell me when I’ve had enough.” Trinnie twisted in Keelah’s arms; pushed at her roughly. “And why are you touching me? You trying to make a move or something?”

Keelah blanched and maneuvered Trinnie over to the wall so that the intoxicated woman could lean against it. “I’m not making a move Trinnie. I just wanted to make sure you could stay on your feet.”

Satisfied that Trinnie wouldn’t collapse, Keelah released her. Stepped back. “I’m on my feet now, aren’t I?” Trinnie growled.

It was more of a slouch, and the wall was doing most of the work but Keelah didn’t say anything. She did, however, rush over to Trinnie’s side when the woman began to slide down the wall. Keelah steadied her again; snapped her fingers a few times to get Trinnie’s attention.

“Hey...Trinnie...wake up...I’m going to get you into bed, okay? Put your arm around my neck.”
Trinnie hiccupped; smiled broadly and obediently looped both arms around Keelah. “I knew you were making a move. You’ve been hitting on me for years, outlander.”

Keelah’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “I have?”

“You’re always buying me drinks. Sometimes more than one.”

“That’s ‘cause you always tell me to shut up and buy you a drink. I’m not hitting on you, I promise.”

Keelah grunted under the weight of the intoxicated woman. Why did people always get so damn heavy when they were drunk? She pressed Trinnie into the wall again, this time using her body as leverage to keep the woman in place.

Unfortunately, Trinnie took the move to be an overture and she trailed her fingertips down Keelah’s arms. Then hooked an ankle behind Keelah’s right leg.

“You smell good,” the drunk woman purred. “Like berries or something.”

“Uh…I ate like seven bowls of ice cream earlier,” Keelah responded lamely. “Punga fruit.” Trinnie pressed even closer. Nuzzled her face into Keelah’s neck and breathed deeply.

“You also smell like sweat. And vanilla. I like that.”

“It’s coconut.” Keelah tried to squirm away from Trinnie’s roving hands. “Trinnie…stop, okay? I’m trying to keep you upright and you’re not helping.”

“We’ll have to use your bedroom for our little dalliance. I bunk in the common room upstairs and there are too many creeps there. They’ll probably watch.”

*Dear God.* “Trinnie, look, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I’m not trying to initiate a romantic encounter with you. I consider you…uh…a friend, okay? I just want to get you into your own bed so that you can sleep off this bender. That’s all.”

Trinnie pulled back, her face inflamed from the alcohol and her shock at Keelah’s words. “Wait a minute. You don’t think I’m pretty?”

“What?” Keelah was incredulous. Why the hell was she even trying to have a conversation with someone who wasn’t lucid?

“You’re calling me ugly!” Trinnie shouted. And the once flirtatious hands suddenly clenched on Keelah’s shoulders.

“I’m not calling you ugly,” Keelah contested. And she really wasn’t. Beneath Trinnie’s permanent scowl and her dreadful haircut, she was actually quite an attractive woman. But there was no way in hell Keelah was going to sleep with an acquaintance let alone take advantage of her when she was intoxicated. “Look…will you just try to balance on this wall? I’m going to go get some help from the bar, and then I’ll escort you to your bed.”

“No. Fuck you!” Trinnie shoved Keelah away from her, nearly pushing the battle ranger to the floor. “You people are all the same. Always looking down on me. Thinking you’re better.” The young woman crossed her arms over her chest and stared daggers at Keelah. “I swear, everybody in this tin can is an asshole.”

Keelah rubbed her right shoulder and tried to ease the ache that was there. Trinnie was surprisingly strong. She’d practically dislocated Keelah’s shoulder.
Keelah released an irritated breath and stared at her grumpy companion. All she’d wanted to do was drink a little alcohol and fall into a happy sleep. Now she was forced to contend with a hurt shoulder and hurt feelings.

Trinnie looked equally agitated and much more alert than she’d been moments before. Her outrage at Keelah’s rebuff most have sobered her.

Keelah sighed. “How about I buy you a drink?”

Trinnie rolled her eyes and huffed dramatically. She looked ready to refuse. But after a few seconds of tense silence, the young woman relented. “I want pie too. A big slice.”

“Fine.”

Keelah let the sulky woman precede her into the bar (Trinnie stumbled only once) then followed behind her. Keelah gave a friendly nod to the bouncer, Brock, before settling onto a bar stool next to Trinnie.

“Hey Belle,” Keelah called, “Can I get two Nuka Colas on ice and a slice of pie? The biggest piece you have?”

The bartender nodded and reached for two glasses.

“You said you were going to be me a drink!” Trinnie exclaimed crossly.

“I am.”

“Well, unless Belle plans to put a little bourbon in that coke, I don’t want it. What am I? Twelve?”

Keelah raised an eyebrow, completely unfazed by Trinnie’s tantrum. “You want the drink or not? I’m paying.”

Trinnie scowled and shook her head so viciously that the little plaits on her head spun like tiny windmills. “Fine!” she snapped. “But I’m going to need more than one Nuka Cola to get a proper buzz, so get your caps ready.”

Keelah bit back a retort and focused her attention on the shiny bottles of liquor lining Belle’s mantle. Trinnie was upset with her but, hell, it wasn’t like she was pleased with this turn of events herself. She should be in her bedroom right now spooning a bottle of cheap red liquor. Instead she would be forced to make due with a syrupy version of sugar water all while entertaining a foulmouthed malcontent.

Belle plopped two frosted glasses down on the countertop and slid a ginormous slice of chocolate pie towards Keelah.

“That’s mine,” Trinnie protested. And she grabbed the pie away from Keelah and began to tear into it ravenously.

“Why, Katrina, I’ve never seen you eat anything,” Belle stated, surprise written across her face. “Not counting that tobacco you chew, of course.”

“Well, if you comped my meals, maybe I would eat more.”

Belle placed her hands on her wide hips and frowned at Trinnie. “Child, I already comp most of your drinks. If I pay any more of your tabs, I’ll be in the poorhouse.”
Trinnie just rolled her eyes and used her fingers to tear into the decadent dessert.

“Fork?” Belle asked. Trinnie licked her fingers as an answer. Belle tutted under her breath and turned her attention to Keelah. “And you. What is it with you vaulties? Your kind never buys alcohol, and I have some of the best hooch in the wastes. What are you? Some kind of teetotaler or something?”

Keelah snorted into her glass of cola. A teetotaler? Yeah right. She would swim in whiskey if she could find a big enough bottle.

Beside her, Trinnie smacked her lips obnoxiously; chocolate crumbs falling from her mouth, marring Belle’s spotless counter. The garrulous bartender glared.

“She doesn’t buy your drinks, Belle, because they taste like piss,” Trinnie said nastily.

“You’d better watch your mouth Katrina, or I’ll make sure the very next drink you get from me does taste like piss.”

Keelah’s mouth twisted and she stared suspiciously at the brown drink in her hand. “Ugh…” she murmured weakly. “I’m suddenly not thirsty.”

Belle laughed heartily and winked at Keelah. “Don’t be so squeamish vaultie. I’m just giving Katrina a hard time. This problem child vexes my nerves but I love her.” The bartender wiped away the crumbs with a soft cloth then took Trinnie’s empty saucer. The young woman had finished the pie in under a minute.

“Another slice?” Belle asked.

Trinnie shot a hesitant glance at Keelah.

“Sure,” Keelah responded. “And if you have any sandwich fixings, that would be good too. She’s going to need some bread to soak up that alcohol.”

Trinnie scowled at her. “You’re an insufferable goody-two-shoes, you know that?”

“And you’re annoying as fuck,” Keelah responded dryly.

"Play nicely girls," Belle commented, before walking away to prepare the new order.

Keelah and Trinnie stared at each other for a long moment. Brown eyes against blue. Scowl versus scowl. But then both women burst into laughter.

“I can’t stand you,” Trinnie managed between chuckles.

“Oh really? That’s not what you were saying a few minutes ago. ‘Oh Keelah, you smell like vanilla’”, Keelah mocked.

“Well, you do. And I happen to hate vanilla.” Trinnie used a fingertip to pick up a chocolate crumb Belle had overlooked. She popped it into her mouth happily as if it were proof that she hated vanilla and Keelah.

“Uh huh,” Keelah commented. She reclaimed her glass of cola and took a tentative sip.

Trinnie studied her companion quietly; her blue eyes curious and invasive. “You really consider me a friend?” she asked Keelah.
Keelah swallowed a mouthful of drink before answering. “Sure. You’re the friend who cusses me out the most often.” Another sip. “I take that back. You’re tied with Charon. He swears like a sailor too.”

Trinnie placed both hands on her untouched drink; breathed warm air over the glass even though the drink was ice cold. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a friend,” she admitted softly.

Keelah’s head whipped around. She gave Trinnie a surprised look.

“I used to have friends,” Trinnie continued; her eyes focused on a spot above Belle’s countertop. “Used to have quite a few friends actually. I’m from this place called Little Lamplight. It’s a settlement run completely by kids. No adults whatsoever. No stupid rules and nonsense expectations.” There was slight turn of her mouth. It could have been a smile. “It was real nice there. Considering we lived in a cave….But when you turn sixteen, they kick you out. Just like that. I’ve been on my own ever since.”

Trinnie’s eyes wavered; dancing over any surface that wasn’t Keelah’s face.

Keelah sighed heavily. Risked a glance at the row of shining bottles that called to her and Trinnie both. The wastelander swallowed back the expectant saliva; turned her attention to Trinnie.

“You never made it to Big Town?” she asked.

“How do you know about Big Town?”

“I’ve been there. To Little Lamplight too.”

“They let a mungo into Little Lamplight?”

“No one ever knows the way to Big Town. We’re just expected to go. Expected to find it. My brother and I ended up in some hell hole near an abandoned train station. Some creep found us. Took us as slaves. He locked us in this small cage. There were others on every side. Dozens of cages of people. Like animals in a zoo. The man said he was going to sell us to some factory up north.”

Keelah’s eyes narrowed at Trinnie's words. A factory up north? That sounded like the Pitt. The massive slave operation she'd been unable to interrupt. “My brother was real smart though. Knew how to pick locks. He waited until the slaver was asleep and broke us out of the cage.” She shook her head sadly; her butchered hair waving again. “But he wasn’t satisfied with just getting me and him out. He made me wait for him up near this radio tower then he went back to the camp. Said he was going to free the other slaves.” Trinnie turned her gaze to Keelah. Her eyes were hard. Pain-filled slits. “He was a do-gooder like you. Brave but stupid…I waited for him for hours, but he never came back. When night fell, I crept back to the camp, but they were all gone. Not a single person left behind. Not even a body. I guess the slavers caught him. Put him some place he couldn’t break out of.” She stared off into space; her jaw tight; her tone funereal. “So, no, I never made it to Big Town. Most Lamplighters never do.”
Keelah blinked rapidly. Tried to process the unexpected information. “I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“Screw you outlander. I don’t need your pity. I just talk a lot when I’m drunk. And I needed something to do since Belle is taking so damn long with the pie!” She screamed the last bit and the other customers in the bar gawked openly at the commotion.

Keelah placed a hand next to Trinnie’s. She didn’t touch Trinnie (she didn’t think the woman would appreciate it), but she wanted to do something. So she placed her hand on the countertop next to Trina’s. Tried to communicate something important with the small gesture.

Trinnie stared at Keelah’s hand for a moment then looked into Keelah’s eyes. “I said no pity.”

“It’s not.”

Keelah took a chance. Turned her hand over, palm up. Trinnie’s lip curled derisively. But not even a second passed before the woman placed her hand on top of Keelah’s. They both clenched their fingers and made tight grasp. For two women who were spectacularly jaded, it was a significant act; the approximation of an embrace.

Keelah used her free hand to sip her drink. Trinnie did the same, complaining immediately.

“Fuck! This cola tastes like piss too.”

“Please don’t tell Belle that. I don’t want to have to worry about the contents of my glass every time I get a drink here.”

“Wuss,” Trinnie retorted. But her tone was light, almost affectionate.

Keelah snickered into her glass. Squeezed Trinnie’s hand before casting a sidelong glance at her…uh…friend. “You really are pretty, you know that right? Beautiful actually.”

Trinnie didn’t even bat an eye. “Fuck you outlander. You missed your chance with me. Your loss by the way.”

Keelah laughed again. Trinnie joined in, her hearty chuckles making Keelah feel surprisingly buzzed. Maybe she wouldn’t need the alcohol to fall asleep tonight. Laughter was an intoxicant all its own.

Belle strode in from the kitchen, two plates in her hands. “Look at you two, all a twitter. You didn’t dip into my stock while I was in the back, did you?” The bartender glared at Trinnie, prepared to admonish the churlish woman.

“I only did that the one time Belle. Stop being paranoid.” Trinnie let go of Keelah’s hand; reached for her plate of sandwiches and pie.

While Trinnie dug into her food, Keelah turned her attention to Belle.

“Hey Belle, what did you mean earlier when you mentioned vaulter? You said vaulter in plural form. I thought I was the only vaulter you’d ever met?”

“You were. Until a few days ago. Another vaulter came strolling in here looking like the bad end of a Brahmin. I felt so bad for him, I gave him a job stacking boxes.” Belle pressed a fork into Trinnie’s hand and pointedly ignored the young woman when she started to complain. “He’s in the back. Organizing the storeroom for me.” Belle gestured at the small room behind her.
Keelah’s eyes widened. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask.”

“Well, what vault is he from?”

“Beats me kid. Why don’t you go interrogate him yourself? I have customers to see to.” The bartender walked away, leaving Keelah in stunned silence.

Could someone else have left Vault 101? Keelah hadn’t seen hide nor hair of a 101-er in three years. She’d simply assumed her former neighbors had given up on trying to leave the vault; had accepted their fate as lifelong vaulters.

But maybe it was someone from one of the other many vaults in the wasteland. A survivor who’d clawed his or her way out of the steel enclosure and was trying to make a life in this new world.

“God, I hope it’s not one of the Garys,” she murmured to herself as she recalled the murderous Gary clones she’d encountered in Vault 108. There’d been dozens of them; too many for her to manage on her own; and she’d fled the creepy vault hoping that none of the deadly replicas would follow. “Please don’t let it be a Gary.”

"Who's Gary?" Trinnie asked around a mouthful of food.

"I'll tell you later."

Keelah made her way to the supply room, her hand moving instinctively to her sidearm. It was unlikely that a homicidal clone would stack boxes, but it didn’t hurt to be prepared.

Keelah entered the cramped space. Squinted her eyes to better discern the figure kneeling on Belle’s storeroom floor. Whoever he was, he looked like Gary. Broad shoulders and sandy hair. A faded blue jumpsuit.

Keelah shifted into a defensive stance and spoke the only word the Gary clones knew.

“Gary?” she asked tentatively.

The vaulter lifted his head, and Keelah released a whoosh of air.

“Butch?”

The vaulter smiled; stood to his feet and revealed the neatly stitched 101 on the front of his jumpsuit.

“Keelah!” he exclaimed. And then he was hugging her. “Who’s Gary?” Butch asked, pulling back to study her face.

And Keelah could only laugh. ‘Cause this evening hadn’t turned out at all like she expected. And that was actually fine by her.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title inspired by Frank Ocean Song.
Keelah ushered Butch to a corner table so that they could have some privacy as they caught up. Belle had been right about the vaulter’s appearance. Butch looked positively ragged. His usually neat hair was all over the place; his vault jump suit was badly wrinkled and tattered in places; and there was a faint odor about him, of musk and the outside. It was the tell-tale scent of a person who’d navigated a sewer.

Butch sank into a wooden chair heavily and immediately began stretching the muscles in his shoulders and back. He looked beyond exhausted, but his eyes were clear and his smile wide when he turned to Keelah.

“You’re going to get me into trouble, having me take my break early,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it. Belle’s good people.”

Butch stole a glance at the stocky woman filling orders at the bar. “Yeah, she is. She gave me a job without a second thought. Even spotted me some food last night.”

Keelah smiled at him and didn’t bother to hide her staring. She’d never expected to run into a 101-er in the Capital Wastes. And in far-flung Rivet City of all places!

“How long have you been out?” she asked him.

“Two days. It took me that long to get to this ship. Although finding Rivet City was a complete accident.” Keelah raised an eyebrow, encouraging him to continue. Butch fiddled with a salt shaker. “I left the vault with nothing but a bottle of water and a pocket knife. Amata tried to get me to take a satchel of supplies, but I didn’t want to be weighed down. I didn’t want what to expect out there, and I didn’t want to be overencumbered.” Keelah’s eyes fluttered at the mention of Amata’s name but she didn’t interrupt the Tunnel Snake. “I got about a mile away from the vault when I ran into this thing that looked like a monster out of a horror story. Razor claws and sharp teeth. But it walked like a man. It was the craziest thing ever.” Butch’s eyes went wide as he described what had to have been a Deathclaw. “It came right at me. I didn’t think I had any chance of outrunning it so I just jumped into this lake that was nearby. I swam until it felt my arms were going to fall off. And when I stopped, I was here.”

A sheepish look crossed his face. “I lost your helmet. Some horrid looking thing grabbed me in the water. Its claws went right through the metal. The helmet came off.”
“Probably a Mirelurk. They’re mutated crabs. And deadly.”

Butch leaned forward in his chair; his eyes intense and trained on Keelah. “They warned us in school about all the monsters that were outside, but this is worse than I’d ever imagined. It’s like the entire wasteland is conspiring to kill a person.”

“That’s ‘cause it is.” Keelah cleared her throat; felt a familiar ache bloom in her chest. “How many others have left the vault?”

“It’s just me. I was the first…besides you, of course.”

“Why no one else? And why’d it take three years? I thought folks were clamoring to leave?”

“We were. But we wanted to have a plan in place before walking out into the unknown. You know, prepare for the monsters. The radiation. Amata tried really hard to put together a training for those of us who wanted to leave. Combat training and basic survival skills. But eventually we realized that it was damn near impossible to prepare for something we hadn’t the foggiest idea about.” Butch shrugged. “Interest waned after a while. No one wanted to volunteer for what seemed to be a suicide mission.”

Keelah nodded. She understood the vaulters’ trepidation. She’d felt the same way, her first time outside of the vault.

“I guess you finally volunteered?”

“Yeah. I was tired of those metal walls. And the vault’s so quiet now. Too many empty rooms. Too many damn ghosts.” He sighed heavily and fixed his eyes on his dirt-darkened fingernails. “You must think I’m a wimp. For years I did all that talking about going out into the wastes and starting a gang, and look at me. Took me three years to get up enough nerve to even open the vault door.”

The shame colored his cheeks, and the vaulter clenched his hands into fists and refused to meet Keelah’s eyes.

“I don’t know Butch…You survived a Deathclaw and a Mirelurk. And somehow managed to swim thirty miles through irradiated water. I’d say that makes you pretty bad ass.”

Butch finally looked at her. “You’re not upset about the helmet?”

Keelah shrugged. “Better the helmet then your head.”

Butch’s charismatic grin finally made an appearance. “Awesome.”

“So how’s everybody else in the vault?” Keelah asked.

“Eh…about as well as can be expected. A lot of the tension dissipated when you left…” He coughed embarrassedly. “Sorry…but, uh…we got the vault cleaned up and fully operational again. Everyone has to work two and three jobs to keep everything running since we don’t have enough people. Brotch is the new chaplain. Can you believe that? But there aren’t any more kids or teenagers for school, so…” He drummed his fingers on the table. “And we still don’t have a doctor. Amata has everyone on a strict vitamin regiment. So that we can keep our immune systems strong. She doesn’t want to lose anyone else.” He smiled warmly. “She’s a damned good overseer. The complete opposite of her father. Everybody loves her.”

Keelah decided not to comment. Steeled her features and tried to regulate her breathing. But Butch knew.
“She misses you,” he commented softly. “She thought you would come back. She waited by the vault door. Every six months. Without fail.” He averted his eyes. “You know…you could probably go back now. A lot has changed the past three years. Everybody—”

Keelah cut him off. “So how’s Beatrice? She recover from her leg injury?”

Butch looked disappointed by her deflection, but he allowed it. “Yeah. She’s doing real good. Stanley fashioned her a wheelchair out of one of those rolling chairs. She gets around great. And that medicine you left for Stanley really helped. He still gets headaches from time to time, but he comes out of his room more often now. And he’s gotten Andy back under control.”

“That’s good.” Keelah gave him a tired smile. It was good to see the former Tunnel Snake and to hear that 101ers were doing better, but the sustained talk of the vault and Amata were beginning to get to her. Long buried emotions and resentments were beginning to surface. Keelah felt like she would faint at any second. Or scream.

She was saved by an uninvited guest.

“Thanks for the grub, outlander, but I have to call it a night. Belle says to settle up with her at the bar.”

It was Trinnie. The impudent woman barged into Keelah’s and Butch’s conversation with little concern about how rude she was being.

Keelah turned her attention to the young woman. “Okay...well, I suppose I’ll see you the next time I’m in Rivet City.”

"Maybe. Maybe not. We may be friends, but I’m not your BFF. Control yourself.”

Trinnie crossed her arms moodily, revealing tattooed portions of pale skin and a sickly thin musculature that highlighted how little she ate. Butch stared at the curious women with rapt attention.

Keelah noticed Butch’s engrossment. Unfortunately, so did Trinnie. “What are you looking at greaseball?” she snarled.

“Uh…nothing…sorry,” Butch stammered. His cheeks flamed again and Keelah couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

“Trinnie, this is my…friend, Butch.” Keelah’s brow furrowed. Damn, it felt weird calling Butch that. “Butch, this is Trinnie.”

Butch extended a hand. “Nice to meet ya.”

Trinnie glared at the outstretched hand. “You touch me Elvis, and you’re losing an eye.”

Keelah gave Butch a reassuring smile. “It just takes her a while to warm up to you.”

Butch withdrew his hand; folded his arms back on the table. But he couldn’t disguise the sudden light that had flared in his eyes.

*Good Lord.* Keelah thought. And she set a mental stopwatch to document the time it would take for Trinnie to break Butch’s heart and possibly some part of his face.

“I’d better go claim a bunk in the common room before all the creepos get them. Later, outlander.”

And Trinnie stalked away without a backward glance.
Keelah waved a hand in Butch’s face to get his attention. “She doesn’t like it when people stare,” she chided.

Butch blushed again. The embarrassed look made him look much younger, like the brash boy he used to be when he terrorized the halls of Vault 101.

“Sorry,” he said hastily. “I’ve just never seen anyone like her before.”

Keelah nodded. “So what’s next for you? You plan to stay in Rivet City?”

“I’m not sure. This is the only place I’ve run across so far. It seems as good a place as any to settle down in. At least I have a bed here. And a job. Sort of.”

“How much you making?”

“Belle’s paying me in food. She tried to give me bottle caps at first.” A confused look crossed his face. “Do people in the wasteland collect bottles or something? Anyway, I just told her to pay me in steaks and water. That should tide me over until the guards distribute the weekly ration cards.”

Keelah shook her head. “No. It doesn’t work like that here Butch. There are no ration cards. No distributions of goods. If you want food, drink, or any other supplies or services, you have to pay for it. Bottle caps are the form of currency in the wastes.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit!” Butch looked incensed.

“What?”

“We recycle Nuka Cola bottles in the vault. You know how many crates of bottle caps we have in storage? I could have been rich!”

Keelah laughed. “I don’t know about rich. The vault probably has a few thousand caps tops. That doesn’t get you as far as you think out here.”

“It’s still way more bottle caps then I have now.”

A thoughtful look crossed Keelah’s face. She dug into her pocket. Removed a handful of caps and set them on the table. “Here. That should get you through a couple more days. You’ll be able to buy some wastelander clothes and a sturdier pair of shoes.”

Butch stared at the neat pile of rusted caps. “You’re just going to give them to me? Like that?”

Keelah shrugged. “You need a head start to make it out here. Besides, you’re a 101-er. Like me. We’re the only two who made it out.”

Keelah smiled but her tone was solemn. Butch responded with a pained smile of his own.

“Yeah.” He swept the bottle caps into his hands; tucked them away in his pocket. “I’ll pay you back. Once I figure out how this bottle cap system works and I find a job that pays a bit more.”

“I can give you a job.”

“You have boxes that need to be stacked too?”
“No. But I do a lot of traveling. Some trading. Combat operations. I could always use a companion who’s quick on his feet and good with a gun.”

“I’m quick with a blade. Will that work?”

“I can teach you how to use a gun.” She did a quick once-over of his body. Took note of his wide shoulders and tall frame. “Maybe an assault rifle. Or shotgun. You’ll need something with a bit more power if you want to keep Deathclaws and Mirelurks away. There are also mutant bears to worry about. Fire ants. Rats the size of dogs. And raiders who shoot on sight.”

She waited to see if Butch would quaver at her words. If his expressive face would betray his fear and concern. But the former Tunnel Snake simply stared back at her. Unblinking.

“When do I start?” he asked.

Keelah smiled. Pleased at Butch’s resolve. “Give me a couple of days. I have to head home to take care of some business first. When I get back, I’ll get you a gun and some armor. We can spend a few days on target training and basic combat. And then it’s out into the wastes to get you familiarized with DC.”

Butch nodded. His face was drawn and hands clenched into tight fists on the table. Perhaps he was scared. Perhaps he was terrified about the prospect of facing snarling beasts and mad men; but as he’d told Keelah three years ago in the vault med clinic: the teenagers of Vault 101 had matured against their will. They’d earned their adulthood through fire, through gunfire. Had seen limbs give way to lead; skin succumb to flame. There were new monstrosities he’d have to face, to be sure. But Butch had seen so many already.

He smoothed his hands out on the table. Stared down at muddy hands, cracked fingernails. “I guess I’m not a barber anymore,” he said softly.

Keelah couldn’t tell if he was speaking to her or to himself.

“How do I ever pay you back?” he asked her. His eyes as still and brown as his hands. “For the bottle caps. For my mom. For everything?”

“That’s not what this was about.” Keelah’s eyes flashed. A swift anger. “You aren’t indebted to me. And I don’t want you to feel that way.”

She popped her knuckles. Suddenly irritated. But she didn’t know why.

“I don’t feel indebted,” Butch was quick to counter. “But I do feel...something.”

Keelah relaxed as she had a revelation. “Butch, you’ve had stooges and cronies for so long, that you’ve forgotten what friendship feels like. That’s what this is. And it’s free.”

Butch’s eyes widened. His mouth opened but no sound came out. It was clear that he couldn’t determine what was appropriate to say. So he said the next best thing: “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Keelah settled back in her chair. All of a sudden she felt bone-achingly tired. Even sleepy. But she’d have to wait a few more hours before she could call it a night. Taking on Butch as a companion had altered her plans. She would need to head to Megaton tonight to check on Dogmeat and get some quality gear for Butch from her stash of weapons and armor.
She would have invited Butch to accompany her to Megaton and save her a round trip, but she didn’t want to force the Tunnel Snake to go back into the wasteland so quickly. Butch looked bedraggled. He could benefit from a few nights rest and some good eating. Sleep and hot food were hard to come by in the Capital Wastes. He would know that soon enough. Better to enjoy it while he had it.

Keelah cleared her throat. “There is one thing you can do for me Butch.”

Butch stirred himself. He was visibly tired. Had fallen into a semi doze that quickly. “What’s that?”

“There’s a kid on this ship. His name is James Hargrave. He’s a tough one. Could grow up to be real mean if he isn’t careful. His mom pays more attention to a bottle of scotch than him. And his dad left him about six years ago.”

Butch released a breath of air and his eyes became evaluative slits. He didn’t appear to be angry. Just pensive. But Keelah knew there were roiling emotions below the surface. Butch had always been sensitive when it came to certain topics. Explosive even.

Keelah chose her words carefully. “I’m afraid for him. I’m afraid his anger is going to consume him. Or consume someone else. He’s a good kid, deep down. But he’s hurting. And when people don’t know what to do with their pain, they hurt themselves. Or others.”

Keelah and Butch’s eyes met. Understanding passed between them. He’d spent years hurting others, trying to purge his personal demons. Keelah had spent years hurting herself. Both methods had been exercises in futility. Neither one of them had successfully subdued their pain.

“What is it you want me to do?” he asked her. His face wracked with so much emotion that the white of his eyes disappeared.

“Maybe you could talk to him. I think you and he would understand each other.”

“And why do you think that? Because I have a boozer mom? And a dad who ate a fistful of chems just to get away from me?” Butch’s breath had gone choppy and his chest heaved. He was livid.

“You think that makes me a role model?”

Keelah stared back at him, silently. Her posture straight and her eyes clear. She let Butch have his moment.

“There’s nothing I can teach this kid. Nothing! Except how to swear in three different languages and how to carve someone up real proper-like with a switch blade.” His eyes gleamed in a way that Keelah hadn’t seen in years. His lip curled, a feral sneer. “You remember that right? How you got that scar on your lip? How I tried to give you a second smile at your tenth birthday party?” He laughed then, a disturbing baritone, but the laughter seemed forced and there was no real venom behind his words. Only fear. And an unmistakable wet in his eyes that kept Keelah’s body still and her features neutral. She knew Butch was trying to make her angry. Distract her so that she wouldn’t make such a bold request.

“I owe you for what you did for my mom, but don’t go trying to pawn some troubled kid off on me, alright? I’m not trying to be anybody’s father figure or big brother. Find another sucker to do your charity work.”

His breathing returned to normal as soon as his rant ended. But his eyes were still too brown and damp and he couldn’t keep his hands still.

Keelah exhaled. “I’m not asking you to do anything extraordinary. Hell…James probably won’t even let you get within a foot of him without socking you. I just thought…” Keelah sighed. “I don’t
Kelah stared at the former Tunnel Snake. Her eyes soft and inquisitive.

Because both of them knew that Butch did understand. It was why he was so irritated with Keelah all of a sudden; why he had become so hostile and had reverted back to his old temperament. He was petrified at the prospect of encountering a younger version of himself. He would rather face down another Deathclaw or Mirelurk than confront something that hit this close to home.

Butch avoided Keelah’s gaze. “Look… I know everyone in the vault thought I was a bully and a selfish fuck. And maybe I was. I didn’t care about anyone. Except my mom. I spent twenty-two years looking out for her. Making sure she remembered to eat and shower. Making sure she didn’t pass out in the bathtub and drown herself. It was… hard. Watching her slowly kill herself. It’s why I wanted to get out of the vault. I couldn’t stomach anymore. I was the one who found my dad’s body… I couldn’t…” His voice quavered. “I couldn’t bear to find my mom like that.” He turned hardened eyes on Keelah. “And I can’t go collecting other tortured people just ‘cause you ask me to. I couldn’t save my parents. I’m sure as hell not going to try to save someone else. So the answer is no.”

Keelah nodded slowly. Let Butch’s words wash over like a cold stream. She shivered from fatigue and her want of drink. It took a fair amount of effort for her to climb to her feet. “I understand. And I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. That wasn’t my intent.” She pushed her chair in. “I’ll see you in a couple of days. Bring you a change of clothes and another helmet.” She managed a small smile.

Butch looked shocked. “You’re not angry with me?”

“No. I get it.” Her eyes flitted away momentarily before coming back to rest on Butch. “I think you and I have more in common than we think.” She took a deep breath. “And Butch…?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t mention my scar again.” Her tone wasn’t hostile but her eyes delivered a tough message. “If we’re going to be traveling together, we need to leave our past acrimony in the vault. Okay?”

Butch nodded. “Agreed.”

The vaulter stood to his feet. He’d grown a few inches in the three years since Keelah had last seen him and he towered over her. But Keelah didn’t feel threatened by him like she had in the past.

Now that they’d cleared the air, she was able to smile again. “You’d better get back to your boxes. Belle’s nice, but she’s not that nice.”

“Will do.”

But he didn’t move. Neither did she. They were the only two 101-ers in the wastes and somehow that made them feel inextricably linked. They were almost loathed to separate. But it had to be done.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” Keelah repeated.

“See you.”

Keelah turned towards the exit.

“Keelah?”
She turned back around. “Yeah?”

“I nearly forgot. With all this other…” He paused. “Amata had a message for you. On the off chance that I ran into you in the wastes.”

Keelah lost all feeling in her body. “What did she say?” she asked hoarsely.

Butch grinned. With his easy smile, disheveled clothes and still damp eyes, he looked like one of those wasteland itinerant preachers who went around spreading the “good news” to wastelanders who’d long stopped believing in such things.

“It’s not what she said. It’s what she told me to do.”

Butch walked over to Keelah. Enveloped her in a heartfelt hug. He held on for what seemed like forever; his heartbeat a perfect mirror to Keelah’s; his breathing soft and soothing.

Keelah gripped the vaulter’s elbows, held on tight, and imagined Amata. Her former best friend. Her lover. If she tried hard enough, she could smell the heady lavender scent; feel the velvety skin beneath her fingers; hear Amata’s playful laugh.

But delusions never last.

Keelah accepted the embrace a few more seconds then stepped back. “I gotta get going,” she husked. “I have a long walk ahead of me.”

Keelah dropped some caps off with Belle at the counter then left the bar. Butch stood in the doorway of the Muddy Rudder and watched his friend’s sluggish gait; the way she had to grip the rail to make it up the staircase.

She moves like my mother, he thought worriedly. She moves like every step is painful.

When Keelah disappeared from his view, he made his way back to Belle’s storeroom; back to the dozens of boxes that still required his attention.

He put his hands to work organizing and sorting, lifting and stacking. But his mind was occupied. Fixed on Keelah; his mother; Amata. And a new wrinkle in his life: the still unknown James Hargrave.

Damn it, he thought. Just ’cause Keelah has to be a Pollyanna doesn’t mean I have to be. I’m a Tunnel Snake after all. The baddest of bad assess. He slammed a box down too hard; left a dent that he would have to explain to Belle. The kid probably has wasteland cooties and everything.

Butch let loose a stream of epithets. I wanted to leave the vault and start a gang. Instead, it looks like I’m going to be starting a daycare center. What the hell, DeLoria?

But he couldn’t even find the requisite anger to fuel his manic thoughts.

Butch pushed the final box into place and stepped back to view his handiwork.

His mind was racing, and the thoughts made him uncomfortable.

He thought about his final conversation with his mother. His last night in Vault 101 when he’d told her he was leaving. She’d accused him of abandoning her:

You’re just like your father Frankie. Too chicken shit to stay around and be a man.
Butch hadn’t responded. His mother had said crueler things to him over the years. He’d acclimatized himself to her viciousness. Somewhat.

*Nothing to say, huh? Probably too dumb to form a sentence. It’s why they made you a hair stylist. No brains required to cut split ends.* She cackled. *You couldn’t even get a job as a garbage burner. Instead you walk around all day with a printed apron on, carrying baby scissors. Am I supposed to be proud?*

She tilted back her bottled of scotch; let the clear liquid splash into her mouth then smacked her lips happily.

*You’re a sissy Frankie. I ever tell you that?*

*Every day. All the time.*

She’d called him names so often when he was a kid that he’d nicknamed himself *Butch*. An aggressive-sounding moniker that would prove to others (and himself) that he wasn’t weak; he wasn’t a chump. He was tough.

*You’re good for nothing Frankie. Weak! Just like your father. He couldn’t handle being a grown up so he downed an entire bottle of Jet. Too pathetic to face the real world.*

She drained the rest of the scotch; too self-involved to recognize the irony.

*Go ahead and leave then, you coward. I don’t need you. You go out there and get yourself killed just like your father. But don’t come running back to me when you realize how bad it is out there. Don’t come back ever again, you hear?*

Butch loved his mother. He remembered what she was like before the alcohol claimed her; before the drink ruined her mind and made her forget she had a son.

It hurt him to leave her in the vault; to leave her alone with the memories of his dead father. But he had to put himself first, for once. So he walked away.

He stood in Belle’s storeroom, remembering his mother's words; his feet tapping an anxious rhythm against the metal flooring. He recalled how it'd felt all those years; being a child forced to care for an alcoholic parent.

*I’ll just talk to the kid one time. One time! And if it doesn’t work out, it’s not like it’s my fault. The kid’s probably a lost cause anyway. That’s what they always said about me. Everybody.*

But not everybody. Because Amata had given him a chance even after all the shit he’d put her through when they were young. And Officer Gomez had seen something in him, never cracking down even when Butch deserved it. And now Keelah was offering him something. Work. And friendship.

*Let’s leave the acrimony in the vault,* she’d said.

So maybe James Hargrave wasn’t a lost cause.

And maybe, just maybe, Francis DeLoria wasn’t a lost cause either.

*Two times,* Butch thought. *I’ll talk to the kid two times. And then we’ll see.*

He pushed back thoughts of his mother (the snarling mouth but pain-filled eyes) and headed for
By the time Keelah made it to Megaton, it was well past three in the morning. The wastelander had to use the greenish hue of her Pip-Boy to light the path to her metal home. The artificial light cast a ghostly hue about the twisted ramps of the city, and the only sound Keelah could hear was the heavy plodding of her own feet.

She removed a piece of paper that was flapping on her front door—a pamphlet from the Apostles of Eternal Light, promising holy water and salvation—and moved into her darkened home.

She took a moment to store her weapons then tossed the rest of her gear in a haphazard pile near the stairs before making her way to the second floor.

Her handybot, Wadsworth, met her in the corridor.

“Good evening ma’am. So glad to see you’ve returned. Will you be requiring a bottle of purified water or a haircut at this time?”

“No thanks Wadsworth. Maybe some other time.”

She moved past him towards her bedroom but stopped at the small room to her right—the storage space that had recently been converted into a guest room.

Keelah stood in the doorway and stared down at her visitor. Charon’s lanky form barely fit on the small sofa that took up half the room. His legs and feet hung over the side and the ghoul looked dangerously close to falling on the floor.

But he seemed to be sleeping soundly so Keelah turned to tiptoe away. She needn’t have bothered.

“Back so soon?” Charon’s voice was thick. Sleep-roughened.

Keelah turned. Watched as the ghoul shifted into a sitting position. Keelah smirked when she noticed the object in Charon’s hands. The merc slept with a loaded pistol. His faithful combat shotgun lay on an end table; within arm’s reach.


Charon snorted, knowing better. He stretched his back and arms, making a pained face that was easy to discern even on someone with few remaining facial features.

“You know, you’re welcome to have the bed whenever I’m not in town,” Keelah told him. “I’ve told you that.”

“I tried. Dogmeat is territorial.”

Keelah chuckled. “No, he’s not.”

“You’re right. He’s not. But I’m not really interested in cuddling with a dog.”

Keelah laughed even harder. Dogmeat was especially affectionate when it came to bedtime. The pooch simply loved to curl up near a person’s socked feet.

“Well, I’ll talk to Sheriff Simms tomorrow. See if he can’t rustle up another mattress that we can put in here. We can fix up your room real proper like.”
Charon visibly startled at the use of the word your. “I’m perfectly content with my cot at Underworld. I don’t need special accommodations.”

The two of them did this from time to time. Pretended not to care so deeply for the other. Hid their affection beneath gruff and silence.

“I know that Charon. Just consider this place a backup. A place you can rest your head and store your gear.”

Charon grunted. His version of a soliloquy.

“Brian Wilkes and James Hargrave told me to tell you hello.” Charon nodded. Clicked open his pistol. Checked the chambers. Closed it. “I’m taking a couple of days off then heading back to Rivet City. You can join me if you want. I think I’m going to do some more runs for the Brotherhood. It’s easy work. Quick caps.”

Charon put his pistol away. Stared at Keelah with his expressionless eyes. “You have more caps than you can ever spend. Why do you keep taking on jobs?”

“You have just as many caps. Why do you keep accompanying me on the jobs?”

“You are my employer. I do as you command.”

“No, Charon. I told you four years ago. You’re your own man. Not some employee. Definitely not an indentured servant. You can leave at any time.”

“The contract doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know. You refuse to tell me anything about it.” Keelah huffed in exasperation and scratched her fingernails down the peeling wallpaper. She prepared to ask a series of questions she’d asked a dozen times before. “You ever going to explain to me the nature of this contract? How you ended up in Ahzrukhal’s employ? Why you feel so committed to the holder of your contract?”

Charon’s face was permanently impassive but Keelah swore she saw a glimmer of something in the ghoul’s eyes. “You ever going to tell me what you’re looking for in the wastes? Why you keep moving from one end of this desert to the other?” His eyes narrowed. Zoomed in on Keelah’s arms; on the marks she’d self-inflicted not even seven hours ago. “You ever going to tell me why you collect so many scars outside of combat?”

Keelah glared. Her fingernails nearly breaking against the rotted wall. Her posture went rigid as if she were preparing for attack.

Charon was unfazed by her agitation. He sat calmly. Stared back in that unnerving way of his. He was the perfect mercenary. Unflinching. Unintimidated. Solid as stone.

But he cared for Keelah. So he bent just a little. “We both have secrets Keelah. Keep yours and allow me mine.”

Keelah was still upset. But she nodded; bit her tongue.

The two of them did this from time to time. Pushed each other away; avoided; spurned.

Keelah moved away from the door. Headed for her own room. “Goodnight Charon,” she called. She didn’t expect a reply.
“G’night,” she heard behind her. A gravelly voice. Rough and familiar.

She closed her bedroom door and sank onto her thin mattress. Dogmeat’s whistling snores filled her room; distracting. Keelah turned on her Pip-Boy. Found Agatha’s station.

The old woman was up late, making heartrending music. Keelah reached into her nightstand; let her hand curl around glass.

She drank to the sound of the weeping Stradivarius. And when the music stopped, she drank more.

One door down, Charon sat where she left him.

And for only the second time in his long life, the mercenary despaired.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title inspired by Nirvana song.
Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer gets asked out on a date.

Chapter Notes

Amata sighting in next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11– Wild Young Hearts

Keelah made a slow circle around the Arlington Library main floor. The Brotherhood scribes who oversaw the building had done a great job collecting prewar books during the four years the archive had been open, and the library now boasted shelves upon shelves of novels, comics, and work manuals. The scribes had even gone so far as to organize the books by genre and alphabet; making the well-kept space seem like a bona fide prewar library.

Keelah marveled at the library’s transformation. There was still a faint tinge of dust to everything and visible bullet holes from the numerous skirmishes that had occurred inside the large building, but the Brotherhood had obviously been hard at work cleaning, sorting, and camouflaging signs of battle. The place looked impressive.

Keelah traced a finger down the spine of each book she passed. She’d personally contributed hundreds of novels to the archive over the years, but the sheer volume of books the library now possessed indicated that Scribe Yearling had multiple people out in the wastes scavenging books for her pet project.

The petite brunette in question was currently occupied with processing Keelah’s most recent donation. Keelah had stumbled upon an entire box of books in one of the south metro tunnels, and after removing a few novels for her personal library, she’d bought the remaining books to Arlington Library. It had taken her half a day to make the long trip and she’d had to rent a Brahmin to carry the box of books. But it was well worth the travel and expense to see the look on Yearling’s face when she’d handed over the surplus of novels.

Scribe Yearling was perhaps the last remaining librarian in the entire wasteland, and the Brotherhood scribe took her job seriously. Preserving knowledge was of upmost important to the Brotherhood of Steel. Yearling was honored that the bureaucratic group had assigned her such an esteemed post.

Keelah made her way to the library’s poetry section. She’d already selected two books from the crammed shelves. Two tech journals on computer programming. She browsed the poetry section for something a bit more imaginative that would balance out the technical reading.
She removed a heavy green book from one of the shelves. Began skimming it for content.

“Don’t get those books out of order Keelah,” she heard from behind her. “It takes me hours to sort them properly. I don’t want to have to redo anything.”

“Yearling, I’ve been coming here for years. Have I ever messed up your classification system?”

Scribe Yearling lifted her head from the stack of books she was processing. “Yes. Several times in fact. Or am I supposed to believe that someone else filed the Grognak Barbarian series in with the Programmer Digests?”

Keelah rolled her eyes. Caught. “Fine. I’ll be more careful this time.”

“See that you are.”

Scribe Yearling went back to her work, but Keelah saw the small smile on the woman’s face. Yearling liked to give Keelah a hard time when it came to her books, but the librarian didn’t mean any harm. On the contrary, her gentle scolding was simply her way of flirting with Keelah. The two of them had known each other for four years now and had discarded small talk for playful banter ages ago.

Keelah flipped through a few more pages of the poetry book. Tried to determine if the book would be worth the extra weight to her supply pack. The title of a poem caught her eye:

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
Keelah’s breath caught in her throat and the wastelander nearly dropped the heavy book on the floor. The poem was arguably the most beautiful thing she’d ever read. And damned significant if she were being honest with herself. She read the poem a second time, her fingers trembling against the washed-out pages.

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

Tears sprang to her eyes at the poignant words and Keelah found herself surprised by the sudden emotion. She pressed the corner of the page down, creating a bookmark. Then closed the book with a firm slap and tried to temper her reaction. She couldn’t be caught crying in a room full of soldiers; couldn’t be so discernably vulnerable in front of so many of her peers.

She cast a quick glance around the great hall to see if any of the other soldiers or scribes had witnessed her momentary weakness. But the scribes were busy filing their respective books and the soldiers were hyper focused on patrolling the halls.

Keelah sighed in relief.

But then her eyes landed on Scribe Yearling. The young brunette was staring at her, a knowing look on her face.

Keelah blushed and briefly considering moving towards the exit, but Yearling caught her off guard with a soft request:

“Come here, Keelah. I need to show you something.”

Keelah carried her three books over to Yearling’s counter. Moved much more slowly than was required considering they were only separated by a few feet.

She came to a stop in front of the librarian. “What is it?” Keelah asked.

Scribe Yearling slid two books towards Keelah. “The rest of the books you bought me are of good quality, but these two are badly burnt. I don’t have need of them.”

Keelah picked up the rejected books; turned them over and inspected them. She hadn’t noticed how charred they were; how the pages had blackened into nothingness. “I’ll take these back with me then. I know someone in Megaton who uses ruined books for kindling.”

She deposited the burnt books into the satchel on her back. Then slid her three library books towards Yearling.

“I’d like to check these out.”
Scribe Yearling took the books. In a practiced motion, she began recording the books’ titles onto a rectangular card on her desk.

“You do realize that you’re the only person with these privileges? Everyone else who wants to read one of our books has to do so within the confines of the library. No checking out under any circumstances since we can’t be sure we’d get the books back.”

Keelah shifted from one foot to the other. Watched as the woman wrote her name in perfect script on the library card. “So… I get this special privilege because I’ve donated the most books?”

“No. Although I do appreciate your effort over the years. We could probably name an entire wing of the library after you, you’ve donated so many. But that’s not the reason.” She put her pencil down. Studied Keelah with intense green eyes. “You should know why Keelah. You’re not obtuse.”

Keelah rubbed the back of her neck anxiously. She wasn’t obtuse. She’d been coming to this library for a long time now. Depositing books and making conversation. In that time, she’d developed a bit of a friendship with Scribe Yearling. Sometimes it seemed like what they had was more than friendship.

The studious librarian was painfully shy and so much of a workaholic that her peers found her uninviting. But Keelah saw through Yearling’s rigidity and introversion; she recognized that the librarian was brilliant, funny, and adorably bossy. The rapport the two of them had developed had been immediate. Effortless. They talked books and Brotherhood politics; they debated the merits of comic books; and Keelah endeared herself all the more by bringing the cloistered woman news from the outside and sugary treats.

Somewhere along the way they’d begun flirting with each other. It was easy to do when the main topic of discussion was literature. There was a certain romance to poetry and prose. Talk Yeats and Neruda long enough and something tender will develop.

They’d been courting each other for years (somewhat unconsciously), and each exchange of books had become an overture.

Scribe Yearling moved to the final book to be checked out: the green book of poetry that had flustered Keelah. The librarian turned to the poem Keelah had marked and her eyes traveled down the page.

“Wild Geese is one of my favorite poems,” she said softly, her eyes moving to Keelah. The librarian closed the book and pushed all three texts towards Keelah. “I find the poem to be hopeful and heartrending all at the same time.”

“Yes.”

“It also reminds me of how the world used to be. Wild geese and rolling mountains. Soft rain and clean blue air.”

Keelah sighed tremulously. Even recited, the words were beautiful. “Yes.”

The wastelander added the three books to her pack. Patted them in place so that the corners wouldn’t poke her.

“How long do I have before I need to return them?” Keelah asked. “I’m guessing my library privileges won’t allow me to keep them a year?”

Yearling smiled. “No. But you can take your time with the books. I trust you to keep them safe.”
And her eyes moved across Keelah’s face openly. An invitation. But of course Keelah had always been terrible at initiating romance.

Scribe Yearling decided to take the first step. “Now that we have the library up and running, I’ve been allotted some personal time. I’m thinking about going to Tenpenny Tower for a mini vacation. See what all the fuss is about. I heard that the hotel has queen sized beds and gourmet meals. And that each suite comes with a massive clawfoot tub.”

“It does. All of the above. I actually have a room there. But I hardly ever stay over.” Keelah’s nose wrinkled. “They’re not the friendliest bunch.”

“I care little about their social niceties. All I want is a hot bath and food that doesn’t come out of a can.”

Keelah smiled at the suddenly animated woman. “Make sure you go the Café Beau Monde then. The chef has a brahmin béarnaise that is to die for.” Keelah licked her lips, thinking about the decadent meal. “I gain weight every time I visit Tenpenny Tower. The food is that good.”

“Maybe you should go with me.”

Keelah nearly choked in surprise. “Huh?”

“I wouldn’t mind a bit of company. And you’re obviously familiar with the area. You could show me the sights. Point out landmarks and such. Scribes don’t get to see as much of the world as paladins and knights do. We spend most of our days indoors. Behind terminals. It would be nice to get out and travel a bit. Especially if I’m with a friend.”

The librarian’s voice had grown increasingly soft and Keelah felt a pleasant tingle in her spine. Scribe Yearling was clearly asking for more than a sightseeing excursion with a friend. Her eyes and soft tone said as much.

The librarian waited patiently for Keelah’s response.

Keelah toyed with her satchel. Pretended to be adjusting her items into a more comfortable position. She had to think about Yearling’s offer. It had been some time since she’d been involved with someone romantically. She was woefully out of practice. And not altogether sure she was ready to pursue any form of intimacy.

For a moment, her thoughts flickered to Amata. A shy first kiss in a metal hideout. Mutual tears and breathy confessions.

“Keelah?”

Keelah stopped fiddling with her bag and faced Yearling. “Hmm?”

“Would you like to go?”

Keelah swallowed. Thought about it for another second. “I would actually. When do you plan to leave?”

“This Friday. I have an entire week off. Will that work for you?”

“Absolutely. I’ll meet you here on Friday and we can set off.”

Scribe Yearling beamed. “It’s a date.”
Keelah smiled. It was a date. “I have to head out now. I have to get a Brahmin back to his owner. Thanks for the books.”

She tossed Scribe Yearling another smile before exiting the building. The borrowed Brahmin was right where she’d left it. Tied with a bit of a rope to a faded STOP sign. Keelah untied the Brahmin and clicked her tongue to get it to follow. She had a full five days until her rendezvous with Scribe Yearling. Plenty of time for her to get the Brahmin back to Megaton and put together a travel bag for her trip.

She headed westward, pushing her heavy goggles back on her face to block out the sun. She wasn’t too far away from Rivet City and briefly considered making a detour to check in on Butch.

It had been two months since she’d run into the former Tunnel Snake at the Muddy Ruddy bar, and Butch had been able to acclimate surprisingly fast to the wasteland. He’d traveled a few weeks with Keelah, getting skilled with an assault rifle and learning the basics of trading. Not long ago, he’d been offered a job as a guard with one of the Project Purity caravans and had happily accepted.

Keelah hadn’t seen him a few weeks, but she knew vaulter was happy with his new lot in life. His new job allowed him to spend more time in Rivet City and near the two people whose friendship he was delicately cultivating: Trinnie and James Hargrave.

Keelah made a mental note to stop by Rivet City after her trip with Scribe Yearling. She needed to check in on Brian Wilkes anyway. Give him the new comic books she’d found.

The wastelander kept a watchful eye out as she headed past the sprawling Alexandria Arms motel. There was always a lot of raider activity in this area, and she’d been ambushed a couple of times by Enclave soldiers. She put a hand near the SMG on her hip, just in case, and made sure that her footfalls were not so heavy as to draw any attention.

She didn’t have any backup for this trip and needed to be doubly careful. Charon was off completing some ridiculous mission for Moira, who was working on a second edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. Keelah had intended to bring Dogmeat along, but the hound’s barking had unnerved the rented Brahmin, so she’d left her faithful pup at home.

Keelah didn’t see any movement behind the motel’s boarded up windows. Didn’t hear the rumbling of a Vertibird.

She made it past the motel with no problems and allowed her mind a second to wander.

Scribe Yearling had asked her out. She couldn’t believe it. She didn’t even know Brotherhood personnel engaged in such social activities. They were always so focused on their mission; on the Enclave; on the Super Mutant problem. She’d never seen a Brotherhood member fraternize or even take a day off. Their idea of fun was running into a Super Mutant fray with guns blazing.

But Scribe Yearling was different from most BOS members. She was playful where they were mostly dour. And she didn’t have a confrontational bone in her body whereas most BOS members slept in full power armor. Yearling cared about books not battles. And she wanted to share all the books the library had amassed whereas the Brotherhood’s primary mission was to hoard knowledge.

Yearling’s nonconformity was probably why the Brotherhood had placed her at the remote Arlington Library in the first place. She was a respected Brotherhood scribe, but she didn’t quite fit in with her peers. She was noticeably different. She perplexed. And for a military organization as regimented as the BOS, any divergence from the norm was unwelcome.
Keelah was newly happy that she’d agreed to go to Tenpenny tower with the bookish woman. She knew what it was like to feel like an outcast.

*I’ll have to show her a good time, Keelah thought to herself. Maybe see if I can rustle up some shampoo since she’s so excited about the clawfoot tub.*

A quick movement to her right startled Keelah from her thoughts. Someone was walking just ahead of her. And moving erratically. Whoever it was was too far away for Keelah to see clearly but she unsheathed her SMG anyway. Just in case.

As she crested the small hill that led towards the metro tunnels, she was better able to see the nearby traveler. The traveler was wearing a bullet proof vest ([Why is he wearing it outside his clothes? Keelah thought in bewilderment]) and there was a rifle strapped to his back. The traveler was moving so slowly that Keelah had already almost caught up to him in a matter of seconds.

As she drew closer, Keelah was able to discern why the armed man was moving at such as snail’s pace. He was dragging a heavy bag behind him and struggling mightily to move even a few steps.

*Must have found some good salvage in the wastes and couldn’t pass it up, Keelah thought, as she approached the man.*

When she got within a few yards of the beleaguered traveler, she realized her mistake. It wasn’t a man at all. It was a woman. A sweating and gasping woman who was so exerted by her struggles with the heavy bag that her entire face was red and blotchy.

The high color and harangued expression didn’t keep Keelah from recognizing the woman though. Keelah removed her goggles. “Susie Mack?” she asked incredulously.

The traveler spun around, nearly tripping over her oversized bag. “Keelah?”

Keelah jogged the last few meters to the sweaty blonde. Behind her, the Brahmin wandered off into a patch of dead grass; began rooting around in browned foliage for something edible.

“What in the hell are you doing out here?” Keelah asked Susie.

“Currently? Getting my ass kicked by a rucksack. Spare some water?”

Keelah fished a bottle of water out of her satchel and passed it to Susie. The vaulter downed the entire bottle in seconds.

“Dehydrated?” Keelah asked.

“Yeah. I had four bottles on me when I left the vault this morning, but I went through those within my first hour outside. It’s hot as hell out here!”

Keelah nodded sympathetically. “Yeah, it is. The humidity takes some getting used to.” Keelah handed the vaulter another bottle of water. “What are you doing outside the vault?”

Susie took a deep drink before answering. “I’m the official trader for Vault 101. This is my first day on the job. I’m out looking for some buyers for some of our goods.”

Keelah crossed her arms; surveyed the frazzled woman in front of her. “They sent you out alone?”

“No one else was willing to come. I wasn’t willing, to tell the truth. But the vault’s running low on some necessities, so I figured I’d take one for the team.”
Susie squatted down in the dirt road and took a few seconds to catch her breath. The vaulter squinted up at Keelah, her hand raised to shield off the sun.

“This sun is something else,” the blonde commented tiredly. “Feels like it’s going to tear my skin off. But at the same time, it feels pretty damned good.”

Keelah smiled affectionately. “Just try not to stay in it too long Susie Q. Sun burn is an actual thing.”

Susie rose to her feet. Patted away the dust that had collected against her blue jumpsuit.

“Fancy running into you here,” she said to Keelah.

“I’ll say. You’re the second 101-er I’ve run into in a matter of months.”

“You’ve seen Butch then?”

“Yep. Not too long ago.”

“Is he okay? We were worried to death.”

“He’s fine. Has a job. A place to sleep. That’s considered wealthy in the wasteland.”

Susie stared at their surroundings. At the dilapidated buildings and decaying shrubbery. “I’ll bet,” she murmured. She turned her attention back to Keelah. “This place is depressing.”

Keelah shrugged. “There are good bits. You just have to find them.” She moved over to inspect Susie’s bag. “So what is it the vault has you selling?”

“Well, we figured we’d sell the stuff we had an overabundance of.” Susie opened the bag. “Scrap metal. About forty pounds worth. I’m not sure what we can get in exchange for it, but Amata said she’d be happy with a box or two of Stimpacks in return.”

A look of concern crossed Keelah’s face. “Has the vault run out of medical supplies?”

“Not yet. But we’re close. We consume a lot of vitamins because…no doctor. So those are pretty low. And we used most of the Stimpacks during the rebellion. We have to replenish our stock before the baby comes.”

“Baby? What baby?”

Susie smiled. “Christine Kendall is pregnant. Can you believe it? It’ll be the first vault birth in more than ten years.”

“I can see why you’re so anxious to get medical supplies.”

“Yep. High priority.”

“Still, selling scrap metal isn’t the way to go.”

Susie looked confused. “No?”

“Scrap metal is a commodity in the wastes, but it’s the last thing the vault should sell. For several reasons. One, the vault is a metal enclosure. You need scrap metal to maintain all of the vault’s machinery. The water purifier. The heating ducts. The air filtration system. That’s why the vault designers put so much scrap metal in storage. You can’t maintain the vault without it.” Susie looked shocked at the news. “Secondly, when you’re trading in the wastes, you want to trade things that are
high value, low weight. You’re packing forty pounds of scrap there. That’ll get you 400 caps max. On the other hand, you could have brought one of those bio-disks that the vault uses to upgrade Pip-Boys, sold it, and gotten over a thousand caps. For one. Those disks are lighter than a pack of gum. You could carry a whole sack of them and not even feel it.”

Sarah nodded along, her eyes wide with the new information. “I didn’t know any of that. All of this is so new to us. We’re flying by the seat of our pants.”

“Eh…you’ll catch on eventually. But you have to learn about the cap system. And learn how to haggle. Folks will take advantage of you if they think you’re a newb. And the vault might want to invest in a Brahmin….That’s a Brahmin over there.” Susie recoiled at the hulking animal. “It’ll help when you transport in bulk or have to move heavy items.”

Susie put up a hand to stop Keelah’s word salad. “Stop. Please. I feel like I’m in Brotch’s class all over again. Except this time I don’t have a nerd in front of me who forgets to cover his paper.” She lifted an eyebrow; studied Keelah. “Wait a minute. I do have a nerd in front of me. I think I’m going to need a bit of tutelage to really get this trading thing down. What do you say?”

Keelah crossed her arms defensively. “I’m not a prefect. I’m definitely not the welcome wagon who holds every vaulter’s hand their first day out of the can.”

“Maybe not. But you’ve always been all gentlewomanly, so I know you’ll do it.”

Keelah scowled at the comment.

“Please?” Susie asked, her face crestfallen. “I don’t think I can tote this bag of scrap another five feet. And I really don’t want to disappoint Amata.”

Amata.

Keelah sighed heavily. Focused her attention on the Brahmin, who’d settled down in the brown grass and was dozing.

She turned back to Susie. “I’ll help you,” she said. “You stood up for me during the vault rebellion. Helping you get sorted is the least I can do.”

Susie smiled. “Great. Where do we start?”

“First thing we have to do is get you better armor.”

“But this is a modified utility jumpsuit. The vault guards wear this and everything.”

Keelah fingered the thin material protecting Susie’s torso. “This material won’t hold up to a blast from a single weapon let alone a group attack. Plus, you don’t want to walk around the wastes in a vault jumpsuit. Some raider or slaver will catch sight of this suit and follow you back to the vault to loot it.”

Susie’s face paled. “I didn’t realize that. Shit!”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get you set up with some nice gear. And we’ll go over some Wasteland 101 type of stuff.”

“God. This is going to be like being back in Brotch’s class.”

Keelah grinned then grabbed ahold of the sack of scrap metal and tugged it over to the dozing
Brahmin. She patted the cow’s head until it woke and tottered to its feet.

“Help me,” Keelah said to Susie, and the blonde help her mount the sack on the Brahmin’s back. “We’ll have your first lesson at my place. No use lingering out here in this sun.”

She motioned the Brahmin and Susie to follow her and started in the direction of Megaton. Susie fell into step beside her.

“I really appreciate this,” Susie said; her brow still flushed and reddened from the angry sun.

“No problem.”

The two were silent for long moments; the only sound they could hear being the steady clomping of the Brahmin’s feet.

“So how have you been…since I last saw you?” Susie asked.

Keelah put her goggles back on. With her sun-bleached dreadlocks and her heavy weapons, she looked like a fearsome desert warrior; but the wastelander seemed oblivious to the striking figure she made. Susie silently marveled at her.

“I’ve been fine,” Keelah answered. “And you?”

“Fine.”

They left a lot unsaid. Then again, the two of them hadn’t been particularly close during their adolescence and didn’t have much to draw from as far as relationship-building.

“You need more water?” Keelah asked. She noticed that Susie’s face was still red and her breathing hadn’t yet calmed.

“No. But I could use a bathroom. Any facilities near here?”

Keelah couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yeah.” She gestured at the wide expanse of earth on either side of them. “Take your pick.”

Susie was aghast. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope.” Keelah turned her back on the irritated woman. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

Keelah tried to hide her laughter, but Susie could see the wastelander’s shoulders quaking.

“This isn’t funny Keelah,” Susie snapped, stalking off into a patch of tall grass.

“Be sure to remove your rifle first,” Keelah called over her shoulder.

The wastelander heard loud swearing behind her and nearly doubled over in amusement.

“Oh Susie,” she said to herself, once she’d composed herself. “This is only the beginning. Just you wait…the wasteland is a hell of a teacher.”

Keelah tilted her head until the rays of sunshine caught her face. She let the warmth coat her skin; thought about the sweetbitter poem from earlier.

*Meanwhile the world goes on.*
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

The world was going on.

That was the main lesson the wasteland was teaching her.
The world was going on.
And so was she.

Chapter End Notes

**Wild Geese is a poem by the poet Mary Oliver. This poem and its copyright belong to the Mary Oliver. All credit to her.

Wild Geese is one of my favorite poems. I felt it encapsulated a lot of what the Lone Wanderer was feeling. And whenever I get the chance to give a shout out to Mary Oliver’s work, I gladly do it.

Song title inspired by Noisette’s song.
Transatlanticism

Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer takes Susie out into the Wastes. Danger ensues. And a little heartbreak.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 12– Transatlanticism

Keelah guided the loaded-down Brahmin up the ramp to her Megaton home. Susie followed closely behind, the vaulter’s eyes wide and curious as she took in her new surroundings. The metal-framed shanty homes; the multitudinous ramps and wandering animals; the sharp odor of frying meat. The blonde seemed almost overwhelmed by the sights and sounds, the smells.

Keelah stopped at her front door and angrily snatched another holy water pamphlet from her front door.

“Damned Eternal Lighters! Keep leaving this shit on my door!” she complained.

She balled the pamphlet into a ball and lobbed it into a nearby trashcan.

When she noticed Sheriff Simms’s son, Harden, walking past, Keelah waved the lad over.

“Hey Harden, come here. I need you to do something for me.”

The lanky teenager sauntered over, staring puzzledly at Susie and her mostly visible vault jumpsuit.

“What’s up?” he asked Keelah.

“You mind returning this Brahmin to Nathan for me?”

“No way. Nathan will just start talking about the good old days and the Enclave and such, and it’ll take me forever to get away from him. Find someone else Wanderer.”

Nathan did know how to talk a person’s ear off. Keelah had lost entire afternoons to the old timer’s long-winded speeches. But Keelah waved off Harden’s concerns.

“Nathan doesn’t talk about the Enclave anymore,” she told him. Not since they abducted him and held him in a cell in Raven Rock, she didn’t say. “Besides, I’ll give you ten caps for doing it.”

“Fifteen,” the teenager countered.

“Hey, now…what would your dad think about his son shaking down a resident?”

“I’m not shaking you down. I’m negotiating a price that’s fair to both of us.”
The brown-skinned teen raised an eyebrow and Keelah pursed her lips thoughtfully. The impudent youngster was smart; she had to give him that.

“Fine. Fifteen caps. But you have to water the Brahmin too. And give him some feed.”

“Deal.”

Keelah handed the teenager his caps then nodded at Susie to get the woman’s help in removing the bag of scrap metal.

Harden led the Brahmin away and the two women tottered the heavy bag into Keelah’s house and set it on the floor.

Keelah closed her front door. Began removing her weapons and gear.

“Nice place you have here,” Susie commented. She paced around the living room, perusing the shelves of books, tidying canned goods as she passed (labels facing outward), before stopping in front of Keelah’s collection of Bobbleheads. The vaulter shot Keelah a sly grin. “God, you’re a nerd,” she joked.

“Hey, those are collector’s items,” Keelah protested. “And I had to do some perilous shit to get most of those.”

Susie moved closer to inspect the tiny inscriptions on the Bobbleheads’ bases. “Okay, so you’re a badass nerd. Still a nerd.” The blonde quirked an eyebrow at Keelah’s annoyed face. “Would you prefer nerdy badass?”

“Keep insulting me Susie and I’ll equip you in armor made out of papier mache.”

But that only made Susie laugh, and the vaulter flopped down happily into one of Keelah’s red vinyl chairs.

Keelah began rummaging through her weapons and armor locker. “You have any preference for armor material? Leather? Metal? Winterized?”

“I don’t even know what that last one means. Just give me something that will stand up to a bullet.”

Keelah pulled a brown armor set from the locker. “We’ll start you out with some recon armor then. It has high damage resistance but is also pretty light and good for stealth. The coloring will make it hard for folks to see you in the desert.” She passed the suit to Susie. “Try it on. See if it fits.”

Susie removed the rifle from her back, then rose to her feet and began to strip out of her clothes.

Being vaulters, both women had grown up sharing living quarters and bathrooms with dozens of people. They had no qualms about disrobing in front of others. Susie was down to her undergarments in seconds.

She pulled the recon armor on, fumbling a bit with the clamps and hooks until Keelah showed her how to fix them properly.

With the suit firmly adjusted and the matching helmet in place, Susie Mack looked like a bona fide wasteland warrior. Keelah grinned at the blonde’s transformed appearance.

“I look okay?” Susie asked.

“Like someone not to be messed with. But looking intimidating isn’t enough to survive out here.
You need to know how to protect yourself. How to spot trouble before it even starts.”

Susie pulled off the helmet. Her gold-spun hair fluttered around her face, mussed and wild from the tight fit of the recon helmet.

“I’m pretty good with a rifle already,” she told Keelah. “Your dad wasn’t the only one taking his daughter down to the reactor room for target practice.”

“That’s good. You’re already a step ahead.” Keelah went back to the weapon’s locker. Stuck her head in and moved some things around. “You want to stick with the rifle then? I also have laser rifles and plasma guns. Shotguns. Heavy weapons like flame throwers. Missile launchers.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to sell some vault knick knacks here. Not liberate a small country.”

Keelah pulled her head out of the locker. Fixed Susie with a serious look. “Out here, being a trader is an occupational hazard. I’m just trying to prepare you.”

Susie looked momentarily discomfited by Keelah’s words, but the gutsy blonde smiled through it. “I’ll just stick with the rifle.”

“Fine by me.” Keelah removed a nasty-looking knife from the locker though. And a small pistol. “You should always carry backup weapons. This .32 goes on your hip. You clasp the combat knife to your ankle.” When Susie stared at the knife in confusion, Keelah rushed on. “The knife’s for close range fights. When you can’t get to your gun.”

Susie paled. “I think you’re trying to scare me,” she said softly. “Send me running and screaming back to the vault never to come outside again.”

Keelah set the pistol and combat knife on the table next to Susie’s rifle. Then turned grave eyes on her friend. “I’m not trying to scare you Susie.” She cleared her throat. “My first night out of the vault…my first five minutes, someone shot at me. I had nothing but a piece of a baseball bat to defend myself with. I ran as fast as I could. Tried to take shelter in this burned out school. The school turned out to be a raider hideout. I barely got away with my life. But not before they filled me with buckshot…”Keelah unbuttoned her armor. Displayed a cruel scar above her navel. The wound was old and ugly; a tangle of discolored skin. It looked like an unhealed blister. “This was my welcome the wasteland. Nearly bled to death in some shack in the middle of nowhere. Thank goodness my dad taught me a thing or two about first aid.”

She re-buttoned the armor. “So I’m not trying to scare you. Not trying to make you see boogeymen behind every corner. But I am trying to tell you how it is. You can take my word for it. Or you can find out the hard way.” Susie stared back at her, stunned. “We understand each other now?” Keelah asked.

“Yes.”

“Good.” Keelah offered a tight smile, trying to lighten the mood. “I have a book you can read that’ll give you an overview of some things. While you’re doing that, I’m going to go upstairs and wash some of this dirt off.”

Keelah snagged a heavy book from the top of her bookshelf. Passed it to Susie.


“Yep.”
Susie frowned. “Reading? Really? Reading is going to help me survive the wasteland?”

“It says so in the title.”

“You’re worse than Mr. Brotch,” Susie grumbled. But the vaulter settled into her chair and began to thumb through the thick book. “It’s 300 pages!” she exclaimed.

“Three fifty if you count the appendix,” Keelah supplied. The wastelander headed for the stairs and began her ascent to her bedroom. “And no skipping chapters either,” she called over the banister. “I may quiz you later on.”

An expletive floated towards her and Keelah chuckled before bounding up the remaining stairs. She had about two layers of dirt to get off her skin and looked forward to soaking her tired body in the warm water.

Later that evening Keelah took Susie to the Brass Lantern for dinner. It was Keelah’s way of rewarding Susie for completing the Wasteland Survival Guide so quickly and for answering correctly all of the questions Keelah had subsequently asked her.

The pair sat at a back table inside the small restaurant and Keelah fiddled with her silverware as they waited on their food.

“You like living here?” Susie asked her suddenly.

The two of them had been sitting mostly in silence. Susie preoccupied with people-watching and Keelah mentally charting the safest route for her and Scribe Yearling to take when they traveled to Tenpenny Tower in a few days.

Keelah roused herself from her silent contemplation. “Living where? Here? In Megaton?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s okay. I have my own space. And the food’s pretty good.”

“And the people treat you well?”

“They don’t threaten to hog-tie me like the folks in the vault,” Keelah responded sarcastically. Susie’s face fell at her words. “But they’re pretty nice here. I got some puzzled looks at first, being a vaulter and all. But you stick around a place long enough and people start considering you one of their own.”

“I’m happy for you.” Susie’s voice was soft. Sincere. “I’m glad you found someplace to belong. I imagine community is hard to find out here in the wasteland.”

Keelah took a sip of her water. Ignored the comment and fixed her eyes on the chipped glass she was drinking from.

Andy Stahl walked over with two plates of steaming food. He set a plate down before each woman.

“The nightly special,” he stated cheerlessly. “Iguana steak and twice heated mac and cheese.”


“Don’t worry. It tastes good,” Keelah said. “Got any bread?” She asked Andy.
“No,” the ill-tempered man responded. He stood there a moment, frowning. Waiting to see if Keelah needed anything else. When Keelah nodded her thanks, the bar manager walked away, glaring at each customer as he passed as if their very presence in the restaurant offended him.

“He’s kind of cute,” Susie commented. The blonde was poking at her iguana steak with a fork; a look of revulsion clear on her face.

“Andy Stahl? Cute?” Keelah asked. “The guy has a permanent scowl on his face. He actually shakes his fist at people like some old man defending his lawn. Look. He’s shaking his fist right now.”

Susie stole a glance across the room. Andy was actually shaking his fist at one of his customers. Some young guy who’d spilled a drink across the restaurant countertop.

Susie shrugged. Returned her attention to her mac and cheese. “There aren’t many eligible guys to date in the vault,” she said around mouthfuls. “Everyone’s either already married or related to me. It’s slim pickings.”

“Still. Don’t just go throwing your heart at the first guy who brings you cheese noodles.” Susie snorted at the comment. “There are more qualities to look for in a person than cuteness, you know.”


“Fine. I’m not an expert on relationships. Do what you want.”

“Don’t you mean do whom I want?” But Susie smiled when she said it, and Keelah rolled her eyes, mollified.

The wastelander decided to change the subject. “When are you expected back at the vault?”

“Tonight. This was supposed to be a short trip since I don’t know my around outside.”

“I can walk you back in the morning. It gets dicey out there at nighttime. Things moving around that you can’t see.”

“Morning works for me.” She’d finished eating her mac and cheese. Stared down moodily at the untouched iguana steak on her plate.

Keelah sighed. “Here. Give it to me. I’ll take your steak. You can have my noodles.”

They swapped plates and both went back to eating quietly.

“So any more things I need to know, Professor?” Susie asked after a moment.

“Not really. Everything else you’ll learn in the trenches. All in all, just run when you can and shoot when you have to.”

“You’re a wise woman,” Susie said dryly.

“Eh…shut up before I make you read another textbook before bed.”

Susie snorted and they both laughed long and hard.

The two of them weren’t used to socializing together, to being friends. But the Capital Wasteland
made fast allies of even the most estranged people.

“You ready to call it a night?” Keelah asked when they’d both scraped their plates clean.

“Yep. I need to get out of this armor and into something a bit less suffocating.” She pulled at the body-hugging fabric of the recon suit. “And I could use a shower. Y’all have those here, right?” For a moment, she looked apprehensive. Worried at the thought of not having access to running water.

“They’re not commonplace in the wastes, but Megaton has its own water treatment plant so most homes here have some sort of bath. I have a shower. It’s tiny, but it gets the job done.”

Keelah stacked their dishes into a neat pile. Left them at the center of the table for Andy’s brother, Leo, to collect.

“Shall we?” she asked Susie.

The vaulter nodded and followed Keelah to the door. Most of the Brass Lantern’s customers stared at Susie as she passed; immediately suspicious of any newcomer to their small metropolis.

Susie stared back at the ogling crowd, her eyes widening in surprise at the cold looks.

“Don’t mind them,” Keelah whispered in her ear. “They’re just wary of first-timers. Plus, they see your Pip-Boy and are curious. They don’t see too many vaulters around these parts.”

The two of them left the diner and headed up the ramp that led past Moriarity’s saloon. It was an intentional path away from Keelah’s house. The wastelander wanted to give Susie the scenic route. Familiarize the blonde with Megaton in case she visited in the future for trading purposes.

“I can’t believe there’s an atomic bomb smack dab in the middle of this town,” Susie commented, staring down over the edge of the platform at the tilted bomb and the Children of Atom worshipers huddled around it. “Aren’t you afraid that thing will go off one day?”

“Nope. I disarmed it ages ago.”

They continued walking. Past Moira’s shuttered supply shop. Past Megaton’s small-scale armory.

“You disarmed an atomic bomb?” Susie asked incredulously. “Damn it! I knew I should have sat next to you in Brotch’s science class. I probably would have made higher than a D.”

Keelah laughed. Sidestepped Jericho as he sauntered past, his usual thunderous expression firmly in place.

“See that up there?”

Keelah stopped at the highest point of the metal city—the drawbridge above Sheriff Simms’s house. The wastelander pointed to some spot above her head.

“What?” Susie asked.

“Stars.” The inky black sky was replete with them. Tiny beacons of bright that looked like miniature lighthouses, all of them. “Humans destroyed the earth. Killed the oceans. But they couldn’t touch the stars.” Keelah voice was soft and somber.

Susie stared up at the sky. Mouth gape and eyes filled to brimming with the splendor of the celestial bodies. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” the vaulter commented. “It’s beautiful.”
“You want to sit here a while?” Keelah asked.

“Yes.”

Keelah snagged two chairs from one of the outdoor tables; positioned them so that they wouldn’t block the pathway, and both women sat.

“Okay…” Susie started. “Maybe I’m not so pissed that I’m the person who had to venture outside.”

Keelah smiled. Her eyes moving rapidly across the sky, searching for patterns and designs.

“How long can we stay out here?” Susie asked.

“As long as we’d like. There’s no curfew in the wasteland.”

Susie settled back in her seat. “Good. Score one for the Capital Wastes.”

Keelah chuckled. Closed her eyes for a moment to see if the stars remained behind her eyelids.

“There’s a man in the sky,” Susie remarked.

Keelah’s eyes snapped open. “Where?” she asked. “Point him out.”

Could it be a Vertibird? A troop of Enclave soldiers preparing to swoop in and attack the town?

“Up there. In the stars.” Susie pointed at a collection of stars to their right. “See? There’s his head. There’s his arm.”

Keelah sighed in relief. “You would see a man in the stars. Slim pickings indeed.”

Susie smacked Keelah on her leg. “Shut up.”

They both laughed. And when Keelah looked hard enough she could see a person in the constellation of lights. A giant man who looked to be carrying a sword or a club of some sort.

“I never noticed him before,” Keelah noted.

“Now who’s the smart one?”

“He looks bad ass with that sword. Must be a soldier or something.”

“Probably. And he’s kind of cute.”

Keelah could only stare at her companion. Narrow her eyes playfully at the mischievous grin on Susie’s face.

“You’re incorrigible Susie Mack.”

“What? You afraid I’m going to be a bad influence on you?”

The vaulter’s eyes positively sparkled (rivaling the stars above) and her face broke out in a smile that immediately moved Keelah to laughter.

“I guess I’ll find out,” Keelah murmured.

The pair exchanged another warm smile before turning back to the stars.
They spent the rest of the evening pointing out shapes in the sky and arguing over whose interpretation was correct.

All in all, it was a damned good evening.

They set off for Vault 101 bright and early the next morning. Susie outfitted in her new recon armor with both new weapons attached to her person. Keelah also insisted that the blonde take the *Wasteland Survival Guide* and continue to study it when she had the time.

They sold the bag of scrap metal to Walter at the water purifying plant and used the proceeds to buy a fair amount of Stimpacks, Med-X, and vitamins. Keelah felt bad about selling so much scrap when the vault needed it for future use, but she figured the vault needed medical supplies more than anything else. And she reasoned that she could always leave a bag of scrap outside of the vault from time to time since she ran across so much of the metal during her travels.

The pair passed through the main gate and Keelah instinctively pulled her goggles on. Susie slid on her helmet, and the two women headed down the dirt pathway towards Vault 101.

“Hold up a second Wanderer,” Keelah heard from behind her.

The wastelander turned and spied Sheriff Simms hurrying to catch up to her. The stern sheriff had grown a few more gray hairs since Keelah had first met him (in his beard, along his temple), but the man was still spry and nimble and he eliminated the distance between them in seconds.

“How’s it going Sheriff Simms?”

“Can’t complain. No raider attacks in months and the caravans bring us good gear. That’s all we can ask for.” Keelah nodded politely. Stared at the chiseled-face man through her heavy goggles. “I meant to come by your place last night but got sidetracked by a skirmish at the saloon. Damn Moriarity. He turns decent folks into drunks and hooligans with that poison water of his. I think he’s dealing in chems too, but I don’t any evidence to prove it.”

Keelah frowned. “I hope you’re not asking me to be a spy or something, Sheriff?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. What I stopped you about doesn’t even have anything to do with Moriarity.” He folded his arms across his chest, making the fabric of his leather duster stretch and accentuate his solid frame. “You know I’m a Regulator and work with Sonora Cruz to root out lawbreakers and wrongdoers. Bring them to justice.” Keelah nodded. She was familiar with the vigilante group. Its leader, Sonora, had even offered her a job not too long ago. A fistful of caps for every finger of a criminal.

Sheriff Simms peered down at the wastelander, his wide-brimmed cowboy hat shuttering his eyes. “I heard from Regulator HQ that there’s a group out there abducting wastelanders. Snatching them out of their homes, from the road, and holding them for ransom. Dozens of people have gone missing this month alone.”

Keelah’s brow furrowed in consternation. “Could it be raiders? Talon maybe?”

“Kidnapping isn’t Talon’s style. And this group is too organized to be raiders.” He rubbed a hand across his face. For a moment, he looked older than his years. “We think it’s a group that was operating a few years back. We called them the Fisher of Men ‘cause they abducted so many people. Put up huge ransoms. Families paid the caps, but from what I heard, the group never returned anyone. The Regulators tried to track them down some years back, but we could never get a beat on
them. Whoever they are, they’d good at hiding. We hadn’t heard much from ’em in six years or so, but it looks like they’re back at it.”

“The Fisher of Men…” The words tasted sour in Keelah’s mouth. “You want me to be on the lookout for anything usual?”

“You can do that. Any bit of information would be helpful. The Regulators aren’t a military force, so our hands are tied with how much we can do. But the real reason I’m telling you all this is so that you can be careful out there. I know you do a lot of traveling back and forth. You spend days and weeks gone. I’m not trying to coddle you or anything. You’re a grown up and good with a gun. But these are real baddies we’re talking about here. They’ve disappeared dozens. Maybe more than that. Keep an eye out.”

Keelah sighed heavily. Why did there always seem to be new threats popping up in the Capital Wastes?

“I’ll be careful Sheriff. Thanks for the warning.”

Sheriff Simms tipped his hat to her and made his way back up the incline towards the main entrance.

Behind her, Susie swore under her breath. “You weren’t kidding about this place. Mass abductions? What in the hell…?!”

“Let’s keep moving Susie. We’ll melt if we stand in one spot.”

Keelah’s feet quickened across the cracked ground. But her mind was on Sheriff’s Simms words. His ominous warning.

Vault 101 wasn’t a long distance from Megaton, but Keelah still stopped for a break a half a mile into the trip. Susie was having a hard time adjusting to the heavy armor and full face helmet, and she’d asked for a respite so that she could catch her breath and clean the sweat from her face.

The pair paused beside a rotted tree, and the blonde removed her helmet. Took deep lungfuls of air and fanned her flushed skin.

“You still have that papier mache armor?” Susie panted. “I think I’d prefer that right now.”

“Your body will acclimate. It just takes time. Here.” Keelah gave the vaulter a bottle of water. “You have to get accustomed to carrying a pack of supplies and three weapons. With the weight of your armor included, you’re probably packing an extra eighty pounds right now.”

“Not for long.” Susie’s hands went to the buttons of her armor and she began to loosen the clamps.

“What are you doing?! You can’t take your armor off in the middle of the wastes!”

“Watch me.”

Keelah slapped at the woman’s hands. “Stop it. You’re going to walk to the vault nude?”

“I have underclothes on. Besides, I’ve seen those raider outfits in your closet. Folks out here wear way less than what I’ll have on.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Keelah tried to re-button Susie’s armor, but the vaulter pulled away from her and continued to loosen her clothes, eventually revealing a vault-issue bra and smooth albeit heat-
flushed skin.

“Don’t move!” Keelah suddenly exclaimed.

“At least let me take this thing off for a few minutes,” Susie complained. “I’m suffocating here.”

“That’s not it. There’s something coming this way. And it’s big. May be a super mutant.”

Keelah’s grave tone got Susie’s attention and the vaulter froze in place. Her expressive blue eyes were riveted on Keelah, awaiting instruction.

“Fasten your suit,” Keelah commanded. “Quickly. And get your rifle ready.”

Susie did what she was told. In a matter of seconds, she was standing by Keelah’s side, rifle gripped in her hands and pointing forward.

They could both see it now, a hulking creature, moving closer to them; clearly stalking. Its heavy footfalls made a loud crunch against the dusty pavement and Susie was almost certain she could hear it breathing.

“It’s a Deathclaw,” Keelah said. Her assault rifle already raised and directed at the creature that was now only ten meters away. Nine. Eight. “It takes a lot of firepower to take one down. Aim for the legs. Try to hobble it.”

“I don’t know if I can Keelah,” Susie stammered. All of this was so new to the blonde. Overwhelming.

“You’re a good shot Susie. You said so yourself. We won’t have much time, so make every shot count.”

The Deathclaw was in range now. The heavy horns on its head long and curved like the crown of some nightmare demon. And its razor-sharp claws already poised for attack.

Keelah could testify to the strength of those knife-edged claws. She’d had a Deathclaw slash across her face once, leaving a deep scar below her right eye. Deathclaws liked to hack; to mutilate. They dismembered their victims and left the ruined carcasses as warnings for future prey.

Seven meters. Six.

“Now!” Keelah shouted.

The air around them erupted in sound. The ear-splitting crack of assault rifles firing. The blood-curdling roar of an angry Deathclaw.

As Keelah predicted, the initial hail of bullets did nothing to stop the beast. The Deathclaw kept advancing even as his thick skin succumbed to lead and his body spouted a liquid red.

Susie hesitated. She was completely unnerved by the sight of the blood-spattered mutant. She brought her rifle down. Trembled uncontrollably.

“Don’t you stop firing!” Keelah yelled. “It’s him or us. You shoot until he makes it impossible for you to shoot.”

The explosive command did the trick. Susie raised her gun again. Continued firing. The Deathclaw got within a foot of them before succumbing to its injuries, falling face-first into the sand.
Susie lowered her weapon. Heaved a sigh of relief.

“Don’t relax yet.” Keelah instructed. “They usually travel in packs. There could be more nearby.”

Keelah kept her assault rifle at the ready as she scanned the area around them. She briefly regretted not bring her trusty sniper rifle. She could have used its scope to identify threats at a farther distance. But she couldn’t see anything in their vicinity. Didn’t think that they were in any immediate danger. She put her weapon away. Gestured for Susie to do the same.

Susie’s face was pale. And her hands shook as she secured her rifle to her back.

“Sorry for yelling at you,” Keelah said. “Sometimes the volume helps motivate a person.”

Susie nodded numbly. “Don’t worry about it. It worked.” She sighed heavily. “Can we get out of here? I don’t think I can handle anymore…” The blonde’s voice trailed off and she did her best not to look at the blood-stained corpse of the Deathclaw. Already hungry flies had gathered. Swarming the felled beast; a veritable fog of death.

Susie turned distressed eyes on Keelah. “I’m not sure I’m cut out for this Keelah. This heat and the monsters. Not knowing what’s around the next corner.” She slammed her fist into her thigh. Suddenly angry with herself. “I feel like a fucking wimp. Like I’m letting the vault down. But I don’t think I can manage the outside. I’ve never been afraid of anything in my life. My family doesn’t… tolerate fear.” Her eyes blinked rapidly. A painful memory resurfaced. “But I’m terrified Keelah. Terrified that I might wind up in one of those… thing’s clutches. Or that I might lead one of them back to the vault. Or what about this band of kidnappers the sheriff was talking about? What if one of them follows me back home? They’d have an entire collection of people to abduct. I can’t…!”

She was close to hysterics and Keelah moved quickly. Placed a hand on Susie’s shoulder and spoke softly.

“Relax Susie. Take a deep breath.” Susie inhaled. Exhaled. Her eyes flitted all over the place. She was near a panic attack. “It’s okay to be afraid out here. The wasteland is a scary place. That’s why people try to find cities with big walls that they can hide behind. You haven’t failed anything.”

Keelah nodded at the dead Deathclaw. “Who wouldn’t be afraid with that big fucker bearing down on ‘em?” Susie managed a weak smile. “You did good,” Keelah emphasized. “And you’ll do better. You just have to give it more time.”

Susie nodded. Somewhat comforted. “I think I should have accepted that missile launcher you offered back at your place.”

Keelah gave her a reassuring grin. “’’Maybe next time. But let’s get going. Before any of his friends show up.’’”

Susie nodded, her hands still trembling. She put her helmet back on and followed Keelah across the desert. The two of them continued their slow trek towards Vault 101.

The dead Deathclaw lay where they left him; his body disappearing under an avalanche of ant and flies.

. . . . . . . . . . . . .  . . .  . . . . . . .  . . .

They made it to the vault’s outer door not long after that. Keelah stared at the wooden entrance; her mood immediately soured by the sight of her old home.

Susie put her hand on the doorknob; clearly relieved to be home. The vaulter had removed her
helmet during the march up the incline and her golden hair brushed Keelah’s face as she hastened past.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Keelah murmured, taking a few steps back.

Susie turned away from the door. “You’re not coming in?”

“Hell no. I’m in exile, remember?”

“Keelah, that was three years ago. A lot has changed since then. People have abandoned those old grievances.”

“The fact that they had any grievances with me in the first place is bullshit,” Keelah snapped.

She was still pissed about everything that had transpired in the vault during her last visit here. And being this close to the vault only intensified her ire.

Susie sighed. “I really think you should come in. People would want to see you. And Amata…”

Keelah’s glare silenced her. “Well, what about Beatrice then? You saved the woman’s life. The least you could do is check on your patient. What kind of doctor are you?”

“I’m not one at all.”

It was Susie’s turn to glare. They were both stubborn women. Obstinate and unafraid of conflict.

It was Susie who relented first. “Fine. Don’t come in. But you still plan to show me around the wasteland, right? Be my tour guide and make sure I don’t fall down some rabbit hole?”

“None of the holes I’ve fallen into have had rabbits,” Keelah grumbled. “But yeah. I’ll take you around. Show you all the good trading spots.”

“And you really think I can do this? Be the trader the vault needs?”

Keelah scratched at a phantom itch on her neck. “I’ll be honest with you Suze. It’s a tough job for a single person. It would be better if you had a partner traveling with you. And one or two guards to watch your back. You probably still need a Brahmin. And it wouldn’t hurt to have a couple people on the inside who are in charge of your inventory. I invest in a few traveling caravans out here, and from what I can see, it’s hard work. And none of them travel alone.”

Susie’s face fell. “So you don’t think I can do it?”

Keelah tugged her goggles off her face. “What I’m saying is that you need more help. Go in there and get some of your friends to back you up. Maybe even your brother Wally. He likes to pummel things. There’s plenty he could fight out here.”

“Not sure ‘Come Outside and Fight’ is an effective recruitment pitch.”

“Whatever. Just do what you can to get some more hands on deck. And I’ll work on my end to develop a decent business plan for your enterprise.”

“You’re a nerd at all times, aren’t you?”

“Bye Susie,” Keelah retorted. And she turned to leave her friend.

“Thank you,” Susie said softly. Keelah turned back around, her eyebrow raised. Susie smirked. “What? Are you expecting a lengthy speech or something? That’s as good as it gets.”
Keelah laughed. “I’ll see you in a week. I have an engagement that’ll keep me busy for a few days. We can meet back here next Tuesday.”

“Sounds like a plan. Later hero.”

Susie opened the wooden door. Keelah headed down the dirt incline.

But the wastelander spun back around when she heard Susie scream.

“What the fu—!” Susie shouted.

Keelah raced back to the wooden door, her hand instinctively moving to her sidearm.

But Susie had already calmed down and was currently laughing with whomever it was who’d startled her.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack, Amata!” Susie exclaimed. “Why were you standing behind the door like that?”

Amata opened the wooden door wider, revealing herself. But the Overseer didn’t step past the door’s threshold; her movements were uncertain as she studied the sliver of sky she could see outside the door.

“I was expecting you back last night. When you didn’t show, I got worried,” Amata said.

“You’ve been waiting here since last night?”

Amata looked embarrassed. “I’d decided that if you didn’t show by this evening, I was going to go out and look for you.”

Susie smiled broadly. “That’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me. But as you can see, I’m fine. I had a little help on the outside.”

Susie stepped aside so that the Overseer could see the person standing behind her.

Amata gasped. “Keelah!”

Keelah raised a hand. A muted wave. “Hey.”

Susie seemed to be enjoying the scene playing out in front of her, but the blonde quickly decided to excuse herself.

“I’m going to take these medical supplies to the clinic. Amata, I’ll fill you in on my trip later this evening.” A playful grin thrown at Keelah. “See you next week hero.”

Keelah tried to protest the woman’s departure. “Wait a sec—”

But Susie disappeared down the dim walkway, leaving Keelah alone with her former best friend.

The wooden door swung wildly between them, caught by a faint breeze, and Keelah stepped into the tunnel; closed the door behind her so that no flies or beetles could get in. Or anything larger.

The wastelander pursed her lips in annoyance and risked a glance at her former friend. Time had been kind to Amata. The young Overseer was as lovely as ever—all honeyed skin and auburn eyes—but she’d lost the slender frame of adolescence and had gotten noticeably more curvy. The baby fat was gone from her face. She no longer looked like a teenager trying to lead a vault. She looked like a woman who was confidently in charge.
She looks like a commander, Keelah thought to herself. Sort of how Sarah looks when she’s leading the Pride into battle. She looks like a fucking boss.

Amata seemed to be doing some silent observing of her own. Her eyes wandered freely over Keelah’s face and body. Lingering on Keelah’s almond-shaped eyes. Settling for long moments on the wastelander’s lips.

Amata smiled. “Your hair is different,” she said softly.


“I like it. It suits your face.”

Keelah instructed her eyes not to flutter; her heart not to palpitate. Don’t you dare, she scolded her traitorous body. Suck it up.

“And your hair is lighter.” Amata stepped forward. Almost as if she were about to touch Keelah’s hair. Or her face. But something in Keelah’s eyes—the way the wastelander stiffened—made the Overseer abort the movement.

“It’s the sun,” Keelah stated. “Being out in it too long bleaches a person’s hair.” Keelah shrugged. “The sun is funny like that. It makes skin darker and hair lighter.”

Amata looked past her. Peered through the slits in the door at the sun-drenched world outside. “I’ve never seen the sun,” she murmured; her arms clenched tight around her waist. “I’d like to. One day. I was prepared to face it had Susie not returned.” Her eyes returned to Keelah. “Thank you for assisting her. I didn’t expect her to run into you. I’m glad she did.”

She tried to meet Keelah’s eyes. Communicate something important. But the wastelander avoided the gaze. Directed her attention to the single light bulb illuminating the entranceway to the vault. Light bulbs were vaulters’ versions of the sun, the moon; stars. Keelah suddenly felt happy that she’d been forced to leave the vault all those years ago. She couldn’t imagine having to settle for artificial starlight.

“I have to go,” Keelah said. Her eyes still trained on the tiny bulb.

“You don’t want to come in? Get something to eat? Some fresh water?”

“No, thanks.”

Keelah turned to leave.

“Wait a second.” Amata put a hand on Keelah’s elbow. A fleeting touch. Keelah turned around. Finally looked at the Overseer.

But the wastelander looked agitated. She fidgeted. Unconsciously touched the spot on her elbow where Amata’s fingers had just been.

“The vault can pay you for your time. You know…for helping Susie. Is there anything…you need?”

Amata’s eyes were so brown, so hopeful, that for a moment Keelah forgot how angry she was with her former friend. How betrayed she still felt.
“I don’t need anything from the vault. I helped Susie because she helped me once upon a time.”

Amata swallowed deeply. Memories of the vault rebellion pushed to the forefront. “I see. Well, thank you again for your service—”

“Stop talking like that, alright? You sound like a politician.” Amata mouth flattened into a thin line, and she put her hands behind her back. Stiffened her spine. Now she looked like a politician. “And quit thanking me. All I did was give Susie some armor and burnt macaroni and cheese. No big.”

Keelah was being deliberately dismissive because she wanted this conversation to be over with already. She wanted Amata to leave and to stop looking at her like that—like she’d rediscovered something precious that had been lost.

“I told Susie that I’d help get the vault caravan started, but I’m not going to bill you for my time. So no more platitudes, alright? And no more invitations to come inside. Agreed?”

Amata cleared her throat. She looked annoyed. Disappointed. Maybe both. “Fine.”

Keelah did a quick scan of the door’s perimeter. “And a quick note. Try not to linger near this entrance in the future. It attracts attention. You don’t want a raider passing by and noticing this door is ajar.”

“That’s sound advice. Thank you.”

More politician speak. Keelah very nearly rolled her eyes. “Take care Amata.”

“Keelah?”

Once again, Keelah stopped. Met those expressive brown eyes. “At least allow me to thank you for one thing.” Keelah raised an eyebrow. Nodded her assent. “When you left…the last time…you mentioned the Enclave. It was only in passing, but you warned me about them.” She released a soft sound. Maybe a sigh. “Not long after you left, the Enclave contacted us. They wanted admission to the vault. Claimed they were our allies and that they could protect us.”

Keelah frowned. “What happened? Did they get in?”

“Well, I remember you’d said they’d abducted you…and killed your father…” The Overseer’s eyes dimmed and she sounded apologetic. “…so obviously I didn’t trust them. I radioed them. Told them that all of the vaulters were infected with a deadly pathogen and would appreciate them coming inside and offering medical services. I even gave them a fake passcode.” Amata smiled softly. “We haven’t heard from them since.”

Keelah couldn’t help but laugh. “Good job ‘Mata. You probably scared them back under their rocks.”

Amata grinned. Buoyed by the praise and the use of her nickname. “It was easy enough to pull off. You and I fabricated better stories to get out of work detail when we were kids.”

Keelah laughed again. Harder this time. “That’s true. Remember the time we convinced everyone that we had vault pox? Didn’t have to go to work for weeks.”

“Until your dad ratted us out.”

“Well, he knew there was no such thing as vault pox.” She smiled fondly. “He was more upset about the unoriginality of our pretend disease’s name than the fib itself.”
Amata chuckled. “I told you we should have called it mineral-ligo. It sounds much more dangerous than vault pox.”

“Mineral-ligo sounds like something you put on a rash.”

Amata laughed heartily. Keelah smiled. Tried her best to hide her amused expression but Amata knew better.

The Overseer took a step forward. Smiled up at Keelah. Not even bothering to disguise her affection.

“I’ve missed you,” the vaulter admitted. “Missed seeing you. Missed laughing with you.” She put a single finger against Keelah’s cheek. Delicately massaged the burn scar along the woman’s jaw line. “There are so many things I miss Keelah.”

Amata’s eyes were wet and wide, and Keelah was momentarily lost in the shimmering orbs. Or maybe she was found. Most likely she was found. There was home in Amata’s eyes. Home and here and stay. And please.

Keelah found her voice. Averted her eyes. “I have to go,” she husked. Moving away from Amata’s hovering hand. Those needful eyes.

“But you’ll come back?” Amata asked. Hadn’t she asked Keelah that question before? Years ago, in front of the vault door? “You’ll come back?”

Keelah placed her hand on the doorknob. Prepared to reenter the wasteland. To leave Vault 101 once again.

She spoke in Amata’s direction. But couldn’t look directly at her. “Tell Susie I’ll meet her outside this door next Tuesday. Bright and early. But I won’t come inside. I won’t ever enter the vault again.”

Keelah looked at Amata this time. Her eyes clear and solemn. Her tone uncompromising.

“Butch gave me your message,” Keelah said. Her mouth twisting when some unnamed emotion flickered across Amata’s face. “He also said you thought I’d return. That you waited for me by the vault door.”

Amata blushed, but she didn’t appear to be embarrassed by the revelation. The younger leader lifted her chin; her posture firm. Her eyes unwavering. “Yes. Every six months for three years. I waited for you.”

There was a flash of something in the vaulter’s eyes but just as quickly as it had come, it disappeared. Whatever the emotion was, Amata blinked past it.

Keelah nodded at the words. Her face strained; a terrible grimace. “Stop waiting,” she murmured. “Stop waiting for me.”

If Keelah was cruel, she could have said more. Could have insulted or recriminated. Shouted and swore. But the feelings that remained—that palpable connection between her and Amata that had somehow survived three years of separation and a lifetime’s worth of acrimony—stilled any bitter words she could have lobbed.

Keelah left without another word. Let the wooden door close on the person she loved most in the world.
She’ll only break your heart, the wastelander thought, as she trotted down the dusty path. She’ll break your heart, again, and you don’t have much heart to spare.

She repeated those words as she retraced her steps to Megaton. She repeated them until they became a refrain, a mournful song. And by the time Keelah reentered her square-shaped home, she’d convinced herself of a powerful truth:

I don’t love her anymore.

I don’t love her.

I don’t love.

The wastelander settled into a red vinyl chair and stared at the empty walls.

Two miles away, in her own box-shaped hovel, Amata did the same.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Death Cab for Cutie song.

A bit of an allusion to a Pablo Neruda poem at the end there. Will circle back to that reference in subsequent chapters.
Try a Little Tenderness

Chapter Summary

Tenpenny Tower, bubbles, and wine.

Chapter Notes

A short, sweet chapter before a whole hell of a lot of drama in future chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13– Try a Little Tenderness

“You know, I could get used to this… How bad would it be if a Brotherhood scribe quit the service to bathe full time?”

Keelah laughed and looked up from the wine she was currently pouring. The wastelander shot an amused glance at Scribe Yearling who was currently luxuriating in a clawfoot tub. The Brotherhood librarian had been soaking for nearly half an hour and bubbles and foam were everywhere.

“It’s not really the most hardcore way for a BOS member to go out,” Keelah responded dryly, carrying two glasses of wine over to her lounging friend. “And Elder Lyons would have both our hides if the Brotherhood’s last remaining librarian suddenly quit. And to bathe, no less.”

She handed one of the flutes of amber liquid to Yearling, who thanked her softly before taking a sip.

Scribe Yearling was completely naked; in a bath; in the middle of Keelah’s master bedroom.

Tenpenny Tower was a luxury hotel—the last bastion of extravagance left in the entire wasteland. But the hotel’s design left a lot to be desired. The beds were large, the rooms were small. And the hotel’s famed clawfoot bathtubs were smack dab in the middle of each suite. The peculiar placement of the baths could have been a design flaw. It could have been the result of pure laziness on the part of the builders. Whatever the reason, the hotel’s occupants ate, slept and bathed all in the same room. It was a bit ridiculous. But it was still better than anything else the Capital Wastes had to offer.

Keelah sat on the floor next to the clawfoot tub; her back pressed against the cool porcelain. Her nose was immediately filled with the smell of sweet vanilla and sandalwood.

“I can’t believe you found shampoo and body wash,” Yearling said, as she sank deeper into the frothy water. “It smells like I’m on some tropical island.”

Keelah smiled into her wine glass; used a finger to pop an errant bubble dancing near her head.

“I bought ‘em off a friend of mine in Megaton. Nova. She likes to smell good for uh…work purposes.” Keelah wrinkled her nose. Tried not to think about Nova’s unfortunate profession.
“Anyway, I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it. This entire experience. A bed with actual sheets and pillows? Water that stays hot for longer than five minutes? And you weren’t lying about the brahmin béarnaise. It was heavenly.”

“Must have been. You ate three helpings at lunch.”

Yearling raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. “Are you trying to shame me about my zealous eating, Keelah?”

The wastelander chuckled. “Of course not. I actually enjoyed watching you eat all that food. To be honest…I’m kind of enjoying watching you right now.” The wastelander took a delicate sip of her wine. Enjoyed the pleasant tingle in her throat.

“You don’t have to watch Keelah. This tub is big enough for two.”

Keelah drained the rest of her wine. Too fast. Stared down into the empty flute as if more wine would suddenly appear.

She and Scribe Yearling had been on this mini vacation at Tenpenny Tower for three days now. During that time there had been plenty of laughing and flirting; copious amounts of eating and loafing; but so far none of the women’s exchanges had progressed past playful banter.

Yes, they were currently sharing a suite (formerly Alistair Tenpenny’s, now Keelah’s) and, yes, they were sharing a single bed. But the bed was king-sized; more than large enough for both of them to sleep comfortably without touching. And before today, neither of them had showered or disrobed in front of the other.

But today there was a bath. And wine. And a heated silence that was stretching on for far too long.

“Keelah?” Yearling asked; her hand coming up to rest on the wastelander’s shoulder.

“Hmm?” She really should get more wine. She needed more. Maybe vodka if the café downstairs had any.

“Are you going to join me?”

“Maybe later. I’m not really a fan of bubbles. They get into my nose and make me sneeze…It’s a whole thing.”

Yearling looked amused. “You’re a terrible liar,” she said, a playful smile on her lips. “But okay. More bubbles for me. Will you at least wash my back?”

Keelah twisted around to face the librarian; to see if the woman was being serious.

Scribe Yearling seemed to realize how suggestive her words were, and she blushed a pretty pink.

“Okay…I know that sounds like a come on, but I really just want my back washed. We have to use buckets to wash at the library. I want to take advantage of all of these indulgences while I have the chance.”

Keelah smiled. “I’ll wash your back. Pass me a towel.”

The wastelander sat her empty glass on the floor and accepted the soft sponge Yearling handed her.

She kneeled on the floor behind Yearling; studied the smooth, creamy back before brushing the
sponge across; careful strokes.

“That feels good,” Yearling murmured; her own wine glass forgotten as she leaned back in the tub; offering more of her neck and back to Keelah’s attention. “If I fall asleep, please don’t let me drown.”

“I won’t.” Keelah traced soapy figure eights across the woman’s skin; moved the sponge across her shoulders up to her neck, back down. “Want me to wash your hair?” she asked.

“Yes, please.”

Yearling placed her wine glass on the floor next to Keelah’s; then handed the wastelander the small bottle of shampoo.

Keelah put away the sponge; used the sweet-smelling soap and began lathering Scribe Yearling’s hair. Her movements were gentle but forceful; her fingers searching and kneading. Massaging the places where they found tension; smoothing the areas where they found tangles.

Yearling’s hands clenched on each side of the tub, and the librarian released a breathy sound that was hidden by the splash of the sponge into water.

“Let me get a pitcher of water so that I can rinse this off,” Keelah said, rising from the ground and crossing over to the night table to retrieve an empty carafe.

She filled the pitcher with warm water from the sink and crossed back over to her reclining friend. Scribe Yearling looked up at her; her eyes heavy-lidded; a soft smile lighting her lips.

Keelah smiled at the tender expression on the woman’s face; knelt beside her; tilted the carafe and washed away soap and shampoo. Rivulets of wet ran down Yearling’s head and face; almost like tears but softer. Serene.

“You want another wash and rinse?” Keelah asked. Putting the empty pitcher down. Using the pad of her fingers to thumb away moisture from Yearling’s face.

Yearling’s eyes fluttered. Closed. “No. That was perfect. And more than enough.” Her eyes reopened. Gazed at Keelah. Unfiltered. “I’d like to return the favor. Wash your locs.”

Keelah grinned. Folded her arms on the edge of the tub. Rested her head there, quite comfortable. “I’ll wash them when I shower later,” she demurred.

Yearling put a hand out. Used a finger to trace one of Keelah’s unruly eyebrows; the side of her cheek.

“Keelah, dear, you spend so much time taking care of others. Why don’t you let someone take care of you for a change?”

Keelah stiffened at the words; lifted her head and fixed Yearling with a serious look. “I don’t need to be taken care of.”

There was an edge to her voice. Faint but there.

Yearling’s hand clenched on Keelah’s wrist. Preemptively stopping the wastelander from moving away. “Don’t be offended. I’m not suggesting you’re helpless. I’m just…” The librarian’s eyes widened then narrowed. The usually composed woman was struggling to put her thoughts into words.
The scribe repositioned her hand. Slid it down Keelah’s wrist until they were holding hands.

“You don’t have to be good.” she told Keelah. “You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.”

It was the poem from days before. The poem from the green library book that had shaken Keelah to her very core.

“Tell me about your despair and I will tell you mine,” Yearling continued; her moss colored eyes soft and penetrating; trained on Keelah’s face.

Keelah stared at their clasped hands; at the battle scars and sunburns that marked both their skin.

“You want me to tell you my despair?” she asked Yearling. Her voice hitching on the final word.

“I want you to tell me anything.”

Keelah looked at her. A sidelong glance. What they were doing—what they were about to do—was too intimate for full eye contact at this point.

“I’m losing myself.” Keelah’s voice was so paper-thin that Yearling had to lean forward to hear it. “A little more every day. I’ve left pieces of myself all over the wasteland. From Andale to Pittsburgh. Vault 101 to Vault 87. I don’t know how to get me back.”

Keelah’s eyes watered imperceptibly as she thought about the naïve girl she’d been before. *Before* burned out towns and charred corpses; before missing fathers and refrigerators filled with human remains. Before she’d discovered alcohol and violent slumber.

She pulled her hand out of Yearling’s grasp; stared down at the brown lines dissecting her palms. Tiny roads in the middle of her hands; more maps. *Everything* was a map she was supposed to follow. But to where?

“I feel like I’ve left the real me somewhere. Misplaced her somehow. But I don’t know where she is. Or how to find her.”

She closed her hands. Pressed her fingernails into the meat of her palms until she found a satisfying sting. She looked at Scribe Yearling (finally; *fully*) and croaked out, “What’s yours?”

Yearling’s gaze flicked to the ceiling. The librarian had initiated this painful intimacy; still the sharing was difficult for her too.

“I’m lonely,” she confessed to the ceiling. “I always have been. I joined the Brotherhood of Steel to do something about that. But it hasn’t helped.” Her gaze returned to Keelah. Her eyes so melancholy; so green. “I don’t even know what kind of loneliness it is. A loneliness for people? A certain place? …It just *is*. And I haven’t yet figured out how to live with this particular lonely.”

Their eyes held for a moment then moved away; twin sighs of sympathy and sorrow floated between them. Stayed.

“We need more wine,” Keelah finally said.

“Yes.”

“And music.”

“Yes.”
But neither of them moved.

Keelah’s knees ached from her extended sprawl on the ground but the wastelander couldn’t find the energy to get up. Besides, the pain in her knees distracted from the pain elsewhere. Including the pain in Scribe Yearling’s eyes.

“I’m pruning,” Yearling commented softly; holding up an unsteady hand; wrinkled by water.

That was enough to make Keelah rise to her feet; retrieve a bath towel.

She extended the fluffy cotton towards Yearling. “Come on,” she told the librarian. “I got you.”

Yearling stepped out of the bathtub; water slushing off her body in loud rivulets; and stepped into the waiting towel.

Keelah wrapped the towel around the smaller woman. Held the fabric tight against her body. Pressed her frame close to add extra heat.

There was an amalgam of sensation and smell. Cold and heat; vanilla and wine; water and what could have been tears.

“Hold on a second,” Yearling said; readjusting the towel against her body until her hands were free.

She wrapped newly freed arms around Keelah. Pulled the wastelander close. Hugged and hugged and hugged.

“Is this alright?” Scribe Yearling asked. Her freshly washed hair brushing against Keelah’s face.

“It’s perfect,” Keelah responded. Exhaling into skin as skittish as her own.

And when the pair finally transitioned to the bed, they held on the same way: hugging; breathing; being with one another.

It wasn’t sex. Nor romance. But it was intimacy. A combination of mourning and friendship. An unexpected connection.

They took turns holding each other. Listening to more confessions.

And for a while, the loss—the loneliness—wasn’t as acute.

Chapter End Notes

What can I say? The more I write Scribe Yearling, the more I like her. Doesn't hurt that I heart librarians in real life too. :)

**Chapter title inspired by Otis Redding song.
Keelah and Scribe Yearling were quiet as the elevator made its way from the presidential suite to the ground floor. The elevator creaked from age and poor maintenance, but it still worked well enough, and after only a few sputters and jerks, it delivered the two women to TenPenny Tower’s main floor.

The duo headed for the exit; their travel gear firmly in place and Keelah’s rifle and handgun already secured to her person.

The wastelander stopped suddenly at the entrance. Turned to her companion. “You had a good time, right?” she asked Yearling.

The Brotherhood scribe smiled. “The best. We should do this every year.”

“I’d like that.”

More smiles.

Keelah studied her Pip-Boy. Checked her maps and the time. It was only Friday. She had enough time to escort Yearling back to Arlington Library; stop by Rivet City to check on Butch and Bryan Wilkes; and still make it back to Vault 101 by Tuesday to meet up with Susie for their trading lesson. As a matter of fact, she probably had a little time to spare.

“Hey, you mind if we make a pit stop before heading back to the library?” she asked Yearling.

“Sure thing. You have a package you have to deliver or something?”

“Sort of. Whenever I’m in this area, I like to stop and check on a few friends.” She turned away from the front door and headed towards Café Beau Monde. “I just have to pick up a few items first.”

Once at the cafe, Keelah purchased all of the apples and potatoes the restaurant had in stock; along
with some other essentials: deep fried mirelurk cakes; a half dozen cans of crum and pork and beans; reasonably fresh carrots and as many Fancy Lad snack cakes she could stuff in her satchel.

Scribe Yearling raised an eyebrow; confused by the largesse: “You planning to feed a small village?”

“Something like that. You need anything?”

Yearling immediately turned to the proprietor. “Can I get the brahmin béarnaise to go? And a bottle of sweet red?” The librarian shrugged at Keelah’s amused expression. “What? BOS members can drink when we’re off-duty. Might as well have some wine handy for the weekend.”

Keelah chuckled, paid for the items; and the two women went on their way; leaving the extravagance of the luxury hotel for the decrepit, brown world outside.

They moved past blackened cars; overturned school buses; the skeletal remains of suburban homes.

Emaciated dogs wandered across their path—too frail to menace—and occasionally a rifle would sound from nearby. Someone fighting for their life or claiming someone else’s.

Yearling sweated beneath her heavy robe; not accustomed to such rigorous travel. The librarian’s eyes tracked the landscape—the widespread desolation, the yawning decay—and recorded the images in a way that scholars are known for. A different sort of archive developing in her mind.

“I had almost forgotten,” she murmured. Mostly to herself. But Keelah heard. “It’s easy to forget when you live behind walls.”

The two of them made their way past an abandoned shack; a peeling billboard advertising Nuka Cola. They followed a string of fairy lights to a wooden door that was embedded in the side of a large cave.

“Um…this is where we’re going?” Yearling asked hesitantly. “A cave?”

“Don’t worry. There are no mutants inside. Or crazed animals. Quite the opposite actually.”

Keelah opened the wooden door and entered the cavern. Yearling followed closely behind; her features tight with worry.

But there wasn’t the heavy darkness she expected. More fairy lights illuminated the cave’s spacious entryway. There was a faded STOP sign just ahead; an overturned tricycle, rusted beyond repair; and a tower of wooden planks, approximating a wall.

“What is this place?” Yearling asked Keelah.

But before the wastelander could respond, a sharp voice rang out. “Stop right there or I’ll blow your fucking head off!”

Yearling flinched but Keelah didn’t bat an eye. The wastelander directed her attention to a squat figure atop the wall. What looked to be a kid or a diminutive adult. Someone wearing a combat helmet and welding a hunting rifle.

“I’m going to have to start wearing a sign so that you stop threatening to shoot me every time I visit,” Keelah directed to the pint-sized guard.

“Oh, it’s you.” The mayor of Little Lamplight, MacCready, lowered his weapon. “You usually stop through at the end of the month. You’re early.”
“I was in the neighborhood.” Keelah removed the bulging pack from her back. “I have some supplies for you.”

“Great.” But MacCready’s eyes narrowed when he saw Scribe Yearling. “Who’s the mungo?”

“A friend. You can trust her.”

“I don’t trust any mungo. You’re the exception. She stays outside.”

Keelah exchanged a look with Scribe Yearling who nodded good-naturedly. “Fine. She’ll wait here. Open the door for me.”

A jagged hole appeared beneath the wooden fortress and Keelah turned to Scribe Yearling. “I’ll only be gone a bit. Will you be okay out here?”

“Of course. I have a book I can read. And maybe your friend here wouldn’t mind keeping me company. Chatting a bit.”

“Not a chance mungo!” MacCready quickly retorted and Keelah couldn’t help but smile.

“I’d focus on the book if I were you.” She patted Yearling on the shoulder. “I’ll be back in a jiff.”

The wastelander carrier her sack past the cave’s defense wall then secured the door behind her. She was immediately besieged by enthusiastic Lamplighters.

“You’re back Key-Lock!”

“Hey! It’s the wasteland warrior!”

“Got any comics for us?”

“I’m glad you’re back. I feel safe when you’re around.”

Keelah smiled at the eager sprites. She was the only visitor they ever got, and they always made a big deal of her monthly visits. Primarily because they liked her and because she’d saved a few of their friends from slavers years ago. But also because she always came bearing gifts: books and small toys and sugary treats.

“I do have some goodies for you all, but I’m going to give them to Éclair. Let him divvy them up later.”

“Nuka Cola? You got any Nuka Cola?” Zip asked; tugging at the sack as if he could sense the caffeinated beverage within its confines.

“Sorry Zip. No Nuka Cola this time. But I do have snack cakes. And a few books I think you’ll all enjoy.”

The eldest Lamplighter, Squirrel, frowned. His usually wan face becoming even more pinched and drawn. “Books? The only one of us who could read any good was Joseph. And he’s in Big Town now.”

Keelah nodded in sympathy. A few of the Lamplighters had aged out of the settlement a little more than a year ago. Joseph. Knick Knack. Knock Knock. The small community was still recovering from the loss of its teacher; its merchant; and the resident who cheerfully told jokes and tall tales to keep the group’s morale high.
Bumble was the youngest Lamplighter, at nine years old. Then Zip and Biwwy at 12. But the rest of the Lamplighters were adolescents now; some were teens. And they seemed more aware than ever that soon it would be their turn to make that fateful trip from Lamplight Caverns to Big Town.

The worry was written on the older kids’ faces.

Keelah passed the bag of supplies over to Squirrel. “Take this to Éclair for me, will you? Tell him that the food and books are for you all. I’ll pick up the rest of my gear from him before I head out.”

Squirrel took the bag and shuffled away. Some of the younger kids followed; chittering happily; exultant at the thought of sweets. But Lucy and Penny stayed behind. And MacCready did what he always did. Observed quietly. The frown on his face as permanent as a facial feature.

Lucy brushed at a dark spot on her white dress before approaching Keelah. The resident doctor was 14 years old now and still took her job as medical professional seriously. In all the years of knowing her, Keelah had never once seen Lucy slack off or even crack a smile. The 14-year old was burdened with responsibility. She was a mother figure to nine other children and effectively the second-in-command behind MacCready. She patched up wounds; she distributed medicine; she gave soft words to those Lamplighters who were forced to leave. And those who were forced to stay behind.

The teenager stopped at Keelah’s side. Her chocolate eyes wide and sad. She was wise beyond her years. She was dejected beyond measure.

“Squirrel’s upset because his birthday is next week,” she told Keelah. “He’ll be sixteen.”

Keelah nodded. Swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. “Isn’t Éclair’s birthday coming up too?”

“It’s the week after.”

Keelah’s face betrayed no emotion but her stomach churned. She’d been escorting Lamplighters to Big Town for years now. First Sticky. Then Joseph. Then the twins, Knick Knack and Knock Knock. It was tough; seeing the kids being separated. Walking that long path from Lamplight to Big Town and pretending not to hear the sobs of her young companions.

“I’ll guess I’ll be back next week then,” Keelah responded. Her voice only slightly strained. “And the week after that.”

Lucy nodded. “Yes.” The teenager’s eyes flickered to MacCready before returning to Keelah.

Damn. She looked downright miserable. “Come see me before you leave,” she said to Keelah before walking away.

The other teenager, Penny, had been waiting quietly for her turn. As soon as she had Keelah’s undivided attention, the 15-year old pressed a folded scrap of paper into the wastelander’s hands.

“A note for my brother Joseph. You’ll take it to him, right?”

“Oh course.” Keelah tucked the letter into a pocket of her leathers. Most of the Lamplighters couldn’t read. Let alone write. But they would jot down short sentences from time to time; draw squiggly lines or pictures; and ask Keelah to deliver those missives to their friends in Big Town. It was their way of staying connected. “I’m sure Joseph will be happy to get this letter from his baby sis.”

“You don’t think he’s left Big Town, do you?” Penny asked. Her big brown eyes still so hopeful and child-like even after all this time. “He said he would wait for me. Until it’s my turn to leave Lamplight. But it’s been two years already. You don’t think he’s moved on, do you?”
Keelah hadn’t been to Big Town in several months. Her hectic travel schedule meant she only got to make repeat visits to only a couple of places. Namely Rivet City and Little Lamplight. She saw Big Town only 2 or 3 times a year. Mostly when she had to escort a Lamplighter to the tumble-down town.

“I’m sure Joseph’s still there Penny. Your brother wouldn’t leave you for all the books in the wasteland.”

Penny smiled; reassured. “Thanks Key-Lock. Will you sit beside me during dinner tonight?”

“I’m not staying for dinner Penz. Just dropping a few things off before heading back out.”

Penny’s face fell. “But we all feel so much safer when you’re around.” She shot a meaningful glance at MacCready; then moved closer to Keelah and lowered her voice. “We’ve been hearing noises from that vault. We think its monsters,” she whispered.

MacCready heard her. “Scram kid! The mungo and I have business to discuss.”

Penny made a face at the mayor but did as she was told. “I’ll save you a place at my table in case you decide to stay for dinner” she called before walking away.

MacCready waited until Penny was out of sight before hopping down from his perch on the wall. He slowly made his way to Keelah.

The mayor of Little Lamplight was a gun-toting, foul-mouthed 15-year old, but he hadn’t grown much since Keelah had first met him nearly four years ago. He barely came to the wastelander’s shoulders, and he always seemed to be out of breath. It was as if he didn’t get enough oxygen to his lungs. Keelah figured the mayor’s arrested development had a lot to do with malnutrition and a lack of sunlight. All of the Lamplighter’s suffered from some sort of malady. Some of them had chronic cough, sinus problems; others had sickly pallor, inflamed skin. Still others, like Squirrel and Princess, walked around in permanent funks—alternately depressed and infuriated by their living conditions: the shapeless food that was never filling enough; their dank living quarters that never seemed to get warm; and the slime-infested pools of water that served as bath and drinking water alike.

Most of the kids at Little Lamplight were glum. Increasingly disheartened. They lost friends too often. Spent most of their days afraid of monster attacks or slaver raids. And the only thing they had to look forward to was some far-off place called Big Town that claimed their friends every year. Claimed them and never returned them.

The only Lamplighters who ever appeared happy were the youngest ones. Zip, who was contented by Nuka Cola and anything shiny. And Bumble, who still possessed a childlike naiveté that inoculated her from the worst the cavern had to offer.

It was because of Bumble that all of the Lamplighters called Keelah “Key-lock.” When Bumble was six years old and snaggle-toothed to the point of adorable perfection, she’d had trouble pronouncing Keelah’s name. “Key-lock” became a place-holder and the other Lamplighters followed suit, addressing Keelah as such.

The misnomer amused Keelah. It was better than being called mungo.

Only one Lamplighter refused to address Keelah by the nickname and continued to use the derogatory term reserved for grownups.

“Hey mungo, let’s talk,” MacCready huffed, drawing near to Keelah. “We can grab a drink at Spelunkers. I’ll have Princess watch the front gate while we’re gone.”
He headed towards the main corridor, expecting Keelah to follow. Keelah trailed the moody teenager, sidestepping irradiated puddles of water and sickly-looking guard dogs.

The entire cavern smelled of mold and ripe piss. Flakes of dirt and mildew fell from the crumbly walls as they passed and Keelah briefly regretted not tying her hair up in a scarf. The dust would get trapped in her locs; the smell would too. There was just something about the acridness of Little Lamplight. It permeated clothing. Penetrated skin.

Keelah moved to MacCready’s side; slowed her pace to match his short gait. The mayor stared straight ahead; his face hard; his breathing labored. He looked like a soldier marching to battle rather than a kid going to get a drink.

“Eclair still running Spelunkers?” Keelah asked him; hoping to see a softening of his features.

“No. He gave it up a few weeks ago since he’ll be leaving Lamplight soon. Sammy’s the new cook.”

“How’s that working out?”

“Sammy sucks at cooking. At least Éclair knew how to make the cave fungus taste less like shit. With Sammy, it tastes more like shit.”

“Well, I bought some fruit and potatoes and a few other things. Hopefully it’ll last a couple of days. Give you all a break from the fungus.”

MacCready grunted. His version of thank you. “We’ve still been sending Penny and Squirrel out to forage for food. Sometimes they find good stuff. They bought back a few boxes of InstaMash not too long ago. It was decent enough.”

Keelah didn’t want to think about the Lamplighters eating instant mashed potatoes as a main course. The cavern didn’t have a heat source; didn’t have an oven or anything that could pass as a pot or pan. The Lamplighters would have had to have eaten the InstaMash dry. Like a buttery powder.

Keelah grimaced. “I’ll bring more food when I return next week. Maybe bring Charon with me so that I can carry more.”

“The ghoul?”

“Yeah.”

MacCready stopped walking. Glared at her. “We got enough monsters to worry about around here.”

“Charon’s not a monster. He’s my friend. And he was the one who helped me clean out Paradise Falls and get Penny, Squirrel and Sammy back.”

They exchanged heated looks. A standoff.

MacCready relented. Released a frustrated breath and resumed walking. “Fine. But he stays outside the walls.”

“Fine.” Keelah moved into the space beside him. They both slowed their pace to avoid tumbling down the steep incline that was right before Spelunkers.

“So how much do we owe ya?” MacCready asked, quickening his pace again.

“For what?”
“For the stuff you bought today. For the stuff you’ll bring next week.”

“What have I ever charged you for anything MacCready?”

The mayor shrugged. “Never. But you never know with mungos. You bunch are a fickle lot.”

Keelah sighed. Said nothing. Nearly four years of acquaintance and the mayor still didn’t trust her.

She waved at the Lamplighters who were leaving the restaurant. MacCready barked at one of the kids to go find Penny and tell her to guard the front door.

Keelah made her way over to the counter. Settled onto a barstool. The Lamplight’s new cook, 13-year old Sammy, grinned at her.

“I heard you were back Key-Lock. What’s shaking?”

“Nothing much really. Just passing through.” Keelah raised an eyebrow in surprise when MacCready sat beside her. “How are you enjoying your new gig Sammy?”

Sammy rubbed a bit of cloth across the countertop; clearing it of the greenish water that fell on it constantly from the stalactites above.

“I sort of miss scavenging with Squirrel and Penny. Getting to go outside. But it’s not too bad. I get to experiment with everything they find. Try to make yummy meals from it.” He grinned cheerfully.

“Hey, I have a new item on the menu. It’s a cave fungus and bloatfly stew. I call it fungbalaya. Wanna try it?”

Keelah exchanged a glance with MacCready. The mayor shook his head.

“Uh…that’s okay Sammy. I had a really big lunch. Maybe next time.”

“Okay.”

Sammy moved away from the counter. Went to go stir something in a large round container at the back of the restaurant. Keelah peered closer. The container was a world globe from the classroom. Cut in half and hollowed out to make a mixing bowl.

Keelah shook her head in disbelief; turned her attention to MacCready. “So what’s this business you wanted to discuss?” she asked the mayor.

“Hey Sammy! Get us some water will you?” MacCready yelled. The mayor waited until the cook retreated into the storage area before turning to Keelah. “It’s about those monsters Penny was telling you about.”

“Wait…y’all really have been hearing monsters?”

“We don’t know what it is. But there’s something making noise in that vault. And whatever it is, it sounds big. Real big.”

Keelah sighed. Rubbed a hand across her forehead in frustration.

Vault 87. The vault she’d had to enter to get the G.E.C.K. The vault that had accelerated her confrontation with the Enclave. The vault had been swarming with super mutants and their centaur pets. But she and Charon had cleaned the place out before the Enclave had abducted her.

“There shouldn’t be anything left in there,” she told MacCready. “Just cobwebs and radroaches.”
MacCready shook his head. “There’s something in there. Maybe not a monster. But someone or something is banging against that door, trying to get out.” He drummed his fingers against the countertop. Clearly anxious. “Could be scavengers who happened upon the vault. Who are trying to cart off all the electronics. Could be more slavers setting up a base of operations. Whoever it is. Whatever…we can’t have them opening that door and finding Little Lamplight.”

MacCready stopped speaking when Sammy returned with two bottles of water.

“Here ya go Mac. It’s the last two bottles we have in storage. We’ll have to drink groundwater until Penny and Squirrel find more.”

Keelah could have kicked herself. “Damn it. I knew I forgot something. I’ll bring more bottled water next week.”

MacCready took one of the water bottles. Waved the other one away. “The mungo and I will share this one. Save the other bottle for Lucy. She uses it to help the younger kids wash down their meds.”

Sammy walked away to return the bottle of water to the shelf. The mayor took a long sip of water. Extended the bottle to Keelah.

“That’s okay MacCready. I have water in my pack. I can wait.”

“Don’t be rude mungo.” He narrowed his eyes at her. Shook the bottle in her direction. Keelah took the bottle of water. Drank a sip. Passed it back.

“So what do you want me to do here MacCready? Go back into the vault and clear it again?”

MacCready twisted the bottle in his hand; suddenly nervous. “No. You could clear it a hundred times. There’ll always be someone who tries to get back in. Who runs the chance of discovering this cave. Truth is…I was hoping you would consider moving into Little Lamplight. Permanently.”

Keelah nearly choked in surprise. “What?!!”

“Well…I figure there’s always going to be some new problem. Monsters in the vault. Raiders outside the front door. We need someone here round the clock to look out for us. Someone big who’s good with guns.” He cleared his throat. “It’s not like we’re helpless. I can shoot pretty well and so can Princess and Squirrel. But we’re running out of able bodies. Squirrel’s leaving next week. And Éclair right after that. That’s two of our strongest Lighters. I’m not sure me and Lucy can run things on our own.” It was hard for MacCready to look at Keelah. He fidgeted. Curled dirty fingers around the plastic bottle. “You’re friendly with everyone here. And all the young ones feel safer when you’re around. I just figured…you know…that you could move in and be sort of like…you know…”

“A parent?”

MacCready scowled. “No! …Yes... I don’t know!” He flung the water bottle across the room in a sudden outburst. They both watched it clatter messily against the cave wall. MacCready breathed heavily. A faint whistling emanating from his chest, suggesting illness. “We’re not babies. We’ve been on our own for years and haven’t need any help from mungos. I’m not a wimp either so don’t be thinking that.” He glared at Keelah, savagely, as if she had dared to call him such a thing. “But I’m the mayor. And I’m a good one. And I know when to ask for help. So I’m asking…will you move into Little Lamplight and help us out for a while?” It pained him to ask, Keelah could tell, but his eyes were sincere. Non-threatening. “We’ll give you your own room and everything. You can turn Knick Knack’s old shop into your living quarters.”
Keelah’s mouth opened. Then closed. She was speechless.

MacCready turned away from her. Stared at Sammy, several feet away from them, stirring god-knows-what in a bastardized mixing bowl.

“T’m 15 years old,” MacCready said softly. “You know that, right? I’ll be sixteen in four months. I just want to make sure someone will be here who can look out for the little ones.”

He brushed a hand across his face, lingering below his eyes. He couldn’t have been wiping away tears, could he? The no-nonsense mayor of Little Lamplight wouldn’t cry. Would he?

But Keelah couldn’t be sure. She stared in shock at the teenager next to her; an undersized boy who had been playing grownup for far too long.

“MacCready…” she stammered. “I want to help Little Lamplight. I do. But I already have a home.” Sort of. “And I have responsibilities outside. A lot of people who depend on me.”

She had Bryan Wilkes to think about. And Charon. And her work with the Brotherhood of Steel. Not to mention Susie and all the other wastelanders who relied on her trading.

“I’m sorry MacCready, but I don’t think I can move into Little Lamplight. I just can’t.”

She wanted to say more. To apologize. To explain. To reassure that she’d use her weapons and skillset to protect the Lamplighters from whatever dangers that arose. But Keelah knew, intuitively, that MacCready wouldn’t appreciate her excuses. She also knew, from personal experience, that apologies did little to dampen a person’s hysteries; their fear that some terrible beast was lurking behind their door; waiting beneath their bed. Ready to devour them.

The Lamplighters clearly wanted her presence not her words. And the disappointment that filled MacCready’s face was so plain that Keelah was momentarily blinded by it.

She expected the mayor to shout at her. Or insult her. But the teenager simply turned in his seat. Hopped down from the high bar stool and gave her a somber look.

“Thanks anyway. I’m going to head back to my post. I’ll see you next week when you come for Squirrel.”

He turned to leave.

“Now hold on,” Keelah quickly said; hastening over to him. “I’m not going to do nothing. When I come back next week, I’ll bring Charon. We’ll go over the vault with a fine tooth comb. Make sure there’s nothing in there that can get inside Little Lamplight.”

MacCready stared at her. His eyes as solemn and wise as Lucy’s. “And what about the outside? You gonna clear that for us too? We have two murder passes we have to worry about.”

Keelah swallowed. Felt a pang of guilt. Of course there was nothing she could do about the front gate. About the open-faced rock and fairy lights that led right to Little Lamplight and its occupants. She couldn’t clear the desert! What did this kid want from her?

Keelah licked suddenly dry lips. “I’ll be back next week,” she said. Using her confident voice. “I’ll bring food and water and a whole hell of a lot of firepower. Okay?”

MacCready nodded. Turned on his heels. “See you later mungo.”
Keelah stared after him; watched the teenager’s shuffling gait; his thin, shrunken frame that seemed too small to be carrying such a heavy weapon. She chewed on a fingernail; idly. And wondered how a child could make her feel so positively useless.

. . . .

She headed for the clinic next, to meet up with Lucy. Ran into Éclair along the way. The former cook was lugging her travel pack; his dusty top hat off-balance on his head.

The 15 year old handed her the duffle. “Thanks for the supplies Key-Lock. I divvied everything up like you requested. Even gave the dogs a treat. Here’s your stuff back.”

“Thanks.” Keelah gave her a pack a quick inspection; removed three bottles of water. That left her with two. Enough to get her halfway to Arlington Library. She’d buy more water off a traveling merchant or something. Do a bit of scavenging to replenish her water supply.

She handed the three waters to Éclair. “Give these to Sammy to use for dinner tonight.”

Éclair grimaced at the mention of Sammy. “That kid is a terrible cook. Good thing we don’t know how to make fire. Otherwise he would have burned this shithole down already.”

He quirked an eyebrow at Keelah, his pale eyes shimmering in the darkened cave, and Keelah was struck again by how jovial the kid was.

Éclair had always been a bit of a smart ass: insulting Keelah for not knowing herbs and spices as well as he did (he hadn’t encountered a single herb or spice himself, but he studied cookbooks religiously and considered himself an expert) as well as publicly lamenting her fashion choices (“You have all those caps Key-Lock and the best you can do is a bandana?”).

Most of the older Lamplighters were perpetually serious. But Éclair? The kid was a firecracker. A lightening bug trapped in a cave-shaped jar.

“So Éclair…I heard your birthday’s in a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah. Why? You going to get me something? I wear a size seven in shoes. And I’m partial to loafers.”

Keelah sighed. “No, kid. I’m going to be escorting you to Big Town in a couple of weeks. You ready for that?”

Éclair chuckled. It wasn’t joyful. But it wasn’t entirely mirthless either. “I’ve been prepared for that trip for fifteen years. It’s destiny.” He tilted his head. Looked at Keelah in a way that made the wastelander’s heart hurt. “Is it true that they have apple trees at Big Town? And an outdoor pool with a slide and everything?”

Keelah’s mouth became a thin line. Her eyes blinked unnaturally. Big Town didn’t have either of those things. Didn’t even have mattresses or running water. It honestly wasn’t much better than Little Lamplight.

But Éclair saved her from revealing that truth. Or from lying. “Wait. Don’t tell me. I’d rather be surprised.” He grinned at her. “Maybe you can find me some swim trunks or something, huh? But nothing too gaudy. I’m more of a neutral color kind of guy.”

And he gave her a friendly pat on the back before walking away. Headed back towards the restaurant that was no longer his.
By the time Keelah reached the clinic, she was forlorn. Her mind filled to brimming with MacCready’s bold request and Éclair and Squirrel’s impending departure.

She found Lucy in her office, sitting behind an oversized desk. The teenager looked natural in the professional setting—competent; composed—and for a moment Keelah thought of Amata. Another teenager thrust into leadership.

“You wanted to speak to me Lucy?”

Keelah settled into the chair across from Lucy; smiled when she noticed Bumble sitting cross-legged in the corner. The 9-year old was overly attached to Lucy. Rarely left the doctor’s side.

“Thank you for coming Key-Lock,” Lucy began; folding her hands on the table; looking older than her years. “MacCready told me he spoke with you.”

Keelah shifted in her seat. “Yes. He said the Lamplighters are worried about the vault.” She shot a quick glance at Bumble. Made sure the little one couldn’t overhear. “Worried that there may be monsters or slavers on the other side of the vault door.”

Lucy nodded. “Yes. We are worried about that. But that’s not all. We worry about Penny and Squirrel whenever they go out to forage. Worry that they’ll be kidnapped again.” Her eyes darkened. “We worry about the quality of food we’re consuming. The cave fungus is…unsavory, of course. But what’s more concerning is the source of the fungus. The strange meat it consumes to reproduce itself. We can’t be sure of the impact the fungus is having on our bodies.” She sighed. “And we worry about drafts and illness and ghosts and a whole lot of other things both practical and impractical.” Keelah studied the teenaged doctor through morose eyes... Lucy was brilliant. She always had been. A doctor at seven years old. A surrogate mother well before then.

“Are you asking me to move in here too?” Keelah asked her.

“No. I told MacCready not to ask that. You do enough for us already.” Something flickered in the teenager’s eyes. “But there is something you can do for me.” She sighed heavily. Toyed with her earlobe. “MacCready’s sick. Has a cough that hasn’t gone away in more than a year. Sometimes there’s blood when he coughs. He tries to hide it. But it’s my job to pay attention to things like that… I think he could have an infection. His lungs maybe. Or something in his throat. I know you know a thing or two about medicine. I was hoping you could offer a second opinion. Make some sort of recommendation.” She stared at Keelah. Hopeful.

“I’m more skilled at tending bullet holes and things like that Lucy, but it sounds like MacCready could have a chest infection or something. A kid I grew up with had a bad case of bronchitis once. My dad put him on antibiotics. I can ask around. See if I can find anything like that in the wastes.”

“I would appreciate that. MacCready’s a bit of a blow-hard, but we need him around here. Don’t want that cough getting the best of him.”

Keelah nodded. Once again, too overcome to formulate sentences. After an extended silence, the wastelander finally rose to her feet. “I need to head out. I have a friend waiting for me.”

Lucy stood as well. Followed Keelah to the door. “Thank you again Key-Lock.”

Keelah smiled at the doctor. And leaned into the embrace that was pressed against her right leg by an exuberant Bumble.

“Later Bumble Bee,” Keelah said, smiling into the little girl’s hair.
She tossed a wave to Lucy, to Bumble, to MacCready and the other Lamplighters who had gathered near the front door to see her out.

MacCready nodded from his perch atop the wall; his eyes somber; his choppy breathing audible.

Keelah found Scribe Yearling right where she’d left her. Leaning against the STOP sign; book in hand. But this time the librarian had company.

Penny sat cross-legged on the ground in front of the scribe, listening in rapt fascination to whatever story Yearling was currently reading her.

The librarian perked up when she saw Keelah. Closed her book after a soft smile directed to Penny.

“Looks like you did okay on your own,” Keelah told the scribe.

“Yes. I made a friend.” Scribe Yearling beamed at Penny; who’d risen to her feet and come to stand by Yearling’s side. “Penny and I made it a quarter of the way through this book. We almost got to the best part.”

Penny’s face practically glowed. “She reads really pretty.”

Keelah laughed. “Yes, she does.” She turned to Yearling. “You ready to go? If we move double time, we should be able to reach the library before nightfall.”

“Sure.” Yearling turned to Penny. “How ‘bout I leave this book with you so that you can finish it? You’re going to love what happens in the next chapter.”

“But I don’t know how to read that well. Only short sentences.” The teenager looked crestfallen and Scribe Yearling’s mouth trembled at the girl’s sad expression.

“Okay…well, what about this then? I’ll leave the book with Keelah. And Keelah can finish reading the book to you the next time she visits. How does that sound?”

Penny pumped her fist. “Yeah!”

Keelah raised an eyebrow at Yearling. “You just volunteered me?”

“Yes, I did.” Yearling turned back to Penny. “I also have an entire shelf of books back at the library that I think you and your friends will enjoy. They’re full of pictures and fantastical stories. Some of them have talking animals and genies and things like that.” She smiled. A resplendent slash of her mouth. “Would you like that? I’ll have Keelah bring them on her next visit.”

“I thought no one could check books out of the library?” Keelah asked dryly.

Yearling didn’t even bother to look at the wastelander. “I’ll make an exception…Would you like that Penny?”

Penny jumped up and down happily. Clapped her hands. “Yes. Maybe with those books, I can teach the other Lighters how to read. Like my brother used to.”

“That’s a great idea!” Scribe Yearling seemed to be in her element. The librarian practically hummed with energy. So excited to be sharing books with people who weren’t Brotherhood of Steel.

Yearling presented the book to the giddy teenager. Keelah just barely caught the title: Bridge to Terabithia.
“You hold on to this,” Yearling told Penny. “And Keelah will finish reading it to you on her next trip. Right Keelah?”

Keelah smiled at Yearling. Not at all bothered by the woman’s bossiness. “Absolutely. Now let’s get moving Professor. We have a lot of miles ahead of us.”

Keelah patted Penny on the back; gave a final nod to Mayor MacCready; then led Scribe Yearling past the overturned tricycle; past the flimsy wood door. Past the twinkling fairly lights—Christmas ornaments, long repurposed.

The two women walked back into the Capital Wasteland. That unforgiving desert that gobbled up little kids. Turned them into mungos.

Chapter End Notes

Little Lamplighters!! I just had to include them in this story. Their living conditions always made me sad. I hope I captured their misfortune and resilience well enough.

**Chapter title inspired by Justin Nozuka song.**
No Love Dying

Chapter Summary

More trouble on the home front means a return to Vault 101.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15– No Love Dying

Tuesday found Keelah waiting outside of Vault 101 for her appointment with Susie. Actually, it was more accurate to say that she was waiting above Vault 101.

Not wanting to draw attention to the vault’s location, the wastelander had settled into a rocky alcove directly above the vault’s outer door. The secluded location hid Keelah from view of any passerbys and also gave the wastelander an opportunity to take a much-needed breather. She’d been walking non-stop for five days now. Traveling from Little Lamplight to Arlington Library then on to Rivet City; now back west to Vault 101.

She was exhausted, dehydrated, and more than a little irritable. She needed a shower, a stiff drink, and a few nights’ sleep. In whichever order she could get it.

If Susie agreed to it, Keelah planned to postpone their trading lesson for a week or two. She would then go to Megaton and get a few days rest before heading back to Little Lamplight with Charon to investigate Vault 87. Uncover what manner of man or beast was scaring the Lamplighters so badly.

Keelah squirmed against the rocky surface; tried to find a comfortable position to stretch out in. More than ever she felt like the Capital Wasteland’s designated errand girl. While it was true that she enjoyed helping people and usually performed all of her requested tasks for free, her To-Do list as of late was growing to the point of being unsustainable. She already had her regular runs to Rivet City and Little Lamplight; was consistently called upon to do grunt work for the Brotherhood of Steel and Reilly’s Rangers. She scavenged constantly to fill requests for blood packs and scrap metal; she carried out supply runs for needy townships like Arefu and the Democracy of Rosie (formerly the Republic of Dave). And several times a month she was summoned to Canterbury Commons to convene with the four trade caravans she invested in.

Even with a Pip-Boy, it was becoming nearly impossible to keep track of all of her assignments.

And now she’d committed herself to helping Susie launch the Vault 101 trade caravan.

What the fuck am I doing? Keelah thought irritably; spitting out granules of dirt that had found their way inside her mouth. I shouldn’t have agreed to this caravan thing. The 101ers don’t even like me.

They hated her. They wanted her dead. Yet somehow she’d signed on to be their flunky.

She growled in frustration and made a snap decision. I’m not going to go through with it, she grumbled. Her thoughts fueled by her fatigue and her still undiminished resentment of Vault 101.
When Susie comes out, I’m going to tell her I changed my mind about this caravan thing. I’ll see if Crazy Wolfgang or Doc Hoff will take her on as an intern. They’re always looking for extra help. But I’m not involving myself in any more Vault 101 affairs.

Mind made up, she turned her attention to the road below her. Watched as a trio of hunters descended on a panicked mole rat. It was damn easy for predators to become prey in the Capital Wasteland, and Keelah watched dispassionately as the hunters slew the outmatched animal; carved its body up for meat and pelt.

I’m so sick of it all, Keelah thought to herself. Her right leg nearly numb from the awkward angle it was in. Sick of traveling. Sick of people. Sick of this damn desert.

She would quit on Susie Mack and Vault 101. Then go home to Megaton and drink herself into a long dreamless sleep.

The wooden door creaked open below her and Keelah positioned her head so that she could see the person exiting. It was Susie. Her blond hair a brilliant hue in the sun; her blue jumpsuit discarded for the recon armor Keelah had gifted her last week.

Keelah shimmied her way out of the rocky nook; braced her hands against the jagged surface and jumped.

She landed deftly in front of Susie and put up a hand up when the blonde reared back to attack.

“It’s me Susie!”

“Oi!” the vaulter exclaimed. “Give a girl a warning next time. You trying to give me a heart attack or something?”

“Sorry.” Keelah brushed dirt and bits of rock off of her leather armor; squinted a bit to see Susie through the intense sunlight.

Apparently Susie could see well enough. “You look like shit,” she told the wastelander.

Keelah shrugged. “That’s actually what I need to talk to you about. About this caravan thing—”

“Let’s call a timeout on the caravan for a second, alright? There are more pressing matters we need to discuss.”

Keelah was immediately wary. “Like what?”

“Remember when I told you Christine Kendall was pregnant?”

“Yeah…?”

“Well, I neglected to mention that she’s very pregnant. Like eight months and some change pregnant. We’re expecting the baby any day now.”

There was a sudden roaring in Keelah’s brain. An internal alarm that jangled her nerves and prompted a low-grade headache. Keelah placed a hand over her right ear; tried to calm the dissonance in her head. But it didn’t help. The sound grew. The pressure against her forehead intensified. She blinked. “Why are you telling me this Susie?”

A sheepish look crossed the blonde’s face. “Uh…”

“Please tell me you want me to name the baby,” Keelah said.
“Actually…we were hoping you would deliver it.”

Keelah left Susie by the vault door. Stalked off in the direction of Megaton without a backwards glance. The blonde hurried to catch up with her. Tripping over rocks and twisted branches in her path; nearly stumbling into Keelah from behind.

“Wait Keelah!” Susie panted; breaking into a semi-jog to keep up with the wastelander’s frantic pace.

“I’m not going to deliver Christine’s baby!” Keelah sputtered. “I’m not a doctor!”

“But you’re the closest thing we have.” Susie put a hand out. Grabbed Keelah’s arm. Stopped the woman in her tracks. “Will you slow down for a second? It’s not that big a deal. Christine’s going to do most of the work. We just need you to supervise. Make sure nothing goes wrong during delivery. And…you know…catch the baby when it comes out.”

Keelah rolled her eyes. Resumed walking. “You’re being ridiculous. It requires much more than that. Didn’t you pay attention at all in health class?”

“No, I didn’t. But I know you did. I also know your dad taught you a lot of stuff before he skipped out. So why can’t you do this for us?”

Keelah whirled on her. Suddenly furious. “Because I don’t want to! 101ers damn near chased me out of the vault with torches and pitchforks. Now they want me to come back and play Mother Hen? No! Get someone else.” She continued her trek across the sand; her hands clenching into fists.

Susie kept pace with her. “Christine wasn’t part of that mob. She didn’t do anything to you. I thought the two of you were friends!”

“We’re not!”

She and Christine hadn’t even spoken in high school. Christine had been friendlier than some of Keelah’s other classmates, but the two of them hadn’t been close by any stretch of the imagination.

“She needs your help Keelah.”

“Tough. I’m done with the vault. Find someone else.”

Susie stopped in her tracks. Spoke to Keelah’s back. “Who? We don’t know anyone out here. You’re our best option. Our only option.” Keelah stopped walking but didn’t turn around. “Keelah, we’ve had people die from leg infections. From fevers. Things have gotten that bad. We don’t want to lose Christine. Or this baby. Please help us.”

Keelah’s shoulders slumped. The hand went back to her ear. To the violent sound pressing against her skull.

The wastelander turned around slowly. Looked at Susie and sighed. “I’m not qualified to perform this kind of procedure. I could fuck up. End up hurting her. Or worse.”

“You saved Beatrice.”

“This isn’t the same as all that.” Keelah stared off into the distance. At the walled city that was only a few clicks away; that she could retreat to and hide within for a few days.
“Will you at least come check on Christine?” Susie asked. “She’s in a lot of pain. And doesn’t look well. Everyone’s worried.”

“So you want me to go back into the vault?”

“I know it’s a lot to ask.”

“It is a lot to ask! Those fuckers chased me out twice!” Keelah gnashed her teeth; tasted the metallic tang of blood. “So fuck you Susie Mack for even daring to ask such a thing.”

Susie didn’t seem to be offended by the harsh language. She just stared at Keelah. Waiting.

Keelah spat. Watched the rust-colored blood seep into the wasteland floor. Disappear. She closed her eyes and counted to ten. Gave herself time to think.

Everyone always wanted something from her. Wanted her to kill monsters and resurrect robots. Wanted her to disarm bombs and recover artifacts. Now she was expected to deliver a baby. A baby!

“This is bullshit,” she directed at a dust-tinged sky. And she would have yelled; thrown something; swore at Susie again. But what would have been the point?

She finally looked at the blonde. “I’ll check on Christine. But that’s it. No more playing doctor for the vault.” She brushed past Susie. “Sorry for swearing at you.”

Susie put a hand against Keelah’s back. Her apology for putting the wastelander in such an unenviable spot.

The women exchange a brief glance; communicating. Then headed back towards Vault 101.

Keelah expected to be shot at when she reentered the vault. She expected slurs to be hurled her way; maybe even a couple of jagged items lobbed at her head.

But she and Susie made it all the way from the vault door to Christine’s bedroom with no incident; no shouting; no projectiles fired at her person.

There were whispers of course. Rabid and obvious; and a crowd soon gathered outside of Christine’s bedroom. But the nosy vaulters only stood there quietly. Observed Keelah as she knelt beside the prone woman’s bed.

The wastelander put a hand to the dozing woman’s forehead. Tried to gauge her temperature.

“I’ll go tell Amata you’re here,” Susie said. “And I’ll get Christine’s dad.”

“Officer Kendall?” Keelah asked. Susie nodded. “No. The man hates me. I’d rather not have a scuffle over his pregnant daughter.”

“No one hates you Keelah. I told you that. A lot has changed since last time.”

Keelah frowned. Disbelieving. But when her eyes flickered to the crowd of people outside Christine’s door, she didn’t see the angry faces from years before—those contorted visages of people who’d wanted to tear her apart. She only saw worry and fatigue. And a telltale hopefulness that her arrival portended something positive for their fellow vaulter Christine Kendall.

“I’ll be right back,” Susie murmured before exiting the room.
Keelah returned her attention to Christine. The young woman was pale and covered in a sheen of sweat. Even though Christine was visibly pregnant, it was clear that the woman was underweight. Her limbs were bony and fragile-looking; her collarbone too visible.

Christine stirred under Keelah’s hand; her eyes opening; revealing a dazed expression.

“Hey CK,” Keelah whispered, smiling softly. “Looks like you’re going to give birth to the first vault baby in more than ten years. How you feeling?”

Christine tried to blink herself into lucidness. “My stomach hurts a bit. On the inside. But my dad says it’s normal.” She turned worried eyes on Keelah. “Is it?”

“Umm…I’m not really the expert on things like that CK. But I’m going to check your vitals, okay? And I got some medicine in my pack that I think may help with the stomach pain. Show me where it hurts.”

Christine put a trembling hand on her side. Crossed it over to the top of her belly. “My back too,” the woman husked.

Keelah put both hands on the woman’s belly. Tried to feel through the oversized vault suit the woman was wearing. “Does it feel like you’re having cramps?” she asked Christine.

“Yes.” Christine grimaced. “And I thought menstrual cramps were bad.”

Keelah smiled affectionately. Massaged a spot near the woman’s hip to help relieve some of the pressure. “I want you to concentrate on your baby. Think about baby names and footy pajamas.”

Christine’s eyes closed. Fluttered softly at the rhythmic movement of Keelah’s hands on her stomach. “I hope it’s a girl,” she whispered. “I’d name her Monica. After my sister.”

Little Monica Kendall. Who’d died in a fire during James’ escape from the vault.

Keelah looked over her shoulder. Tried to pick a face from the crowd. “Pepper?” she called.

Freddie Gomez’s mother stepped forward. The last time Keelah had seen the impetuous woman, she’d been shouting in Keelah’s face; clamoring for her banishment.

“Will you make Christine some tea please? I think it’ll help with the contractions.”

Pepper nodded fervently. “Yes, yes…of course,” she stammered. “Should I put lemon in it? Or…or some jasmine oil? That helped me when I was pregnant with Freddie. Or maybe I should make her up a salve that we can put on her back? Her back has to be killing her…” She rambled on; incoherent sentences; and her eyes tracked Christine’s sweat-dampened face. Pepper looked close to dissolving in hysterics.

“Tea will be fine for now. And heat a few towels as well. It’ll help with the cramps.”

Pepper nodded energetically; her hands quivering uncontrollably near her face. She raced out of the room and nearly collided with Amata.

“Sorry Overseer,” Pepper panted before sprinting off down the hall.

Amata entered the bedroom, trailed by Susie and Officer Kendall.

Keelah rose to her feet, her eyes narrowing when she saw the armed guard. She readied herself for a confrontation.
But Officer Kendall simply moved to his daughter’s side. Clasped one of Christine’s hands in his and gave Keelah a worried look.

“She’s been running a fever for days. And she can’t keep any food down. That can’t be good for the baby.” He brushed damp hair away from Christine’s face; clenched her hand tight in his and tried to keep his composure. “Can you help her?” he asked Keelah.

Keelah looked between him and Amata. Abashed. “I’m not a doctor,” she said; her voice laced with apology.

Amata put a hand on Keelah’s elbow. A tentative gesture—brief—meant to reassure. “Anything you can do will be appreciated.”

“Christine’s always been a bit sickly,” Officer Kendall murmured. His eyes trained on his daughter’s sunken cheeks. “Gets it from her mother. My wife Mary could catch a cold in her sleep.” He turned tortured eyes on Keelah. “Christine’s all I got left. I’ll do anything…just help her. Please.”

Keelah stared at the man who had brayed for her blood not even three years ago. Then turned her attention to his daughter—so pale and still. Damn near corpse-like.

“Can I speak to you privately?” Keelah asked Amata.

The overseer nodded. “Give us a second John,” she told Officer Kendall, before leading Keelah out of the bedroom. Past the murmuring crowd and anxious faces. Through the corridor and up the stairs. Until, finally, they arrived at the overseer’s office.

Keelah hesitated outside the office door. Bad memories resurfacing. But the wastelander quickly pushed past her unease. Accepted the seat Amata pulled out for her. Faced her former lover; her former friend.

“She needs a real doctor,” Keelah began. “And not just because of the pregnancy. Her eyes are yellow…her skin clammy. I think Christine’s in a bad way. Maybe some type of infection or internal bleeding. She could actually be too sick to give birth.”

“What does that mean?”

“She could require surgery. A caesarean. To remove the baby.”

“Oh my God.” Amata looked distraught. Her hands spasmed against her desk. Desperate for something to do. “Don’t you know a midwife or something? Someone who specializes in these types of things? I mean…surely people are still having children in the Capital Wastes?”

“Of course they are.” Keelah scooted her chair closer to the desk. Put a hand on top of Amata’s to still the woman’s nervous tremoring. “I don’t know any midwives or specialists. But I do know a few doctors. I can ask around and see if any of them are willing to make a house call. Or in this case, a vault call.”

She studied the back of Amata’s hand. Her fingertips idly tracing patterns against the brown skin.

The handholding had been unconscious, instinctual, and when Keelah finally realized what it was she was doing, she snatched her hand away. As if she’d been scalded by something hot.

The wastelander hesitantly met Amata’s gaze. Saw a mixture of affection and melancholy in the young woman’s eyes.
Amata gave her a muted smile. “Thank you for coming back to help us. Again.”

Keelah shrugged. Tried not to let Amata’s breathy tone affect her. “I’m just getting you a doctor. No need to throw a parade or anything.”

“You deserve a parade. For everything you’ve done for us.”

Keelah snorted. “Instead I get a public flogging.” Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t think I’ll get spit on this time, do you?”

Amata rose from her chair. Crossed over to Keelah and perched on the side of the desk. She stared down at Keelah with soft eyes. “I’ve spent the three years of my term as overseer reminding our community just how integral you were to our recovery. How you saved Beatrice’s life. How you helped oust a tyrant.” Her eyes darkened momentarily. “I pride myself on being an evenhanded and compassionate overseer, but I’m sure everyone realizes that any hostility directed towards my…best friend…will not be taken kindly.” Her voice quavered. “…will not be taken kindly.” She smiled. Or what was an anguished approximation of a smile. “I wish you would have returned three years ago so that I could have told you that. Things have changed a great deal since you were last here. You’re welcome in Vault 101 Keelah.”

Keelah looked away from her; from those glowing, earnest eyes. She clamored to her feet and put distance between herself and Amata.

“Yeah, well…I appreciate your PR efforts and all…” Amata looked hurt by the comment. “…but I’m not trying to come home this time. And I could care less about mending fences. I just want to help Christine and get on my way.” She gave Amata a pointed look. “Okay?”


Keelah clapped her hands together. Affected a cheery tone. “Great! Now I need to get going. Christine’s baby won’t wait much longer.”

She turned towards the door. Her mind already racing with ideas of which city to start in; which doctors to recruit.

There weren’t a ton of medical professionals in the Capital Wasteland, but there were enough. One of them had to know how to treat a significantly ill woman; how to perform a caesarean.

Keelah slapped the button on the wall panel; waited for the door to slide open so that she could leave.

She heard her name called. Whisper-soft. And turned back around.

“Hmmm?”

Amata walked over to her. Stopped within a breath of Keelah. Stared up at her. Her eyes nakedly wanting. “Will you indulge me for one second?” the overseer asked.

“Ummm…Yeah?”

Amata smiled. Wrapped her arms around Keelah. Held her gingerly and reverently as if Keelah were the most delicate thing.

“I’d regretted not doing this the last time I saw you,” Amata confessed. Her proximity causing the words to press against Keelah’s neck.
The wastelander stood stock still. Her senses overcome with everything Amata. The sweet-smelling hair; the warm body; the delicious press of Amata’s skin.

Keelah breathed heavily into the russet curls; her eyes closing against will; every nerve ending in her body singing.

And just that quickly, it was over. Amata stepped back.

And Keelah let her.

They stared at each other. One breathless moment. Then Keelah cleared her throat and backpedaled out of the room.

“Keelah!” Amata called. “You’ll need the password to get back into the vault.”

Keelah retraced her steps. Stuck her head around the door. “What is it?”

“Catherine,” Amata murmured.

Keelah’s first name. Her mother’s name.

The wastelander’s eyes watered. From sadness or longing. She couldn’t tell.

But she could see well enough to know that Amata’s eyes weren’t dry either.

Keelah high tailed it out there; nearly tripping over her own feet.

She sprinted through the metal corridors—practically a blur—but she wasn’t so fast that she didn’t see the vaulters waving at her. Some of them smiling. Others looking pleased to see her.

The civility unnerved Keelah; made her fumble with the passcode to the vault door; misspell her own name.

But a few seconds later she was back in the dusty tunnel; racing down that well-trod path; headed away from Vault 101. But this time temporarily.

The first vault baby in ten years.

The thought made Keelah run even harder.

She had a feeling she wouldn’t be getting a shower or sleep any time soon.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Gregory Porter song.
Chapter Summary

With the clock ticking for Christine, Keelah tries to find a capable doctor.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was really fun to write. I rather enjoyed backtracking through so many characters and making the LW do a bit of a scavenger hunt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 16– Highway Run into the Sun

Keelah started with the doctor closest to her, Doc Church in Megaton.

“Can’t help you,” the cantankerous surgeon said when Keelah made her request. “My hands are full enough taking care of people I actually like. I don’t have time to patch up strangers.”

Keelah’s hands clenched on the doctor’s messy desk, and the wastelander leaned forward in her seat; tried to communicate with her eyes how important this mission was.

“Come on Doc, it’s not even a thirty minute trip. You’ll be there and back in a day.”

“Don’t care.” Doc Church rose from his seat; strolled over to his filing cabinet and began sorting papers. “I don’t step a foot outside these walls. I have a good setup here in Megaton. No way am I going to risk my neck for some vaultie.”

Keelah released a frustrated breath. Jumped up from her seat and joined the doctor at the cabinet. “I’ll pay you. 500 caps.” Doc Church released a hearty laugh. “1000!” Keelah said.

The grizzled doctor narrowed his eyes at her; his bushy white eyebrows so thick that they nearly created a unibrow. “Look here girl, not everyone in Megaton is desperate for caps. I probably have more money than you do.”

He shooed her out of his way. Crossed over to his supply table and began sterilizing tools. He’d effectively dismissed her. He hummed under his breath as he handled his medical equipment.

The cavalier attitude annoyed an already exasperated Keelah. “She could die Church.”

The doctor didn’t even turn around. “People die all the time.”

“5000 caps.”

He turned around at that. Raised an eyebrow at the exorbitant sum. Then chuckled again before
crossing his arms. Leaned back against his work station. “You ever hear of a place called the Hi-Light? It's out east? Near Maryland?”

“No.”

“It’s what you would call a…gentlemen’s club.” A slow smile stretched across his face. “Supposedly they have cold beer on tap and pretty-faced women who bring it to you.” Keelah’s lip curled in displeasure but Doc Church only laughed at her reaction. “I’ve always wanted to visit the place. I got the caps and the appetite for such a trip. But I’ve never gone. And I probably never will. You wanna know why? ‘Cause I like having all my body parts intact and venturing outside these gates would risk that.” The smile disappeared from his face. Replaced by a severe scowl. “Now if cold beer and scantily clad women won’t get me out of Megaton, what makes you think some sob story about a sick vaultie will?”

Keelah cut her eyes at the painfully honest man. Muttered under her breath.

Doc Church walked over and clapped her on the shoulder; laughed again at the woman’s thinly disguised ire.

“I like you kid, but you’ve over Stayed your welcome. Unless you got a hole that needs patching or some radiation that needs healing, I need you to take your leave.”

He pointed to the crudely made sign hanging above his office door:

**Rule Number 1: Don’t Bother Doc Church**

“Fine!” Keelah huffed, stomping towards the door. “But from now on, I’m buying my Stimpacks from Moira.”

Doc Church laughed so hard that he actually doubled over. “Shit girl. Moira buys her Stimpacks from me. Either way, I win.”

Keelah left the medical clinic with the doctor’s laughter still ringing in her ears.

Sometimes she despised the old man. Fantasized about ways to torment him: planting cherry bombs in his latrine; toilet papering his office; or (even worse!) organizing his desk.

But then she’d remember that Doc Church was the person who tended her wounds that first night out of the vault. Who’d fished buckshot out of her skin and fed her Stimpacks until she could walk on her own two feet.

Back then she didn’t have money to pay the doctor; didn’t even know what a cap was. And Doc Church had taken a broken baseball bat as payment.

“Get outta here kid,” he’d said that first night. Shooing her out of his office the same way he did just now.

Eh…maybe she *would* continue to purchase Stimpacks from him. But she’d also sort the paperwork on his desk. Just to irritate him.

Keelah jogged up the ramp towards the Megaton entrance. She had more doctors to see.

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She tried the medical staff at the Citadel.
The Brotherhood of Steel had several doctors (even had a few specialists). Surely they could spare a clinician for half a day.

“No can do Keelah,” Sarah Lyons said. The proud sentinel barked an order at one of her recruits before turning her attention back to Keelah. The two women walked a diagonal path across the bailey; sidestepping sparring soldiers and avoiding the firing range areas.

The bailey was loud. Heavy with sounds of combat training and bellowing officers. Sarah had to shout to be heard.

“Two of our doctors are stationed downtown helping with Super Mutant extermination. Our fighting is heaviest there and we can’t afford to pull them out. Another doctor, Herschel, is set up at Jefferson Memorial. Tending to the Brotherhood members at the purifier. That leaves one doctor here at the Citadel. And we can’t lose her, not even for a day. We get too many mangled bodies coming through the front gate. I can’t risk my soldiers for one wastelander. Sorry.”

Keelah sighed. Kicked at a training dummy near her right.

Sentinel Lyons raised an eyebrow. Surprised by the uncharacteristic tantrum. “This vaultie a friend of yours?” she asked Keelah.

“Not really. But we grew up together. That means something.”

The wastelander was temporarily distracted by all of the movement around her. The twisting bodies; the flash of rubber bullets; the groan of heavy steel.

“Shit!” she exclaimed to no one in particular. “I’ve lost an entire day traveling here. Christine could be giving birth already.”

“I wish there was more I could do,” Sarah murmured. And Keelah could tell by Sarah’s facial expression that the woman meant it.

The Brotherhood of Steel didn’t usually take an interest in the affairs of wastelanders. But Sarah and Keelah had survived an explosion together. Had lain in comas for weeks, side by side. Had discovered a bond when they finally awoke.

“I know Sarah. And I appreciate it.” Keelah gripped Sarah’s forearm—a soldier’s way of bidding adieu—and turned to leave the baily.

“Hey!” Sarah called. “Have you given any consideration to that other thing we talked about?”

Keelah turned around. “You mean joining the Pride?”

“Yeah. We make a good team, you and I.” Her blue eyes sparkled. Her admiration for Keelah clear. “There’s a place for you in the Pride if you want it.”

Keelah rubbed a hand across her neck and shifted uncomfortably. Sarah had asked her to join the elite group several years ago and continued to ask even though Keelah had made it clear that she wasn’t interested. The Brotherhood of Steel was stubborn like that.

“I’m not a professional soldier,” Keelah said; almost apologetically. “And I’m not sure I want to be.” She shrugged. “Besides, I like to sleep in late. And I’ve spent a few nights at the Citadel. You people are up at four AM.”

Sarah laughed. “You know what they say about the early bird…” She tilted her head. Took a good
look at Keelah. The disheveled appearance. The puffy eyes. “Speaking of sleeping. You look dead on your feet. Why don’t you hit one of the cots upstairs? Take a break?”

Keelah took that exact moment to yawn; her face stretching comically and causing Sarah to chuckle. “I can’t. I have to find a doctor and quick. And unless you plan on letting me pilot the Brotherhood vertibird, I have no choice but to hoof it.” She glanced at the map on her Pip-Boy. Pushed a few buttons. “I wish there was a way to fast travel to these places.”

“At least go the mess hall and get some coffee before you leave. You look like shit reheated.”

Keelah frowned at her friend. “That’s the second time someone’s said I look like shit.”

“Then you should probably do something about it.”

Keelah rolled her eyes. “I’ll catch you later Sarah. And tell Fawkes I said hello when you see him. He’s still guarding the southwest runs of the Aqua Pura caravans, isn’t he?”

“Yes. I never thought the Brotherhood would have a super mutant in our employ, but you were right about Fawkes. He’s a good soldier. And no one dares attack a caravan when it’s headed by a laser-welding super mutant.” The sentinel chuckled softly. “Do you know he wants to become a scribe? He asked Scribe Jameson if he could intern with her. I think she’s going to say yes.”

“I’m not surprised. Fawkes is a philosopher. He has a great mind.”

“An evolved super mutant. Who’d have thought?”

“He’s not an evolved super mutant. Once upon a time, he was a human. His mind still is. Even if his body isn’t.”

Sarah smiled. “I can see why he calls you friend.”

Keelah bumped the sentinel with her shoulder. A friendly gesture. “I have to get going. But I will take you up on that coffee.”

She waved goodbye to Sarah and headed towards the Citadel’s A Ring.

“The mess hall is the other way!” Sarah shouted.

Keelah did an about face. Smiled sheepishly before heading in the opposite direction.

She really was tired. And was finding it increasingly difficult to tell her left from her right.

She knew the perfect place to go after this. The one doctor who would absolutely do this favor for her.

“.........

“I’m sorry Keelah, but Butcher is traveling at the moment. He’s probably halfway to DuPont Circle by now. He and Donovan are mapping some of the metro tunnels in that area.”

“Aaarghaldfajdofahdfadfaadfaj!!”

“Keelah, I can’t understand what you’re saying if you bite your fist that way.”

Reilly stared at her distraught friend. The ranger’s ginger hair was swept up into her trademark bun and her green eyes swept over Keelah’s mottled features; her quivering hands.
Her quick assessment complete, the ranger refocused her attention on her computer terminal, typing away at the computer keys and undoubtedly finishing up another of her tracking reports.

“What’s this about anyway?” Reilly asked Keelah.

Keelah paced the small office; her heavy boots making a clicking sound against the metal floor.

“I have an acquaintance who’s about to go into labor. She needs a doctor to help with the delivery.”

“I thought you had medical experience? You patched me up at Underworld.”

“I’ve never done anything like this before though. There are two lives at stake here.” She sighed heavily. “So when do you expect Butcher back?”

“Probably not for a week. Maybe two.”

“Shit!”

Keelah rubbed a hand over her face. Massaged her temples in tight, concentric circles. Tried to stave off a burgeoning headache.

Reilly eased herself out of her chair. Limped over to the distressed woman.

Four years after her traumatic injury at the Statesmen Hotel, the ranger still showed signs of damage. She’d never fully recovered from her wounds and had lost some of the mobility in her right leg. The leader of the world-famous Reilly’s Rangers was unable to reconnoiter these days. Her physical limitations forced her to be a homebound leader; an administrator; a bookkeeper. She would never admit to anyone except Butcher (and perhaps her private journals), but the change in role devastated her. Made her feel that she’d left her glory days back at the Statesmen Hotel; somewhere in the smoke-filled stairwell next to Theo’s body.

Reilly put a hand against Keelah’s back. Patted softly in an attempt to soothe. “Hey, I’m sure your friend will be okay. Give her a couple of doses of Med-X and pray for the best.”

Keelah groaned into her hands. “People still pray in the wasteland?”

“Of course they do. They do everything they did before the Great War. Including surviving childbirth. Have faith.”

Keelah lifted her head and studied the good-natured ranger. There was a reason why Reilly’s Rangers were Keelah’s favorite group of people. The small band of mercenaries cared. They cared when they didn’t have to. When it didn’t benefit them or generate them any fortune.

Reilly’s hand moved to the back of Keelah’s neck. She gripped Keelah there and massaged a ball of tension she found in the wastelander’s neck.

“You’re stressed kid,” Reilly said; her eyes and hand hyper-focused on her task. “Why don’t you stay a day or two in the compound and get some R&R?”

Keelah mumbled something incoherent. Her speech warbled by the pleasant sensations roiling through her body. She felt on the brink of collapse. But this mini massage was doing wonders for her wellbeing.

The compound’s resident wise-ass chose that moment to saunter through the office door. Brick was chewing on a toothpick and the tiny piece of wood nearly flew from the woman’s mouth when she
saw Keelah and Reilly standing so closely together.

“Well, well, well,” Brick purred in her heavy drawl, “I suppose when the boys are away, the girls play. Only problem is...where’s my invitation?”

Brick quirked an eyebrow at the two women; walked a slow circle around them. She was clearly amused.

“Shut up Brick,” Reilly commanded; dropping her hand from Keelah’s neck. “The girl’s in crisis.”

“Really?” Brick hopped up on Reilly’s desk. Made herself comfortable against the smooth surface even as Reilly scowled. “Anything I can do to help?” she asked Keelah.

“Sure. You know how to deliver a baby?” Keelah responded.

Brick’s nose wrinkled. “The only time my hands get close to a woman’s fun zone is when I’m—”

“Stop talking now!” Reilly screeched. She elbowed the tall woman off her desk; then reclaimed her seat behind the computer. “I’m trying to convince Keelah to take a sabbatical, but she won’t listen. Maybe you can reason with her.”

“Oh yeah.” Brick sidled up to Keelah. Slung an arm around the wastelander’s shoulders and leaned in conspiratorially. “Listen to the boss woman Keelah. If you’re stressed, you should take a break. Head back to your digs at Megaton and relax a few days. I can even escort you if you’d like.” She patted Keelah’s shoulder. “We can get that pretty blonde at that outdoor café to cook you up some vittles. That should make you feel better.”

Keelah gave Brick sweltering side-eye. “You don’t fool me Brick. You’re just trying to get near Jenny Stahl.”

Brick feigned hurt. “What?! I’m just trying to look out for you. If, while helping you, I just so happen to get reacquainted with Jenny...why, that’s just sheer luck.”

Sidenote: Once, while mapping the area around Springvale, Brick and Donovan overnighted with Keelah in Megaton. Keelah took the pair to the Brass Lantern for dinner and Brick was immediately smitten with Jenny Stahl. The blonde cook, usually taciturn to the point of seeming unfriendly, was equally taken with Brick and was more than a little fascinated by the ranger’s minigun. The two women spent the entire evening discussing firearms and their love of spicy iguana soup. **

“I’m not rerouting to Megaton Brick. You and Jenny Stahl are going to have to rekindle your romance without me.”

Brick sighed dramatically. “Fine! See if I walk a hundred miles to bring you a mini nuke again.”

“You didn’t do it the last time!”

“But I thought about it.”

Keelah growled. Squirmed away from her outrageous friend. “I gotta go. It’s nearly eleven o’clock and the Mirelurks usually come out around this time. I can’t afford to waste more time.”

Reilly turned her attention from her computer. “Which direction are you headed?”

“North. Pretty far north.”

“Brick will accompany you half way.”
“No, she doesn’t have to do that. Plus, I don’t want her making a return trip on her own. This area is pretty hot with Enclave remnants.”

Brick put her hands on her hips. Scowled at Keelah. “You trying to call me a cupcake?”

“Of course not.”

“Then get your gear on Sally and let’s go!”

The brash ranger slapped Keelah on her back—hard—and ran off to retrieve her battle armor and trusty minigun.

Keelah gave Reilly a pointed look and the squad leader smiled guiltily. “Okay…maybe I wouldn’t mind a little quiet for a few hours. She’s been running around here singing songs about Jenny Stahl for days now. I’m ‘bout ready to pull my hair out.”

Brick strode back into the room. Singing.

“And being apart ain’t easy on this love affair. Two strangers learn to fall in love again…”

Brick’s uniform was a sparkling green; her behemoth mini gun secure in her hands. The fact that she was singing a syrupy love song (and doing a damn good job of it) was completely incongruous with her appearance. Keelah could only stare; her mouth agape.

“Ready to go?” Brick asked.

“Uh…yeah.” Keelah readied her own weapon (better to be prepared for the Mirelurks) and nodded a goodbye at Reilly. “I’ll see you next time. Give my regards to Donovan and Butcher.”

“Take care,” the squad leader commented softly.

Keelah nodded. “Let’s go Brick.”

The two soldiers made their way up the steep stairs. Brick already singing again.

And Keelah would have shushed her. Reminded her of the need of silence at this time of night. But the ranger really did sound good. And the lyrics to the song she was singing—well—they weren’t half bad either.

“Restless hearts sleep alone tonight…sending all my love along the wire…”

They started their long march north. Their eyes on the path ahead; their ears primed for danger.

Neither woman voiced it, but both their minds were on lovers long-distanced; lovers with whom they had little hope of reuniting.

Keelah distracted herself by thinking of Christine; focusing on the remaining doctors who could help her with this task.

She also concentrated on the honeyed words falling from Brick’s lips. Felt her heart ache at the poignant lyrics; memorized the words.

Keelah and Brick parted ways near Minefield. It was nearly morning and the sun cast a phosphorescent hue on the wind-swept world.
Brick wanted to venture further with Keelah, but the ranger had already put nearly eight hours into the trip and Keelah suspected Brick wouldn’t be welcomed at the next location anyway.

Keelah gave the proud ranger a fist bump and watched as she made her way back across the sandy dune.

The wastelander continued her trek north; stopping only to relieve herself and to take hurried sips of water, bites of food. Counting her trip from TenPenny Tower, she hadn’t rested in seven days. She didn’t know how much longer she could go at this pace. The fatigue would soon take her; her body would capitulate. But for now she pressed on.

She only stopped when she heard birds.

**Oasis.**

The only place in the entire wasteland with vibrant plant life. A place where flowers bloomed and birds took residence.

Keelah had thought all of the world’s birds had died during the Great War. She’d never seen anything that could fly besides those wretched bloatflies and man-made vertibirds.

But there were birds in Oasis. There were trees and delicate flowers. *Color* existed in Oasis. Verdant greens and ruby reds.

Even after the death of the Treeminders’ Great One, Harold, the lush community had managed to survive. The group’s healer and soothsayer, Bloomseer Poplar, had used her gifts to sustain the small glade. She was exactly the person Keelah had come here to see.

Once admitted into the small community, the wastelander paid her respects to the group’s leaders, Tree Father Birch and Leaf Mother Laurel, before walking into the wooded area where Bloomseer Poplar kept her residence.

The healer was an eccentric. She had premonitions and she spoke to the trees. Her skin was leathery with age but her mind was sharp. She carried with her a scent of grass and candle smoke, and she spent most of her days tending to her alchemy: concocting liniments and medicines that kept her charges spry and healthy.

Keelah stood for a moment at the entrance to Bloomseer’s room. Watched as the wizened woman poured a vial of foul-smelling liquid into a small container. The mixture was orange then turned purple, and it sizzled in a way that suggested it was alive; conscious.

Bloomseer Poplar didn’t have to look up to know that Keelah was there. “You need something child?” she asked. Her voice as light as breeze; but also heavy as sand.

Keelah moved deeper into the enclosure. It was an alcove made of trees and stalwart shrubs. Mournful creatures lived amongst the branches; scuttled to and fro chirping.

“I was wondering if you had some medicine for me,” Keelah said. Watching as the oracle tore a gnarled and twisted root into small pieces.

“Medicine for someone else, no?”

“Yes. Someone else. She’s sick and with child. She could possibly have organ failure.”

A flame appeared from somewhere. A small fire in Bloomseer’s hand. The old woman touched the
blaze to the broken root. Created a rainbow of color. A small cloud of smoke.

“Organs don’t fail, my dear. They either live or they die. It’s that simple. Her organs are dying then?”

“Yes.”

The old woman took the root’s ashes; spread them onto a thin brown parchment which looked to be made from plant fibers. The smell of the burnt ash was strong but not unpleasant and Keelah sniffled. Coughed a few times.

Bloomseer rolled the parchment and ashes until they were one; until she’d made something that looked like a thin reed. She extended the curious item to Keelah.

“Give her this. Have her chew it. Slowly. Chew it until it’s all gone. It will help her body live again.”

Keelah took the reed/root. Traced her finger along its grooves. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s life. It’s a gift from the Great One.” The old woman rubbed her fingers together until the residue from the ash turned both her palms a brilliant black. “The Great One turned this strip of desert into a sanctuary. From dust he begat trees and plants and sparkling brooks.” She nodded her head at the reed. “That same magic is in the root. It will turn your friend’s sickness into health.”

“Thank you.” Keelah placed the reed/root into a small pouch in her supply pack. “Is there anything I can do for you in return?”

Bloomseer Poplar smiled. Her eyes disappearing for a moment; lost within the time-earned folds of her skin. “You’ve already paid me Traveler.” She smiled at Keelah; a knowing, mystical smile. “You do good works. You’re one of the last guardians this world will see.”

Keelah wasn’t sure about that. Didn’t the oracle know how many people she’d killed? How many bodies she’d looted and left behind? The wastelander squirmed under the praise. Under the intense perusal.

Keelah had a sudden realization. She recalled that the healer had been preparing the reed/root when she first entered this space.

“Did you know I was coming?” Keelah asked her.

There was that smile again. “Don’t ask questions you already know the answers to. It’s a waste of words.”

The oracle gestured with her hands. Led Keelah out of her private quarters and back up the path towards the settlement’s gates.

“Be careful with that bomb,” Bloomseer Poplar whispered into her ear. “Or you could lose the one you love.”

Keelah stopped in her tracks. Stared in confusion at the peculiar woman. “Wha—?”

But the oracle had already turned back towards her quarters. Within moments she’d disappeared amongst the trees.

The healer’s words sent a chill down Keelah’s spine; made her hands flutter nervously at her sides; but the wastelander shrugged off her foreboding thoughts.

Bloomseer Poplar had visions. She’d probably seen that Keelah lived in Megaton; practically on top
of an atomic bomb.

“I could lose the one I love,” she said to herself. “Dogmeat and everyone else in Megaton. Good thing I disarmed that thing ages ago.”

Feeling somewhat reassured, the wastelander continued on her way. Exited the green city and reentered the real world.

She’d found the medicine that would help with Christine’s illness. Now she just needed to find a doctor who could deliver the baby.

..................................

“Of course I’ll do it,” Red responded. “No problem at all.”

“Really?!” Keelah nearly fainted in relief and had to put her hands on a nearby table to steady herself. “You don’t know how happy you’ve made me Red.”

The petite woman grinned at Keelah; tugging her glasses off and cleaning them of dust before returning them to her face. “After everything you’ve done for us? I would have ended up in some super mutant stew if it wasn’t for you.”

Keelah returned the smile. Began plotting a course in her Pip-Boy. “So when can you leave? The sooner we can head out, the better. I’ve already been gone for nearly three days.”

“Leave? I can’t leave Big Town. I thought you were going to bring the patient here?”

Keelah looked up from her Pip-Boy; her eyes widening in shock. “She can’t come here. She’s too sick to travel. Plus she’s never left the vault before. In her condition, she’d probably die from exposure.”

Red scratched the back of her head; causing her red bandanna to move awkwardly up and down. “I’m sorry Keelah, but I can’t leave Big Town. These kids count on me. The place will go to hell if I leave.”

“But it’ll only be one day. Maybe two.”

“You know how bad things can get in the wasteland. It doesn’t take much time. We have super mutants barreling down on us every other day. Raiders coming through at night. We have four guns between us and I’m one of the four who knows how to use ‘em. I can’t just walk out on my folks like that. Bring the girl here and I’ll operate on her. Otherwise, I’m not sure there’s anything I can do.”

“This can’t be happening…” Keelah hopped up and down in one place. Tried to keep her mind alert; tried to do anything to keep herself from disintegrating into the floorboards below.

“What about Dusty? He’s the town guard. Can’t he hold down the fort until you get back?”

“Dusty spends half his time napping while on guard duty. And I can’t even blame him. He sits in that chair twenty hours out of the day.” Red sighed. “I know you have a crisis on your hands Keelah, but so does everyone else in this godforsaken place. I wish I could help. I really do. But my hands are tied here.”
Keelah had the sudden urge to drink. It would be so easy for her to fish the flask out of her knapsack and drink herself into oblivion. But she’d promised Christine and Amata. And damn it! She didn’t like failing tasks.

She exhaled heavily. “I don’t even know where to go after this.” She turned weary eyes on the ceiling; stared at the rotted wood above her head; the jagged holes in the roof that let in bloatflies and heavy dust.

Red made a soft sound of sympathy. Crossed over to stand beside Keelah. “Is there anything else I can do? I have a few Stimpacks if you need them. I’ll give you a discount.”

Keelah shook her head at the friendly doctor. Big Town needed all the supplies they could get. They had very little medicine, weapons or food. The only wastelanders who came this way were raiders and slavers—not exactly the kind of people Big Towners wanted to trade with.

There was a commotion at the front door. A small group of Big Towners jostled their way into the office. Formed a semi-circle around Keelah and Red.

“You’ve returned,” Joseph said; smiling politely like he always did. He was a good kid. Smart. A scholar with no books or classroom.

“Yes. I had some business with Red.” Keelah pulled a folded piece of paper from her pockets. “A letter from your sister Penny.”

“Thank you.” Joseph flashed her another grin before making his way into the corner; a quiet place for him to read.

Keelah looked at the other assembled Big Towners. Bittercup, with her trademark black clothes and heavy makeup. Timebomb, who fiddled with a hole in his trousers. The twins, Knock Knock and Knick Knack, who’d grown considerably taller in the year they’d left Little Lamplight but who were still rail thin and sickly-looking. And Sticky, rambling on about something or another even though it seemed no one was listening to him.

“Hey guys,” Keelah said. Affecting a cheery expression even though she felt like the bad end of a Brahmin.

“I have something for you,” Bittercup said. The black chalk around the woman’s eyes made it seem like she had been crying. “Come find me in the common room later and I’ll give it to you.”

Bittercup quickly exited the room; elbowing Sticky on her way out; and Keelah sighed at the woman’s words. Keelah could only imagine the gift Bittercup would ending up giving her; some small trinket she’d found beneath the sand somewhere; a bauble she’d risked her life over because that’s what she thought relationships were about: gifts and recklessness and pampering someone into loving you. It made Keelah sad. And she was sad enough as it was already.

The wastelander turned her attention to Knick Knack and Knock Knock. “How’s it going twins?”

Knick Knack shrugged. “We haven’t died yet.”

Knock Knock cut her eyes at her brother. “You have any letters for us?” she asked Keelah.

“Uh…no. But the other Lamplighters told me to tell you both hello. And that they really miss you.”

Knick Knack huffed in irritation. Clenched his hands into fists and shuffled out of the room. Knock Knock watched him walk away, a concerned look on her face.
“I have a new joke for you Knock Knock,” Keelah offered. Trying to distract the anxious teen. “It involves a Yao Guai and some really elastic chewing gum. It can help you boost morale around here.”

Knock Knock turned her attention back to Keelah; a despondent look on her face. “People don’t really appreciate jokes around here. I think it’s because they haven’t heard funny things in such a long time.” She scratched a spot above her ear. “Plus, everyone here is just waiting to die. There ain’t no joke that’s going to help with that.”

Keelah’s eyes widened at the morbid comment. Knock Knock was usually the most jovial of all the former Lamplighters. What in the hell happened to her?

Knock Knock turned towards the door; preparing to follow her brother. “Thanks anyway Key-lock. Maybe you can bring me a letter next time, yeah?”

Then she was gone too.

“Hey, I’d like to hear that joke,” Sticky piped in. “I’m betting that the Yao Guai blew a really big bubble and it turned into a balloon and carried him across the desert. Is that it? That’s it, huh? I knew it!” He clapped his hands together and giggled madly. “It reminds me of my story about Joking Joe. Remember that story? Huh? Remember Joking Joe? How he was always making everybody laugh with his funny jokes? Joking Joe with his jokey jokes?” Sticky cackled. “I love that guy!”

Red put a hand up; stopped Sticky from badgering Keelah. “Sticky, why don’t you go make sure Dusty is awake? And take your time.”

“Absolutely Red! I’ll do anything for you, sweetie-kums.” He waggled his eyebrows at the doctor and Red forced a smile. “I’ll see you later,” he said to Keelah. “I’ll bring you up to speed on my latest Supa Dupa Dave story. Regale you with all his heroic heroics.”

The garrulous teenager exited the office, still chattering to himself and Keelah shot an appreciative glance at Red.

“That’s another reason why I can’t leave Big Town,” Red said. “I’d come back and find that someone had killed him.”

The doctor made her way over to Joseph, who had his nose practically pressed into his letter. Red began talking to him soft whispers.

That left Keelah with Timebomb. Big Town’s quietest resident.

“How’s it going Timebomb?” Keelah asked him.

Timebomb shrugged. “I like you.”

Keelah smiled. “I like you too.”

She really did. Timebomb was a sweet guy. Had given her his Lucky 8 Ball after she’d bandaged up his gunshot wounds all those years ago. And he always reminded her to be careful when she traveled in the wasteland. (*Be careful out there. You don’t want to end up on some operating table like I did*).

“Hey, I think I have a few coins for you,” Keelah told him. She fumbled inside the oversized pocket on her back pants leg. Pulled forth a darkened quarter; two pennies, so smooth that Abraham Lincoln was no longer visible.
Timebomb collected prewar money—prewar coins that is—and would line the change in neat rows on the table in his bedroom. He would spend hours straightening the coins; studying them. Straightening them again. He was different like that. Red called it social awkwardness. Keelah thought the young man was a savant.

Timebomb took the quarter and pennies; rolled them around with his fingers. “Thank you,” he said. “I should put these with the others.” He hastened out of the office. “Be careful out there,” he reminded, before disappearing from Keelah’s sight.

Keelah turned; watched as Red led Joseph to the office door. The doctor patted the teenager’s shoulder, whispered something, as he walked away.

“What’s going on with Joseph?” Keelah asked.

“He misses his sister,” Red responded. The doctor cracked her knuckles, one by one; looked visibly agitated and beyond tired. “Most days I’m the resident doctor. But more and more I find myself playing the role of counselor. These kids are so depressed. And this hellhole doesn’t do anything but exacerbate their bad moods.”

“You ever think about leaving this place?” Keelah asked. “Rounding everyone up and going someplace a bit more…homely?”

“Where would we go? Most towns won’t let a single person in, let alone a group of twelve. Besides, if we abandoned Big Town, where would the other Lamplighters go when they turn sixteen?” The doctor sighed. Walked over to her desk and began fiddling with her supplies. “No. There’s no other place for us. Big Town may be a hellhole, but it’s our hellhole. That has to count for something.”

Red opened a bottle of pills. Shook out a few tablets and made her way over to Keelah. The doctor extended the medicine.

“It’s buffout. Take a few. You look like shit.”

Keelah scowled. “Am I wearing a sign or something? Geez!” She ignored the chalky tablets. “And put the pills away. You guys need every bit of medication you can get.” She sighed regretfully. “Sorry I don’t get to this area too often. I know y’all are understocked on everything.”

“Don’t worry about it. We make due. Besides, you can’t always play the part of wasteland messiah. I don’t care what Three-Dog says on GNR, you’re only human.” Red forced the pills into Keelah’s clenched fist. Refused them when Keelah tried to give them back. “And since you’re only human, you should take better care of yourself. Sleep and eat like a normal person.” The doctor wrinkled her nose. “And shower from time to time. You smell like shit too.”

Keelah frowned. But when she lifted her arm, she had to admit that Red was right. “You have a wash basin I can use?”

“There’s a bucket out back. And a gallon of water. Try not to use more than a cupful of water though. We have to make it last until we can do a bit more scavenging.”

Keelah’s face contorted. Damn, did everything have to be so fucking unfair in the wasteland?

She popped the buffout in her mouth; swallowed the bitter pills easily. “Thanks,” she said. Before gathering her things and heading for the door.

“I hope your friend will be okay,” Red said; crossing her arms over her chest. The red of her jumpsuit and bandana practically glittered in the drab room.
“I hope she will be too.”

Keelah waved at the woman before taking her leave. She ducked behind the office building; made sure there were no onlookers; then stripped down to her underwear and used a rag to cleanse her body of dirt and sweat; flecks of dried blood that she couldn’t even be sure were hers.

Feeling somewhat clean, she wandered over to the common room to keep her appointment with Bittercup. Along the way she passed other Big Towners—Kimba and Shorty, a dour-faced Pappy—and nodded her hellos before entering the common room: the unadorned apartment where most of the Big Towners slept.

Bittercup was leaning against a wall in the back and Keelah made her way over to her; nimbly stepping over rumpled pallets and discarded plates.

She came to a stop in front of the doe-eyed brunette.

Bittercup was obsessed with death and everything macabre. She decorated her face with chalk in an effort to make herself seem menacing, dark. But sometimes the woman simply looked like a little girl playing dress-up; a sensitive soul who was trying to hide her insecurities behind mascara and affectations.

“You have something for me?” Keelah asked.

Bittercup thought they were girlfriends. She’d staked her claim on Keelah four years ago. The misunderstanding had worried Keelah at first—she certainly hadn't done anything to invite Bittercup’s attentions—but the wastelander hadn’t wanted to hurt Bittercup’s feelings. So she’d played along. Accepted Rad-X and shotgun shells and any other gifts Bittercup found. In turn, she would listen attentively as Bittercup talked about death and the afterlife and fashion.

There was nothing physical about their interactions. Nothing romantic.

Keelah suspected that Bittercup just wanted someone who would listen to her. Someone who wouldn’t call her a freak because of her peculiarities.

“Here,” Bittercup said; pressing a mostly smushed snack cake into Keelah’s hands. It was a lemon bundt cake and all of its frosting had flaked off and stuck to the cellophane so thickly that it looked like the cake had exploded.

“Thank you,” Keelah said. She used her teeth to tear a tiny hole in the wrapper. Used the packaging like a pastry bag and squeezed the mangled cake into her mouth. “Want some?” she asked Bittercup.

Bittercup took the cake. Pressed some into her mouth. Chewed and passed the bag back to Keelah. “It’s good,” she said.

“Yeah.” Keelah took another bite. Gave the final piece to Bittercup. The wastelander leaned against the wall next to Bittercup; let her head loll against the wood and allowed herself a moment of rest. “I can’t stay long,” she said. “I have to find a doctor. Somewhere.”

“You’re not dying are you?” Bittercup didn’t look as excited as she usually was when it came to death.

“No. I’m not dying.”

“If you do die, come back and haunt me, yeah? It’s boring around here.”
Keelah couldn’t help but chuckle. The wastelander closed her eyes and reveled in Bittercup’s adorable ridiculousness.

“Fine. As payback for all the gifts you’ve given me over the years, I’ll haunt you if I die,” she promised.

Bittercup smiled. Keelah was unable to enjoy the unusual sight because her eyes were still closed. But she opened them a few seconds later. Pushed off the wall. Headed towards the door.

“Hey!” Bittercup called out. Keelah turned around. “Even though I wouldn’t mind having a girlfriend who’s a ghost…don’t die, okay?”

Keelah grinned at her. “You either.”

Just like that she was out of the common room. Then out of Big Town all together.

It wasn’t until several hours later, when Keelah was clamoring down a steep mountain pass that she had a revelation. A way to get a doctor. A way to help Christine. And a surefire way to send a big fuck you to the wasteland gods who liked to torture people.

She stood near the bottom of the mountain and risked a landslide by screaming at the top of lungs.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuccccckkkkkkk yeeeeeexxxxxxxxxhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!”

She had the craziest, wackiest, totally insane idea ever. But if she could get it to work, it would be, by far, the greatest thing she’d ever done.

Keelah took off running.

Chapter End Notes

Good music gives me ALL the feels, which is why I listen to so much music while writing this fic. And (man!) this song by Journey (Faithfully) is so damn good. It makes a person believe that people can learn to love again.

I’m going to post the next chapter pretty quick so that no one guesses what Keelah’s crazy idea is before I can post it. lol.

**There’s a possible pairing here. Brick and Jenny Stahl. Just saying in case anyone wants to tackle that romance. ;)**
Keelah ran all the way to Vault 101. It took her four hours. She threw up along the way. Several times in fact. Left the meager contents of her stomach behind bushes and empty houses. She was literally running on fumes.

But the idea that had seized her—that crazy, ridiculous, possibly clusterfuckery idea—gave her renewed energy; made the pain in her body, the fatigue, recede just long enough for her to make it to her destination.

It was nighttime when she reached the vault. She entered the passcode into the terminal and made her way through the quiet enclosure. There was a murmur of sound to her left, possibly music. Perhaps some vault-wide social activity that was running long. Or a member of the maintenance crew enjoying some radio tunes while completing their work.

She checked her Pip-Boy. **10:57 PM.**

She was sure that Amata had done away with the curfew that her father had imposed. Still, there were no people in the hallways. Just the occasional footfall of what was probably a guard. Or a vaulter meeting up for a late night rendezvous.

She made it all the way to the atrium before running into a vaulter. A guard on patrol. Officer Taylor.

The elderly guard was still in charge of the area near the stairs. He straightened up when he saw Keelah. Put his hand on his weapon and frowned.

“Who goes there?” he called out; his eyes squinting, trying to discern the figure moving towards him.

Keelah didn’t bother responding. Just moved further into the light so that the old man could see her.

“Oh, it’s you,” Taylor snapped. “The Overseer said you’d be back.” He sucked his teeth in annoyance. “She has a soft spot for you, for some reason. It’s a shame really. She’s a fine girl outside
of this captivation with troublemakers.”

Keelah rolled her eyes. “I’ll just be on my way.” She headed for the stairs.

“I haven’t forgiven you, you know,” Officer Taylor cackled. He pointed a bony finger at her. For a second, the appendage looked like the barrel of a gun. “I don’t care how nice the Overseer talks about you. You can be Doctor Do-Gooder for all I care. My Agnes died because of you. I’ll never forget that. Never.”

Keelah bit into the side of her cheek. Tried to focus on the physical pain. Officer Taylor’s accusation still stung even after all this time.

She wanted to hate Officer Taylor. She really did. But the part of her that could still empathize—that part that still cared deeply for the people she’d grown up with—wouldn’t allow such toxic emotion to bloom in her chest. Keelah reminded herself that Officer Taylor was a grieving widower. He’d found his wife, cold and still, and hadn’t been able to resuscitate her. He was learning the hard way that time didn’t heal all wounds.

Keelah knew something about that. About the festering nature of grief. So she bit back any angry retort. Worked out her anger on the tender flesh of her own mouth and continued up the stairs to the overseer’s office.

Amata’s personal guard let the wastelander in. The armed officer flicked his eyes over Keelah, surveying her, but he said nothing. Just nodded towards Amata’s living quarters, indicating that the overseer had retired for the evening.

Keelah made her way to the spacious bedroom that was just on the other side of the office. The bedroom door was closed and she hesitated outside of it. It would be rude to enter Amata’s bedroom without permission. It would be…presumptuous.

Keelah knocked instead. Filled the quiet office with the sound of gentle taps.

The door slid open and there was Amata. Hair-tousled and sleepy eyed, wearing a nightgown. A satin robe.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Keelah said. Embarrassedly. And her eyes couldn’t help but travel to Amata’s hair. Appreciate how the woman wore her curls down when she was off-duty. Notice how the long locks curled around the woman’s nape. “I have an update regarding Christine. And a strange request.”

Amata’s brow wrinkled in confusion at Keelah’s words but she waved the woman in. “Of course. Come inside.” The Overseer stepped aside so that the taller woman could enter.

Keelah stood awkwardly near the front door, not knowing where to sit. She was more familiar with Amata’s old bedroom. The modest space down the hall where she and Amata had had countless sleepovers and late-night study sessions. But Amata had moved into the Overseer’s living quarters. This room was huge. Resplendent. Contained a queen-sized bed; a wide couch; a heavy table; a miniature refrigerator; two bookshelves full of books; colorful pictures in actual frames; and an assortment of metal chairs; some comfortable looking, others severe.

Amata seemed to sense Keelah’s hesitation. “Sit wherever you’d like,” she volunteered.

Keelah chose the couch. Settled into the plushy love seat and tried her best not to sigh in pleasure. It was the softest thing she’d sat on in a long time. It rivaled TenPenny Tower’s mattresses.
Amata sat in the straight-back chair opposite her. Cinched her robe tight around her body and waited for Keelah to begin.

It took Keelah a few minutes to get started. She was so damn tired and the couch was so damn comfortable. It was possible that the wastelander fell asleep. Her eyes closed and her breathing deepened, but she jerked awake when Amata suddenly spoke.

“You said you had an update on Christine?”

Keelah rubbed at her eyes. Tried to wake herself up. “Yeah. How is she?”

Amata crossed her legs. Looked remarkably professional even in nightwear. “She’s pretty much the same. Intermittent pain. A lot of cramping. Ms. Palmer says it won’t be long before the baby comes.”

Keelah blinked. In rapid succession. “I miss Old Lady Palmer. I miss her sweet rolls. And her hugs.”

Damn it! She was delirious. “I have something that will help with Christine’s pain. That will help fix what’s broken on the inside.”

She fumbled inside her supply pack. Removed the reed she’d gotten from Bloomseer Poplar. She handed the pungent stick to Amata. “Have her chew this and eat it in its entirety. It’ll help. It’s magic.” One of her eyes closed. Then the other.

Amata leaned forward in her chair. Clearly concerned. “Keelah, are you alright?”

Keelah’s eyes snapped open. “Yes. I just haven’t slept in a few days. Four days. Maybe six or seven.” She exhaled heavily. Sank further into the couch.

“Keelah, lie down. Get some rest.” Amata’s tone was sharp with worry. Within seconds she was on the couch beside Keelah, trying to press the woman into a sleeping position.

But Keelah resisted. “No! I have to finish. There’s something I need to ask you. Something important. It’s about the doctor for Christine.”

Amata looked at her friend. At the heavy, dark circles beneath her eyes; the rumpled clothing; the fluttering eyes. “Can’t you ask me tomorrow Kee’? You don’t look well.”

“You think I look like shit too?”

Amata tilted her head so that she could meet Keelah’s eyes; Her eyes flickering wildly over her friend’s distressed face and trembling body. “Ask me what you need to ask me. And quickly. So you can rest.”

Amata grabbed Keelah’s hand. Pulled it down, away from her face. “Don’t do that,” Amata instructed. Her eyes flickering wildly over her friend’s distressed face and trembling body. “Ask me what you need to ask me. And quickly. So you can rest.”

Keelah stared down at her hand; at the one that was being held so gently by Amata. She lifted her head; stared at her former best friend with fluttering eyes bejeweled by her own misery and exhaustion. “You’ll have to promise me that they’ll be nice to my friends,” she murmured to Amata; her voice trembly and soft; a shaky whisper.

“Who are you talking about Keelah? What friends?”
Amata placed the magic reed on the cushion beside her. Used her newly freed hand to cup Keelah’s chin; turn her face towards her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, sweetheart.”

Keelah smiled at Amata’s choice of words. The wastelander was drunk from exhaustion. Had she been sober minded, she would have hidden her delight at the words. “You love pet names;” she murmured.

“Yes, I do.” Amata put both hands against Keelah’s face. Stared into the wastelander’s eyes and spoke slowly and firmly. “Ask your important question Keelah.”

Keelah blinked. Stared into the hazel-flecked eyes that she’d dreamt about for more than three years. “I know a doctor who could help Christine with the baby. But she can’t leave her town because all the people there depend on her. But I was thinking…the place they live is a hellhole anyway, so they could actually use a new place to live. Some place that has the room for that many people. A place where they could get food and running water and could even learn how to read and write.” Keelah’s eyes closed. She was close to falling asleep.

Amata rubbed a thumb across the woman’s cheek. “Continue Keelah.”

“Oh…well, I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind if the Big Towners moved in here. That way they would have some place safe to live. And the vault would have a permanent doctor and some extra people to help out with all the vacant jobs.”

Amata hissed in surprise. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah. But you would have to promise me that the 101ers would be nice to the Big Towners. That they wouldn’t treat them like they treated me. Like an outsider. Like some wasteland trash.” Keelah’s face twisted with anger. “That’s what your dad called me anyway.”

“My dad’s a fool.” Amata dropped her hands from Keelah’s face; held Keelah’s hand in hers again. “You really want that? For your friends to move in here?”

Keelah nodded her head. “I’m afraid for them. Afraid that one day I’ll visit Big Town and they’ll all be gone.”

Amata grimaced. “A decision like that…I’d have to put it to a vote. Let the entire vault decide. But, I must admit, I think it’s a great idea. The vault needs a doctor. And we could certainly use some extra workers. We have vacancies all over the place.”

She looked down at Keelah. Noticed that the woman was nearly asleep. “I’ll convene a meeting tomorrow,” she whispered. Her hand brushing through Keelah’s dreadlocks; coming to rest against the wastelander’s earlobe. Loving and soft.

Keelah leaned into the touch; her head coming to rest against the back of the couch; her fingers lacing with Amata’s. “They have to be nice to them,” she repeated. “Promise me that they’ll be nice.”

“I’ll demand it,” Amata assured.

Keelah smiled. Satisfied. She pressed her face into the couch cushion. A breath away from sleep.

“How many…Big Towners?...are there?” Amata asked.

“Twelve.”
“Okay. We can accommodate twelve people. This vault has room for 150. We currently have 73.”

“Oh…and there may be more.”

“Come again?” It was hard to hear Keelah when her head was drooping like that. Amata repositioned her friend’s head. Made it possible for her to speak clearly. “I couldn’t understand you.”

“There could be more than the twelve Big Towners. If the Lamplighters are interested in leaving Little Lamplight, I’d like them to come too. That way they can eat more than cave fungus all the time. And maybe Knock Knock will be able to tell jokes again.”

“Lamplighters…?”

Keelah wasn’t making any sense and Amata stared in confusion at her impaired friend.

“We’ll finish this conversation tomorrow,” the Overseer said softly.

She efficiently removed Keelah’s weapons and her supply pack; tugged off the woman’s dirt-crusted boots. Then gently pushed the dozing woman into a sleeping position on the large couch.

Amata wiggled a hand beneath Keelah’s body until she found the reed. “There you are,” she said. She stood with the reed and walked to her bedroom door; intent on personally delivering the healing stick to Christine and making sure the woman consumed it properly.

But the Overseer stopped at her bedroom door. Turned around and stared at the woman sleeping on her sofa.

Keelah had curled in on herself, an unintentional fetal position. One hand was clenched against her right cheek, as if she were shielding herself. Without her heavy weapons and her usual scowl, the wastelander looked ordinary; fragile even.

Amata whispered words she knew the sleeping woman wouldn’t hear. “I’m going to fight for you this time Keelah. I promise you that.”

Then she swept out of her bedroom; out into the vault corridor to deliver the magic reed.

To deliver on her promise.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Fiona Apple song.
An Extraordinary Machine (part two)

Chapter Summary

Vault 101 makes a decision about the Big Towners and Lamplighters. An old enemy reemerges.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18 – An Extraordinary Machine (part two)

A Flashback – Four Years Earlier

Keelah fiddled with the settings on her Pip-Boy, changing the display colors from green to amber to green again. She tapped her fingers against the side panel, clearing the squiggly lines that had appeared across the interface.

She needed to upgrade her Pip-Boy. The words on her screen blurred too often now, and sometimes the radio would dissolve into piercing static, startling her and whoever was within twenty yards of her.

The Pip-Boy 3000A had been given to her on her tenth birthday. It was one of the oldest models and difficult to upgrade since its parts were no longer available. Sometimes Keelah wondered if Overseer Almodovar had assigned her this particular model to be punitive; another way for him to show his dislike of his daughter’s best friend.

Keelah settled for making her display blue then eased back in the visitor’s chair. She crossed her ankles and waited for her father to finish up his work.

Her dad seemed to read her mind.

“A few more minutes,” he said. His eyes never leaving the formal looking documents on his desk. His right hand moved rapidly across the page as he made notes; erased with his pencil; made more corrections.

He’d said “a few more minutes” a half hour ago, but Keelah didn’t challenge his words. She was used to this: sharing her father with the other hundred residents of Vault 101; waiting for him to make time for her.

Recently, he’d become even more absorbed in his work; fixated on some special project that he only spoke about with Jonas. He kept long hours in his office, writing and researching; and would never elaborate on what the project was even though Keelah inquired often. The teenager figured the research had to be something extraordinary since her father sacrificed sleep for it. Sleep and social activities and damn near any quality time he had with his only child.
The vault was screening a film tonight. Some black and white feature about a ghost and a chicken. Her dad had promised to watch it with her. To leave work on time and sit with her for two hours. Give her that much of his time.

Keelah turned her Pip-Boy back on. Frowned at the blue numbers. She’d been waiting an hour already. They’d probably already missed the movie’s best bits.

She straightened her legs. Leaned forward and tried to get some circulation going in her limbs. She didn’t understand how her dad could sit still for so long. How he could pore over his notes and calculations without moving, without taking breaks.

He was a good doctor. A masterful researcher. And his commitment to his work was turning him into a lousy father.

Keelah immediately felt a pang of guilt for her disparaging thoughts. She coughed loudly as if the action would dislodge the criticisms that had taken up residence within her.

Her dad finally looked up from his paperwork. “Coming down with a cold?” he asked. His eyes inquisitive and concerned.

“No. Just a little thirsty.”

“I have water in the cooler. Help yourself.”

Keelah rose from her chair; strode over to the small cooler her father kept behind his desk. He missed a lot of meals. Had to compensate by keeping dried meat and bottled drinks stored in his office.

Keelah frowned down at the half-eaten containers of food that littered the small refrigerator; then removed a bottle of water.

She slid into the space beside her father. Stood there sipping her beverage while her dad made neat lines in his paper; the words he notated multi-syllabic and hard to decipher.

But Keelah could discern the words at the top of the page.

“What’s Project Purity?” she asked.

Her father stopped writing. Slid the papers into a folder on his desk and smiled up at his daughter. A crooked smile. Strained and incomplete. “It’s a new idea I have for the vault. An abstinence program for teens.”

Keelah nearly choked on her water. “Dad, the vault motto is reproduce or die. Not sure the Overseer will approve an abstinence program.”

Her dad chuckled. “You’re probably right.” He tucked the folder into a drawer in his desk and turned sparkling eyes on Keelah. “Doesn’t stop a dad from worrying that his little girl is growing up. And garnering a lot of male attention.”

Keelah hopped onto the exam table; shifted uncomfortably against the cold metal and began to swing her legs. “You don’t have to worry. I don’t get that kind of attention.” She rubbed at a spot on her forehead. “Not that I want it.”

She was eighteen years old and hadn’t even had her first kiss. Hadn’t held hands with anyone or passed heart-adorned notes in class. Not that she cared. Liking someone and being liked seemed like a lot of work.
“What about Freddie?” Her dad asked her. “He’s been coming around a lot lately.”


“Ah.”

“I’m sort of his creative consultant.”

“And you couldn’t use your position to suggest a better protagonist?”

“It was going to be a vampire candlestick.”

“I see.” Her father laughed heartily. Keelah beamed at his unfettered reaction. She hadn’t seen her dad so relaxed in a long time. “So no Freddy. Anyone else you’re interested in?”

“Like…romantically?”

“Yes.”

Keelah raised an eyebrow. Suddenly suspicious. “Why are you asking? This isn’t your roundabout way of having the talk is it? ‘Cause we already had that conversation when I was twelve. And I really don’t think I can handle another slide show presentation.”

She jumped off the table. Went to throw her water bottle in the recycle bin.

“That’s not what this is, sweetheart. I just want you to be happy. I want to make sure you have…people in your life. People who care about you.”

“I do. I have you and Jonas and Amata.” She settled into the chair across from her dad. Suddenly noticing how red-rimmed her father’s eyes were. How lined his face had become. “What’s wrong Dad?”

“Nothing.”

But he answered too quickly. And he seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

His eyes went to the framed quote hanging on the clinic wall. Revelation 21:6. James reminded Keelah often that the scripture had been her mother’s favorite.

He smiled at the stenciled words; his eyes swinging back to Keelah’s. “Your mother would be so proud of you. You’re smart. Capable. And just as lovely as she was.”

Keelah smiled at her dad’s words. Felt that pinprick of pain she always felt when her father bought up the mother she’d never met; whose countenance she had never even witnessed.

“Is it strange that I miss her?” she asked him. “When I’ve never met her?”

Her dad inhaled sharply at her words. Reached across his desk and clasped her hand. “Of course it isn’t strange. And you did meet your mother. You knew her for nine months. She sang to you. She read to you. She even got to hold you for a little while when you were born.” His eyes gleamed; the beginning of tears. “You were the most important thing, Keelah. To both of us. I want you to remember that.”

Keelah stared at her father. Confused by his outpour of emotion. He was usually so reserved. Loving but aloof.
“I know that Dad. And I love you too.”

“Good.” He patted her hand. Moved back in his chair and nodded his head as if he’d reached some important decision. “Good,” he repeated. “You ready to go watch this film?”

They’d already missed most of the movie. Probably wouldn’t even be able to find seats in the crowded classroom that served as the vault’s theater. But Keelah nodded anyway. Because even limited time with her father was better than no time at all.

“Let’s go,” she said.

They rose from their seats at the same time. Keelah waited by the office door as her father straightened the items on his desk; removed his lab coat and stethoscope; then turned off the lights.

They walked down the metal corridor together; their shoulders brushing comfortably. James chuckling softly as Keelah filled him in on Freddie’s dorsal-finned hero.

It would be their best night in a long while. A movie; laughter; and shared thoughts of a departed mother.

Six hours after the movie ended, James would leave Vault 101.

He would take his research notes, a hidden cache of bottle caps, and a framed photograph of his wife Catherine.

He would leave his daughter.

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Present

Keelah woke slowly from her heavy sleep; cotton mouthed and groggy. She rolled over onto her back and rapped her knuckles against her forehead in an attempt to shake loose the memories that had besieged her during the night.

Project Purity.

She gagged a little bit. Tried to fix her thoughts on something else as she pulled a wool blanket away from her overheated body. Someone must have covered her while she slept. And removed her armor. She was down to her long-johns and socks.

She stared down at her socked feet. Grimaced at the holes in the threadbare cotton that would require her attention. It was damn easy to find shoes in the wasteland. But socks? She’d have to remember to do a bit of sewing later. Otherwise she would catch a cold.

Keelah wiggled her toes and stretch languidly. Bad memories aside, she felt damned good. Well-rested and comfortable. It was as if she’d just enjoyed a long sleep in her own bed.

She was scratching at an itch on her belly button when the door to the bedroom swished open and Amata swept in.

Gone was the night gown and satin robe. This time Amata was bedecked in the sharply pressed uniform of an Overseer. The young leader stopped in the doorway; stared in surprise at Keelah’s raised shirt and rapidly moving fingers.

Keelah tugged her shirt down and blushed. “How long have I been out?”
“Seventeen hours. Give or take. You must have been bushed.”

“A little.”

Amata carried a small platter over to the couch. Set a tray of food and drinks on the table beside Keelah.

Keelah glanced at her wrist to check the time. But her Pip-Boy wasn’t there.

“I removed it so that you could sleep more comfortably,” Amata stated. She turned to retrieve the Pip-Boy from a shelf near the door. “I also took off your armor and weapons. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, that’s fine.” Keelah accepted the Pip-Boy when it was returned to her; reattached it to her left wrist and turned it on. “Uh…thanks for the hospitality.”

She looked everywhere but at Amata.

It had been three years since she’d been this close to her former friend. The proximity and sustained contact were beginning to make her feel fuzzy around the edges. Flushed.

She scrolled through her Pip-Boy. Noted that it was a little after four PM.

“I brought you some food,” Amata said. She gestured at the tray next to Keelah before claiming a seat in a nearby chair. “Some fish cakes and canned fruit. Coffee with a bit of sugar. Is that still how you take it?”

Keelah nodded. Clasped the cup of hot liquid and took a small sip.

Amata stared at the wastelander; her eyes taking in the mussed hair, the rumpled underclothes; the exhaustion that remained in Keelah’s eyes even after such prolonged slumber.

“You can take a shower after you eat,” Amata commented. “Your armor’s in the laundry, but I can get you some clean clothes.”

“You’re washing my armor?”

“It was filthy. Dirt and grime and…blood.” Amata ran a hand through her hair. Looked momentarily discomfited. “It shouldn’t take long to clean. I’ll get you a vault suit to wear.”

“I’d rather wear a paper sack.” Keelah put down the coffee cup. Bit into a flaky fish cake.

“I’ll find something else then.”

There was an awkward pause. A lot of examining the other without trying to be obvious.

“How’s Christine?” Keelah asked. She was mindful not to chew with her mouth open.

“Much better since she’s taken that root. She has a bit more color in her cheeks and managed to eat some soup this morning. You should still probably check on her when you get a chance.”

“She will.”

She was full. Two bites of fish cake and a half cup of coffee and she felt satiated. Or maybe it was anxiety that was making her feel so heavy.
“I spoke to you about the Big Towners, right?” Keelah asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. I couldn’t remember.”

Keelah’s eyes traveled across the pristine bedroom. Took note of the neatly stacked books on the night table near the bed; a framed photograph of a young Amata and her father.

“I’ve scheduled a vault-wide meeting, after supper. We’ll discuss your proposition and make a decision then.”

“I’ll try not to get my hopes up.”

Keelah rose to her feet; began searching the room for her boots and weapons.

Amata helpfully pointed the items out; her eyes soft and curious as she watched Keelah inspect her guns; refill ammunition.

“You won’t need those,” Amata said. Nodding at the fearsome assault rifle and combat SMG.

“You sure?”

Amata walked over to her. Put a hand against Keelah’s and pushed the two firearms back onto the table. “Vault 101 isn’t a war zone anymore. You’re safe here. But I want the 101ers to feel safe as well. So please, no guns.”

Keelah stared into Amata’s eyes. The Overseer was so close that Keelah could count the freckles decorating that perfect nose. She could smell the lavender-scented soap that Amata used.

“No weapons,” Keelah affirmed. Ever aware that Amata’s hand was still resting against hers.

Amata smiled. “Thank you.” The Overseer removed her hand from Keelah’s. Then turned on her heels. “I’ll leave you to take your shower. You know where the facilities are. In the meantime, I’ll find you something suitable to wear.”

Amata collected the meal tray and coffee cup then headed for the bedroom door.

“Amata?”

The Overseer stopped. Turned towards her former friend. “Yes?”

“The Big Towners and Lamplighters…I’ve known them a while now. They’re important to me. I wouldn’t come back here and make such a request if it wasn’t absolutely necessary. I need to know that they’ll be…okay in the vault.”

Okay meaning safe. They both understood her euphemism.

“Keelah…I know you don’t consider the vault your home anymore…” Keelah’s mouth twisted in anger. That certainly wasn’t her choice, to make the vault not be her home. “But you should remember that, once upon a time, you and your father were outsiders and Vault 101 let the two of you in. The administration lied to us kids about your origins, of course, but the adults knew. They knew all along that you and your father were from the wasteland, yet they accepted you as one of their own. He became the good doctor and you became the vault darling.” There was ripple of emotion across Amata’s face. “Outside of Butch and my father, everyone in this vault loved you and your dad. And, yes, that changed after your dad left. And the 101ers have been…unkind to you.” It
was a gross understatement and both of them knew it. “But that shift in opinion has nothing to do
with you being a wastelander and everything to do with the circumstances surrounding your father’s
exit.” Amata lifted her chin. A proud and passionate leader at all times. “I say all of that to say…
don’t count us all as monsters. We’ve welcomed strangers before. We can do so again.”

Keelah closed her eyes. Thought about the 101ers who’d pressed her into a corner three years ago;
who’d spit on her and clamored for her blood. Those were the same vaulters who had crowded into
the vault cafeteria to celebrate her birthdays. Who had taken turns babysitting her when she was a
kid, those nights her father worked late in the clinic.

How could she reconcile such competing imagery? Friend and foe? Hell and home?

Amata’s voice pulled her from her discordant thoughts. “The meeting is at seven. You’re free to do
whatever you’d like until then. I’m sure there are 101ers who’d like to see you.”

Amata attempted a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. Then she was through the door. Leaving
Keelah alone.

When Keelah finished with her shower, she found a pair of army-green overalls waiting for her on
the hamper. The coveralls were still vault-issue garb but were absent the prominent 101 that
distinguished other vault uniforms.

Keelah pulled on the garish outfit. It was oversized and smelled faintly of mothballs, but she was
happy to wear something clean that didn’t resemble a vault jumpsuit. She was also pleased to find
that Amata had left her a fresh pair of socks.

She fixed her hair as best she could; tidied up Amata’s bedroom; then made her way downstairs to
see about Christine. She passed several vaulters along the way—security personnel and 101ers who
were roaming the hallways. The security guards simply stared at her; showing neither hostility nor
friendliness. Some vaulters gawked when she passed by. Others nodded or waved. The ones who
still liked her greeted her warmly.

When Mr. Brotch saw Keelah, he gripped her with a firm handshake and gave her a mischievous
wink.

“You’re a saint, kid. Coming back to this place after all that happened last time. I always knew you
were a good egg.”

“Or maybe I’m just a fool.”

Brotch clucked his tongue disapprovingly. “Don’t say that. I’ve taught plenty of fools in my day, and
you weren’t one of them.” He gestured her towards a corner; so that they could have a semblance of
privacy from the curious onlookers. “You know I’m vault chaplain now, right?”

“Yeah. Butch told me.” She grinned playfully. “Where’s your smock?”

“Eh…they issued me one, but I misplaced it.” Another wink. “Anyway…being chaplain is actually a
pretty nice gig. I get an office and free meals. And the people who sit across the table from me
actually want to be there. It’s something else.” He rubbed at his beard; a thoughtful look on his face.
“I don’t know… as chaplain, it seems like I’m actually making a difference around here. There are a
lot of people in this tin can who have things they need to talk about.” He lowered his voice. Stole a
glance over his shoulder. “Vault Depressive Syndrome is at an all-time high.”
“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe having some new blood in the vault will help with that. I’m planning to vote yes on your proposal. Just wanted to let you know.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Brocht patted her on the back. “Keep up the good work,” he said, before heading down the hall.

Keelah smiled after him. Then walked a few more meters until she reached Christine’s bedroom.

She found the pregnant woman propped up in bed, playing with a teddy bear. Christine’s father was seated in a chair next to her. And a stocky younger man hovered over Christine, trying to wrap the teddy bear in a white cloth.

“Am I interrupting?” Keelah asked. Pausing at the entryway.

“No, of course not. Come in,” Officer Kendall said. He rose to his feet. Gestured Keelah into the room.

“How’s the mother-to-be?” Keelah asked. She made her way to Christine. Shot an amused look at the young man to her right who was still wrestling with the teddy bear and fabric.

“I’m much better,” Christine responded. “Feel me.”

Keelah chuckled at the word choice but dutifully placed her palm against Christine’s skin. The wastelander noticed with some relief that Christine’s temperature had dropped; her pulse was steady. Her eyes had lost its milky texture.

“She’s still nauseous though,” Officer Kendall contributed. “Derrick has had to change his jumpsuit a couple of times.”

The young man—Derrick—blushed and fumbled with the cloth in his hands. “It’s my fault really. I should learn to move faster,” he stammered.

He smiled down at Christine. Straightened the bedsheet around the woman’s distended belly.

“This is my boyfriend Derrick,” Christine introduced. Her smile as wide as her bashful suitor’s. “He’s the father.”

Derrick extended a hand to Keelah. “Nice to meet you. Again. We’ve met before when we were younger.”

“Uh…” Keelah’s brow furrowed as she tried to recall the man’s face. He looked a few years older than she and Christine. Didn’t seem to be someone she’d encountered all that regularly in the vault.

But those bushy eyebrows looked familiar…

“Oh! I remember you now. You coach the Little League baseball team.”

“Yep. The Vault-Tec All-Stars. We’re a perfect 82 and 0.” Officer Kendall rolled his eyes. Derrick caught the snide expression and his smile wavered momentarily. “Of course, we don’t play any actual games since we don’t have opponents, but I like to count practices as victories.”

He blushed beet red; bit into his bottom lip to halt his stammering.
Keelah bit back a smile. Derrick was pretty damn adorable. She could see why Christine was staring all googly-eyed at him.

“Go team!” Keelah complimented. She pointed at the teddy bear. “What’s going on with the bear?”

“We’re practicing swaddling. For when the baby comes,” Christine said.

“Really? How’s it coming along?”

Derrick demonstrated his swaddling technique; wrapping the teddy bear tightly with the cloth until the stuffed animal resembled a croissant.

The soon-to-be father stared down at the barely-visible bear. “We may need more safety pins,” he said morosely.

Keelah chuckled. Stole a glance at Officer Kendall who’d been conspicuously quiet this whole time. The stern-faced guard looked near to having a conniption.

“Why don’t you let Officer Kendall show you the proper way to do it?” Keelah suggested. Purposefully ignoring the surprised look the security guard threw her way.

“You know how to, Dad?” Christine asked.

Officer Kendall flushed. “Well…you pick up a thing or two when you have two girls.” He stepped forward and quickly and efficiently swaddled the teddy bear. His technique was perfect. “Your mom showed me how. She was real good with stuff like this.”

“Alright Mr. K!” Derrick exclaimed; raising his hand for a high-five.

Officer Kendall looked aggrieved but he obliged the high-five; gave Keelah a meaningful look before moving back to his daughter’s side. The officer stared down at Christine; the concern for his daughter and grandchild practically etched into his face.

The unvarnished expression of love and concern on the man’s face moved Keelah. For a moment she was reminded of her own father. The tender look the doctor would bestow on her those days she stumbled into his office after another fist fight with Butch and the Tunnel Snakes.

What am I going to do with you Keelah? He would murmur. As he used a handkerchief to blot blood; as his hands reset a dislocated finger.

Keelah wrenched her eyes from Officer Kendall’s face. Blinked back the images of her father. Being back in the vault was stirring up too many memories.

“We should have a doctor here real soon,” Keelah reassured Christine. “Then you’ll be swaddling the real thing.”

Derrick took the teddy bear from Officer Kendall. Pulled it to his chest and rocked it. Clearly practicing how to burp a baby. “You know…” the little league coach directed to Keelah. “If the baby’s a girl, we’re naming her Monica. After Christine’s sister. But if it’s a boy, we plan to name him after you. Since you’re helping us and all.”

“You know my first name is Catherine, right?”

“Yeah…but we thought maybe we could call him Cather-Ryan. Or Cathe-Terry. Make it Greek-sounding or something.”
Keelah smiled good-naturedly. “Let’s just hope for a girl, shall we?” She turned to Christine. “I have an appointment with the Overseer. I’ll check back with you later.”

“Thanks again,” Christine said.

Derrick waved the teddy bear at Keelah. And Officer Kendall nodded. The wastelander left the room. Made her way towards the cafeteria.

She marveled at how transformed the vault was. The 101ers had done a commendable job repairing the facility; cleaning the trash and blood stains; refurbishing walls that had once displayed bullet holes.

Keelah was so absorbed in her examination that she nearly tripped over Beatrice Armstrong. The resident poet rolled to a stop in front of Keelah. Her face stretched in a face-splitting grin.

The poet did an impressive spin in her homemade wheelchair. “The hero returns!” Beatrice crowed. And the woman actually clapped her hands in glee.

“Hiya Beatrice. You look well.”

“Don’t hiya me. Get over here and give me a hug.”

Beatrice opened her arms and Keelah leaned into the embrace. The slender woman was surprisingly strong and Keelah thought she felt a vertebrae shift when Beatrice squeezed even tighter.

“Oomph!” Keelah wiggled out of the embrace. Tried to pop her back as inconspicuously as possible.

“You saved my life,” Beatrice stated happily. “I have an entire drawer full of poems dedicated to you. Give me a sec, and I’ll go get them. Hope you like rhymes!”

The woman made to wheel herself towards her living quarters.

“Woah! Hold on…” Keelah held up a hand to stop her. “Why don’t I get the poems from you later? I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

The vault meeting wasn’t for another three hours, but Keelah felt no guilt about lying. Beatrice had read poems to her before when she was a teenager. Keelah was fond of poetry herself, but Beatrice wrote poems in only one style. Epic. And Keelah couldn’t spare an entire afternoon to poetry-reading. She just couldn’t.

Beatrice looked disappointed. But only for a second. “We’ll reconvene in my room later. Bring something to drink when you come. Preferably something with a cork.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Beatrice waggled her eyebrows and wheeled herself away.

The rest of Keelah’s encounters were equally pleasant. She was able to catch up with Officer Gomez. Freddie. Her old supervisor, Stanley; and even made time to do a quick inspection of the vault handybot, Andy.

She was happy to learn from Stanley that Andy hadn’t performed any more medical procedures since his episode with Beatrice and had been confined primarily to the maintenance room.

By the time Keelah finished making her rounds, it was nearly seven o’clock. The wastelander made
her way to the atrium where the meeting was to be held.

Officer Taylor glared at her as she passed. But like many of the 101ers she’d encountered this evening, the elderly security guard seemed resigned to communicating his displeasure by way of dirty looks.

Amata was standing at the front of the room with Susie Mack. Keelah made her way over to the two women.

Susie snorted when she saw Keelah’s green coveralls. “Nice getup. Where’s the handlebar mustache and tool belt?”

“Hardy har.” Keelah turned to Amata. “I don’t have to give a speech or anything, do I?”

“No. I explained your proposal to the 101ers this morning over breakfast. This meeting just gives them an opportunity to ask questions and make their final decision.” She placed a hand against Keelah’s arm. “Don’t worry.”

A crowd began to gather behind them. Murmuring vaulters filled the spacious room; broke off into pairs and small groups and chattered amongst themselves as they waited for their leader to begin the meeting.

Amata’s eyes swept the crowd. It looked like she was counting the vaulters. Making sure everyone was in attendance.

Keelah did some people-watching of her own. The wastelander couldn’t help but notice a small group of vaulters to her right who were staring daggers at her. Freddie’s mom, Pepper, stood off to the side, watching Keelah too. The cook bit into a fingernail as she stared at Keelah; a conflicted look on her face.

Even Derrick and Officer Kendall had made an appearance. The little league coach caught Keelah’s eye and flashed her a thumbs-up.

Old Lady Palmer made her way through the crowd. As soon as she was within reach, the elderly woman pulled Keelah into a hug.

“It’s so good to see you, dear. I’ve been worried.” Old Lady Palmer pulled back from the embrace. Gave Keelah a good once-over. “My word! You’re so thin, I could wrap my arms around you twice! You need to eat more.”

“I eat plenty.”

“I don’t believe you.” Old Lady Palmer put her hands on her hips. Gave Keelah the sternest look she could manage. “Looks like I’ll be baking tonight. A pan of sweet rolls and a couple of lemon pound cakes if I can convince Pepper to let me run both ovens. I’m going to fatten you up if it’s the last thing I do.”

Keelah laughed. “Just tell me when and where Ms. Palmer.”

“Come find me after the meeting.” The old woman’s eyes sparkled. She clasped Keelah’s hand in hers. Spoke in an unsteady voice. “You remind me so much of my Anna. She was brave like you. Led the vault scouting party all those years ago. She didn’t make it back though. And I never found out what happened to her.” Old Lady Palmer’s grip tightened on Keelah. “Just promise me you’ll keep coming back. I’ve lost Anna and Jonas. I couldn't bear losing someone else.”
Keelah’s tongue felt heavy in her mouth. She couldn’t make such a promise. Despite her proposal to have the Big Towners and Lamplighters move into Vault 101, she had no intention of moving back into the vault herself. Didn’t even want to be here right now. But she didn’t want to disappoint Old Lady Palmer. Didn’t want to contribute to the deep sadness she could see reflected in the woman’s eyes.

“I promise.”

“Good.” Old Lady Palmer cupped Keelah face. Like a grandmother would. Then she took her place amongst the crowd of expectant vaulters.

Amata called the meeting to order. “It looks like everyone is here. Let’s begin.”

A hush fell over the room, and more than seventy pairs of eyes swung towards Amata and Keelah.

“You all know why we’ve gathered here. Keelah has returned to the vault to help us. Again.” The Overseer’s eyes flickered toward the grumbling quartet that was still glaring hostilely at Keelah.

“Keelah’s already given Christine medicine that has helped her regain some of her strength, and she knows a doctor that can help with the delivery. In return for all of the assistance she’s given us over the years, Keelah has requested that Vault 101 accommodate friends of hers that live in the wasteland. A group called Big Towners and Lamplighters.”

She looked to Keelah for assistance.

“Little Lamplighters. They’re a group of kids who live in a cave out east.”

Her comment drew several gasps from the crowds; a spat of whispering.

Amata raised her hands. Silenced the crowd. “I’ve explained to Keelah that a decision of this magnitude must be made by committee. So, I’ll let you ask her any questions you have about these potential boarders. Then we’ll have a vote. Majority rules.”

Keelah bit her bottom lip. Already suspecting what the final decision would be based on all the frenzied whispering from the crowd.

“Any questions?” Amata asked.

Pepper Gomez immediately raised her hand. Keelah bit back a sigh. “How old are the kids you mentioned? The ones in the cave?” she directed to Keelah.

“The youngest is nine. The oldest is fifteen. They all range somewhere in there.”

“Where are their parents?” Another vaulter asked. “Did the monsters get them?”

“I bet it was dragons,” someone else answered. “There are dragons out there, you know.”

The possibility of parent-eating dragons led to more vigorous chattering from the crowd.

“The first Little Lamplighters were on a field trip at the caverns when the bombs dropped. All of the adults who were with them went outside to find help. They never came back. The radiation probably got them. The Lamplighters have been on their own ever since.”

“That’s terrible!”
“Poor things!”

Keelah was surprised by how commiserative the 101ers were being. Even the curmudgeonly Officer Taylor looked perturbed at the thought of a cave full of orphaned children.

“How many people total? Between Big Town and Lamplight?” Officer Gomez asked.

“About twenty. The Lamplighters also have dogs. If you decide to let them move in here, I figured we could put the dogs in the tunnel outside the vault door. That way they’d have space to run around while also serving as guard dogs for the vault.”

There were nods of approval from the crowd.

“I've always wanted a dog!”

“I've never even seen one!”

Keelah couldn’t help but smile. It was easy to forget how sheltered vault life was. There was so much the 101ers hadn’t seen or experienced. Sunshine. Fresh air. Hell, they reacted to the prospect of dogs as if Keelah had said she was bringing them pet unicorns.

“How about the Big Towners? What’s their story?”

“They’re former Lamplighters. At Little Lamplight, when you turn 16, you have to leave the cavern. The teenagers migrate to Big Town. It’s a small settlement. Not much to look at. A lot of the Big Towners are young too. Sixteen. Nineteen. There are a couple of Big Towners who are in their 20s.”

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“How any more questions from security?” Amata asked. “Having more vaulters would contribute to your workload. I want to be sure to take any concerns you may have into consideration.”

Several officers turned their attention to Chief Officer Hannon. Along with Officer Gomez, Hannon was the senior office on the staff. He was the guard whose opinion carried the most weight.

The steely-eyed guard’s eyes flicked to Keelah and a muscle ticked in his jaw. It was almost as if it was difficult for the guard to look at her.

“How many people total? Between Big Town and Lamplight?” he asked Keelah. His voice sandpaper rough. Authoritative.

“Like what?” Keelah asked. She straightened her shoulders. Stared back at the man. Unblinking.

“Any of them like to play with matches? Or make homemade explosives?” He grinned (an insincere smile) until the pink of his gums showed. “Do they know how to play well with others?” he asked sarcastically.

Keelah’s lip curled at the guard’s tone, but she managed to keep her temper in check. “It would probably take the Big Towners and Lamplighters a little while to get used to having so many guards around. But most of them will probably welcome a security presence. They’ve been fighting off super mutants and slavers for most of their lives. As far as their temperaments go, the vault has seen worse with the Tunnel Snakes. These kids just want some place safe to be. They're not going to color on the walls or run with scissors.”

She narrowed her eyes at Officer Hannon. I see your sarcasm and raise you tenfold, fucker.

Amata recognized the tension. Cleared her throat so that everyone’s attention returned to her. “One
of the benefits of having the Big Towners and Little Lamplighters move in is that we’ll be able to fill some of our vacant work positions. Right Keelah?"

“Yes. There are a couple of ‘em who are real good with electronics. I think they’ll be a big help to Stanley.” The grey-haired electrician pumped a fist in excitement. “There’s a cook. The Big Towners have a guard who should be able to transition pretty smoothly onto the security team here. Obviously you’ll have a new doctor. They even have a teacher who could replace Mr. Brotch.”

Mr. Brotch responded on cue. “I think it’s a terrific idea, Keelah. I’m all for it.”

“Me too,” Officer Gomez added.

More vaulters chimed in. Expressed their support for Keelah’s proposal.

Pepper Gomez raised her hand again.

“Yes, Pepper?” Amata asked; her tone wary.

“When would they be moving in? I’d like to prepare a welcome meal. Maybe that pepper steak everyone likes. But I’ll need a little notice. I have a lot of cans to open.”

Both Keelah’s and Amata’s eyes widened in surprise. The two women exchanged a look. Both too stunned to answer Pepper.

“Don’t make the pepper steak,” Officer Taylor interrupted. “It’s too spicy and you never trim the fat properly.”

“It’s called pepper steak for a reason, you old coot. And I’ve never gotten any complaints.”

“I’m complaining now, ain’t I? Besides, kids don’t like pepper!”

“They do too!”

The two vaulters begin arguing with each other.

Other 101ers pressed towards Keelah. Eager to offer more suggestions.

“I can put together welcome bags for the newbies,” Stanley volunteered. “Dig a few boxes of vault suits out of storage. We have plenty of kid-sized ones. And set aside Pip-Boys for each of them. You think they’ll like that?”

Keelah raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure. We’ll probably have to wait and see…” She was still too surprised by everyone’s enthusiasm to respond appropriately.

Amata helped her out. “Everyone! Let me have your attention please. I’m glad you’re so eager to aid with this transition but let’s calm ourselves. We still have a lot to discuss. Pepper, a welcome dinner sounds like a great idea. If the majority votes yes to the move. I, for one, would recommend you prepare your beef stew. It’s delicious. And it sounds like the Big Towners and Lamplighters could use the vegetables.”

“The beef stew is usually seasoned just fine,” Officer Taylor added. Pepper Gomez cut her eyes at the old man but nodded her approval to Amata.

“As far as the vault suits and Pip-Boys go,” Amata directed to Stanley. “I think we should make both optional. Moving into the vault will already be a big enough change for our new additions. We don’t want to put too much on them too fast.” Amata clasped her hands in front of her. Suddenly looked
nervous. “As a matter of fact…I was thinking of implementing a new policy for the vault.” She swallowed. “From here on out, vault jumpsuits will be optional for all 101ers. The vault caravan is still in its infancy but it won’t be long before we have access to wasteland items such as pants and dresses…even cowboy hats. It’s a new day for our vault. So, I figured, why not have new clothes?”

The Overseer waited for the uproar; for the public denunciation of her newfangled idea. But no outcry came. The 101ers actually whooped. Hi-fived. Turned to their neighbors and exclaimed:

“What do you think we could get high heeled shoes?”

“I’ve always thought I’d look good in a dickey. You know, like that guy from that book in the library?”

“No more wearing these glorified pajama pants. Thank God!”

Amata laughed. Turned to Keelah with a wide smile on her face. This vault meeting had gone much better than either of them expected.

Keelah grinned back at her. Her crazy idea could actually work!

A figure emerged from the crowd. Moving slowly and methodically. Parting the throng of vaulters like Moses parted the Red Sea.

Keelah’s nose flared. She’d forgotten about him. Hadn’t seen hide nor hair of the detestable man since she’d been in the vault. But she should have known that snakes don’t vanish. They simply burrow.

Alphonse Almodovar put a hand up, silencing the chatter around him. He was a generally despised figure, but he still commanded respect from the 101ers. And fear.

He smiled at his daughter—a jagged slash of his mouth—before turning his attention to Keelah. The smile lingered. Grew even more wide. A razor-sharp maw.

“I hate to be a spoilsport. Especially since all of my fellow citizens are so eager to turn our little vault into a nursery school. But allow me to state the obvious. You’re inviting twenty wasteland vagabonds into our vault. Any number of whom could be infected with some type of communicable disease or be suffering from sort of wasteland psychopathy. How, pray tell, do you plan to feed these outsiders?”

Keelah snarled. “The vault has food.”

“Yes. But only enough to accommodate our current population. And our supplies aren’t endless. We have enough food to last us five years maybe. Ten years, tops.”

“We can bring in more food with the caravan,” Susie interjected.

“Oh, yes. What a marvelous idea!” Alphonse retorted sarcastically. “Bring in food that’s probably irradiated and not fit for human consumption. If the tainted outsiders don’t kill us, the tainted food certainly will.”

“I’ve eaten food from the outside for more than three years,” Keelah rebutted.

“And you look great, dear,” Alphonse said airily, drawing attention to Keelah’s scarred face; her thin frame.
Alphonse turned in a circle; faced the crowd and commanded their attention with his booming voice. His ice floe eyes.

“I know the vault hasn’t always been receptive to my counsel but hear me, people. This is a terrible idea. The last time we accepted wasteland trash into this vault, it ended with insurrection. With radroach infestation. We jeopardized the safety of this vault and we lost countless members of our community. I was the person who made that irresponsible decision. Who allowed the scheming doctor and his child into our home. I can admit that it was a mistake. I can’t sit idly by and watch the vault make that mistake again.” He pointed a finger at Keelah. Didn’t even bother turning around to face the wastelander. Just pointed.

Alphonse Almodovar was a masterful orator. He understood that propagandizing required eye contact. “I understand that your new Overseer wants to open the vault and do a bit of trading. It’s not ideal, but we can manage it. What we cannot manage, however, is a group of tainted ne’er-do-wells squatting in our home. They will bring disease. They will bring ruin. We made the wrong choice before and look where it got us.”

His finger still pointing at Keelah. Accusatory. Giving the 101ers a target to focus on.

Amata stepped forward. Her body practically trembling with rage. “Are you done?”


He took a step backwards until he was, again, part of the crowd. Crossed his arms like he always used to do when he looked down on the 101ers from the perch in his office. The former Overseer stared defiantly at Keelah.

Amata sighed and faced the crowd. Some of the 101ers were visibly shaken by Alphonse’s thunderous address.

“If there are no more questions, we’ll move to vote. But before we vote, let me make one thing clear. Since Keelah is the person best acquainted with the Big Towners and Lamplighters, I would like her to serve as our liaison for the two groups as they make their transition. She’s already agreed to help launch the vault caravan, so it looks like we’ll be seeing a lot of her. Consequently, I recommend that Keelah be reinstated as a full member of Vault 101. She would be free to come and go as she sees fit. She would have living quarters inside the vault, if she chooses. It goes without saying that she would be under the protection of the Overseer just like every other 101er.” Amata stared out at the crowd. Her posture straight. Her meaning clear. “If you vote ‘yes’ to this move, you would also be voting yes to Keelah’s return.”

There were more than a few widened eyes at the comment. Mutters and exclamations. Alphonse scowled. Officer Taylor sucked his teeth.

Keelah could only stare incredulously at Amata. They hadn’t discussed her being unbanished from the vault. The wastelander wasn’t even sure she wanted her residency reinstated.

Amata took a deep breath. “All those in favor of the Big Towners and Little Lamplighters moving into Vault 101. And Keelah being reinstated as a full-fledged member of the vault, raise your hand.”

Keelah turned her attention to the floor. Studied the grooves in the metal tile so that she wouldn’t have to see the crossed arms; the lowered hands.

“All of those opposed…”
There was a protracted silence. Keelah fidgeted in place. Wondered which doctor she would have to chase down next. There was a doctor at TenPenny Tower. Maybe if she offered him 10,000 caps.

There was pressure against her elbow. Keelah looked up. Saw Amata’s hand resting there. The Overseer was smiling.

“Looks like your friends have a new place to call home.” Keelah nearly choked in surprise. Her hands clenched into the fabric of her coveralls. She couldn’t believe it. Amata smiled tenderly at the woman’s dazed expression. “And it was nearly unanimous. Only a single dissenting vote.”

Amata cut her eyes at her father. Watched as the disgraced leader stomped out of the atrium.

Keelah stared at the assembled 101ers in disbelief; her mouth agape. One dissenting vote meant that Officer Taylor voted yes. And Pepper Gomez. And the entire security team. She was flabber-fucking-gasted.

Amata turned back to the crowd. “Thank you all so much. For your time and your compassion. This is a good thing we’re doing. I believe it will prove to be mutually beneficial. I’ll adjourn the meeting at this time. Anyone who has follow-up questions can find me in my office.”

The 101ers slowly trickled out. Many of them still talking excitedly about wasteland apparel and dogs and the possibility of having kids in the vault again.

Susie Mack stayed behind. So did Pepper Gomez and most of the security team.

Amata put a hand against Keelah’s waist. Tried to jolt the wastelander from her stupor. “You okay?”

“Yeah… I’m fine. This is just...” She licked suddenly dry lips. “Wow.”

“Not as bad as you expected, huh?”

They were standing so close. And Amata’s hand felt so warm against her hip. Keelah cleared her throat. Stared down at the young leader.

“That was nice what you did…reinstating me, but I don’t intend to move back in here.”

Amata looked disappointed but quickly schooled her features. “Of course. That’s your decision. I just thought…” Amata removed her hand from Keelah’s waist. Placed her hands behind her back and struck a more professional pose. “Like I said, you’re free to come and go as you please. You can simply consider the vault your home away from home.”

“No. Not home.” Keelah wasn’t sure if she was reminding Amata or herself. Either way, the comment hurt both women.

Amata smiled cheerlessly. Turned her attention to the security officer who was waiting patiently behind her.

“Yes, Officer Kendall?” Amata asked.

“I just wanted to know how long it would take to get the doctor here. The baby could come any day now.”

Amata seemed almost embarrassed at how quickly she’d gotten sidetracked from such an important matter. “Of course! Of course.” She turned to Keelah. “What are the next steps?”

“Well, first thing is to get Red here. That’s the doctor…” She sighed. “I still have to check with the
Big Towners and Lamplighters to see if they even want to relocate. And moving such a large group across the wastes is going to take a concerted effort. I’m going to need some outside help. That may take me some time.”

She rubbed her hand across her brow. Now that she thought about it…this idea of hers wasn’t just crazy. It was complicated as hell! She would have to move twenty people over a wild expanse of desert. They would run into God-only-knows how many feral ghouls and raiders along the way. And now that Butch and Fawkes had permanent jobs, she would have to undertake this gargantuan task with the assistance of only one companion (Charon) and Dogmeat.

“Uh…” She blew warm breaths into her clenched fists. Tried to steady her nerves. “I’ll worry about transporting the Big Towners and Lamplighters later. I might need a few weeks to work out all the details. Right now we should just focus on getting Red here as quickly as possible. Now, the problem with Red is, she won’t leave Big Town unless we leave some firepower behind to protect the other Big Towners. That means I’ll need a vaulter who’s skilled with weapons to accompany me to Big Town. He or she will stay behind and help guard the settlement while Red’s here delivering Christine’s baby.” Keelah’s eyes swept across the remaining 101ers. “Any volunteers?”

Pepper Gomez blanched. Officer Taylor rolled his eyes.

Susie Mack stepped forward. “I’ll do it.”

Keelah shook her head. “I was going to ask you to come along anyway. I need someone else.”

“I’ll do it.” It was Officer Kendall. “You’re going through all this trouble to help my daughter. It’s the least I can do.”

“No.” Senior Officer Hannon put a hand against Officer Kendall’s back. “John, you should stay here with Christine. She’s going to need her dad.” He turned obsidian eyes on Keelah. “I’ll go.”

Keelah nodded. “Meet me by the vault door in an hour. Bring an extra weapon.”

The senior officer patted Officer Kendall on the back. Then turned on his heels and left the room.

The rest of the group dispersed quickly after. The married couple, Pepper and Herman Gomez off to the cafeteria to plan the welcome meal (and ready the can openers). Officer Taylor following, giving Pepper unsolicited advice about seasonings.

That left Keelah with Amata and Susie Mack.

The blonde vaulter whistled sharply. Then punched Keelah, affectionately, in the shoulder. “Is there anything you can’t do, cheerleader?”

Keelah rubbed at her shoulder. Glared at the plucky blonde. “Apparently I can’t duck. Damn.” The green coveralls didn’t protect against shit!

“So where’s your brother?” Keelah asked Susie. “I’d have thought he’d be standing up front, waving a sign and chanting ‘No.’”

“I didn’t tell you? Wally left the vault.”

“What? When?”

“Right after I got back from my first trip outside. He figured if his brat sister could make it in the wasteland, he could too. He packed some things and left about a week ago”
Keelah couldn’t help but notice how Susie’s breathing shallowed. “Where’d he go?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t know. He just wanted out.” The blonde vaulter shrugged half-heartedly but it was clear that she was worried. “Maybe I’ll run across him. While we’re out trading.”

And just that quickly, Keelah changed her mind about helping Susie with the vault caravan. “Yeah. Maybe you will.”

“I’ll meet you by the vault door in an hour,” Susie said. “I should go put on my armor.” She turned to leave. “You probably should change too. You look ridiculous in that thing.”

“You’re a laugh riot Susie.”

The blonde waved a hand. Hustled out of the atrium.

Keelah rubbed her eyes and released a heavy breath. She was still stunned by how well things had turned out. And a bit overwhelmed. She’d just signed herself up for a boatload of work.

“I need a drink,” she said out loud.

She forgot that she had company. “I have water in my room,” Amata offered. “Shall we?”

“I’m going to need something a bit stronger than water.” But she had a canteen of whiskey in her pack, so she followed Amata anyway.

The walk from the atrium to the Overseer’s office was quiet. Keelah found herself studying floor tiles again. And counting in multiples of eleven.

Amata kept casting sidelong glances at her quiet companion, but Keelah refused to meet the other woman’s eyes.

She only looked up when Amata’s bedroom door swished open.

Keelah immediately went to her satchel; dug around until she found the small container of amber liquid. She tilted the bottle back and drank until her throat burned; until the sharp edges that made her brain hurt began to dull.

Keelah extended the bottle to Amata. “Want some?”

Amata took a seat in one of her metal chairs; shook her head. “No, thanks.”

The Overseer watched silently as Keelah drained the bottle. The wastelander was so desperate for the alcohol that she actually used the tip of her tongue to chase the final drops.

Amata frowned. “So you’re still drinking?”

Keelah secured the top on her canteen. Tossed the container back into her satchel. “Are you going to give me a lecture on the evils of alcohol?”

“No.”

“Good. ‘Cause I already have someone who does that.”

Amata pursed her lips. “Do you have time to talk? About things not related to the vault?”

“No, not really. We have a lot of miles ahead of us. And I promised Beatrice and Ms. Palmer that I’d
“I should be thanking you. You’re getting us a permanent doctor. And some much needed help for Stanley.”

Keelah was just about to pull on her armor when she felt a hand against her back. The wastelander turned her head. Saw that Amata had taken up position behind her. The Overseer was staring at some spot on Keelah’s back.

Amata pressed a finger against a dark impression in Keelah’s skin. “What happened here?”

“Got caught on the wrong end of a super sledge. The damn thing went right through my armor. Completely ruined a good recon suit.”

“And here?” Amata’s hand moved to jagged scar along Keelah’s shoulder blade.

“I was excavating an old building when the floor caved in. I ended up under a pile of rubble. I’m lucky that scar is as bad as I got.”

Amata made a distressed noise. Keelah turned around. Stared down at the smaller woman.

“You’ve seen me without any clothes on before. You’ve seen those scars.”

“No. Those are new.” Amata’s eyes zeroed in on the gash beneath Keelah’s right eye. The nasty burn scar that bisected her jawline. “So are those.”

Keelah shrugged. Bent over and began to tug on her tight-fitting armor. “What can I say? It’s been a rough three years.” It was hard to fasten the clasps on the newly-laundered suit. Amata helped her. Pushed Keelah’s hands away and snapped the heavy-duty hooks herself.

When she’d finished, she left her hands against Keelah’s shoulders. Gazed up at her former friend with sad eyes. “I can’t believe I sent you out there. Twice. I’m so sorry.”

Keelah stepped away from the touch. The wastelander retrieved her boots. Sat on the couch and began to tug the heavy shoes on. “My father was the reason I had to go out there the first time. There’s no need for you to feel bad about that.”

“But you still blame me for the last time, right?”

Keelah didn’t respond to the question. She focused on properly lacing her boots. Making a neat bow with each shoestring—an entirely useless action.
Amata sighed. Closed her eyes in disappointment.

“Thanks for the socks,” Keelah murmured. “I forgot how comfortable vault-issue footwear is.”

Keelah’s non sequitur put an even more pained look on Amata’s face, but the Overseer nodded through the distress. Crossed over to her bureau and removed two pairs of socks from its confines.

She extended the socks to Keelah. “Here’s extra,” she said.

She didn’t meet Keelah’s eyes when the wastelander took the socks. Didn’t respond to the woman’s soft “thank you.”

Keelah stuffed the socks into her supply sack. Attached her weapons to their proper places. Slung the satchel over her back. “I guess I’ll see you in a couple of days then. Maybe sooner if we make good time.”

“Okay.”

Amata put her hands behind her back. Stood up straight even though her eyes didn’t seem to be quite as steady.

Something in Amata’s eyes made Keelah falter. The wastelander hesitated near the bedroom door.

“Thanks again. I don’t think you realize how life-changing this will be for the Big Towners and Lamplighters.”

She’d told Amata thank you a half dozen times already when there were more important things she could be saying. Things that both women needed aired.

Amata’s mouth twitched. A failed attempt at a smile. “No problem.”

The polished Overseer had been reduced to simple sentences. Keelah couldn’t see, but the young leader’s hands shook behind her back.

“Be careful out there,” Amata intoned.

Her hazel-flecked eyes loosened something in Keelah’s chest. And the wastelander wasted another second beside the door. Her heart and mind at war; her palms sweating.

“Later,” Keelah finally said. Scurrying from the room.

Amata stood there. Rooted to the spot. The young leader had a lot of work ahead with these new developments. Preparations had to be made. Living quarters had to be readied.

She had a pregnant vaulter to worry about. A mutinous father to keep an eye on. And twenty new vaulters who would be in route in a matter of days or weeks.

There was a lot to keep the young Overseer busy.

But for now—at least for a few moments—Amata allowed herself a moment of vulnerability.

She sank down onto the metal chair; put her head in her hands and fought back tears.

“You foolish girl,” she scolded herself.

She couldn’t help but feel like she was six-years old again. Standing outside her father’s office,
waiting for him to notice her. Waiting for him to wave her in with a smile because he finally (finally!) realized his daughter was worth leaving work for; was worth an interruption to his beloved routine; was more important than facts and figures and 12-hour work days.

_God!_ She’d waited nearly twenty years for her father to value her. It seemed like she’d been waiting on Keelah for just as long.

Love poems and love-making; smuggled pistols and office interrogations. She’d given so much to be with Keelah and it had all been for naught. Keelah didn’t care anymore. And even if she _did_ still care, the disdain she felt for Amata clearly outweighed any lingering affection she might have felt.

Amata used the pads of her fingers to remove the moisture staining her face.

“You foolish girl,” she repeated.

It was clear that she was doomed to repeat this cycle. With her father. With Keelah:

Want. Wait. Walk away.

Better to get on with it. She had too many things to do.

The Overseer rose to her feet. Then stared at her reflection in the mirror. She made sure that there were no puffy eyes or tear streaks that would betray her weakness. No markers of fragility that would alarm the residents of Vault 101.

Satisfied that she looked like the capable leader the vault needed her to be, Amata strode out of her bedroom, back to her office; back to her desk; back to the growing list of things that needed to be done.

She’d learned to live without her father’s affection. She would learn to live without Keelah’s.

Chapter End Notes

I bookended Keelah's and Amata's recollections of their fathers to juxtapose their less than perfect childhoods. The two women feel so deeply connected partly because they spent a lifetime satisfying the other's loneliness.
Gimme Shelter

Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer heads to Big Town and Little Lamplight to recruit new 101ers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19 – Gimme Shelter**

It was a long walk to Big Town. The sun had set by the time Keelah, Susie, and Officer Hannon made it half way to their destination. Officer Hannon stared in bewilderment as a crescent-shaped moon appeared behind thick clouds.

“That thing’s not dangerous is it?” the officer asked Keelah.

“No.”

“It looks like it’s watching us.” The security guard took a few steps to his right. Squinted up at the moon. “And it’s following us.”

“It’s lighting our path. That’s a good thing.”

Keelah bit into a piece of Brahmin jerky. Tore off a mouthful before passing the rehydrated meat to Officer Hannon. The security officer gave Keelah a curious look (surprised by her generosity) before taking his own bite and passing it to Susie.

Keelah squatted in the dirt. Took a short breather. “If we keep this pace, we should make it to Big Town by morning. Unless the two of you want to break for camp?”

She knew her two companions weren’t accustomed to such rigorous travel. Susie was doing much better since her first foray into the wasteland. The blonde vaulter wasn’t even perspiring much. But Officer Hannon didn’t look too good. His brown skin was coated in sweat. And the stately officer hadn’t released his grip on his rifle since they left Vault 101.

So Keelah was somewhat surprised when Officer Hannon responded in the negative. “Let’s keep going,” he answered. “For Christine’s sake.”

Keelah nodded. Hopped back to her feet. The wastelander took a few seconds to brush the dust from her armor (it had just been cleaned after all). Then she motioned with her head for her two companions to follow her.

The moon trailed the slow-moving trio—lending its light and companionship—and Vault 101 got further away.
They had several close encounters along their way.

They ran across a drove of bloatflies outside of Springvale. Officer Hannon gawked at the winged creatures until Keelah reminded him they were dangerous. The security guard only just managed to fire a shot into the belly of one of the pests before its stinger could pierce his face. Keelah and Susie handled the rest—killing the other half dozen or so mutated flies before they could descend and attack.

Officer Hannon stared at the green residue splattered against his pants. Coagulated blood; a bit of a wing; a mishmash of organs that resembled dried vomit. The security guard spat into the dirt. Shook his leg until the flecks of blood left his pants. He shot a look at Keelah. His pearl-like eyes questioning.

“That’s the friendliest monster you’ll find out here,” Keelah responded. Reading the question in the man’s eyes. “Let’s go.”

They ran into a group of raiders next. A rag-tag group with more scars than skin. Barb-wired bats and pistols among them. Sunken-in eyes that suggested chem addiction.

Keelah prepared for an attack. She raised her assault rifle. Motioned for Susie and Officer Hannon to do the same.

But the raiders seemed to recognize that they were outmatched. Milky eyes flickered over Keelah’s combat weapon; Susie’s heavy armor; Officer Hannon’s stony face.

A red-headed woman who appeared to be in charge led the small group away.

Keelah watched the raiders until they were a speck in the distance. Then she and her companions moved on.

 Officer Hannon brought the butt of his rifle down on the radroach’s head. Again. Then again. The sound of metal hitting skin was muted. Officer Hannon had struck the insect so many times that only blood remained. And bits of flesh. But the officer didn’t stop his assault. He used the heel of a boot to pulverize the insect’s eye. He stomped until the radroach was a tangle of limbs and antennae. Until Keelah couldn’t tell what was roach and what was dirt.

“It’s dead,” Keelah murmured to the frenzied officer.

Officer Hannon finally arrested his movements. His chest heaved as he looked down at the mutilated insect. “Those things killed my Paulie,” he sputtered.

He cast his eyes at the other radroach carcasses littered near his feet.

The three travelers had been passing a sewer waystation when they were besieged by a group of radroaches. A single radroach was easy to manage. A single bullet could do the job. But a throng of radroaches—organized and bloodthirsty—was a challenge. The hungry insects never stopped biting or clawing with their razor-sharp pincers; their two rows of teeth. A person could be overwhelmed by their ferocity. Be bitten to death in seconds.

When Keelah saw the surge of roaches descending on them, she’d readied a frag grenade. Prepared to blow the insects into eternity. But Officer Hannon thwarted her plans. The security guard had run
into the throng of roaches like a man possessed. His rifle raised like a baton. He swung madly.

But maybe he had been possessed. Even now he fumed. Glared down at the dissected bodies of radroaches that he had singlehandedly slain.

“They killed my Paulie,” he repeated. His pupils disappearing for a second until his eyes appeared a glaring white against brown skin. “Tore him up so bad I couldn’t even recognize him.”

And Keelah suddenly understood why the officer had disfigured the mutant bugs. Why he had hacked the radroaches until they were little more than dismembered pieces.

“They’re dead now,” she told him.

And Keelah would have said more. Or touched the officer to render some sort of support. But she knew Officer Hannon placed part of the blame for Paul Jr’s death on her father. So she said nothing further. She just stood there silently and watched as Officer Hannon move to every felled radroach—what remained of them—and fired a bullet into their corpses.

The trio made it to Big Town by early morning. The fortified settlement was quiet and still. Not even a plume of smoke to indicate a cooking fire. Keelah and company shuffled slowly over the makeshift moat and found the guard, Dusty, asleep in his chair.

Keelah nudged the slumped man. “Look alive Dusty.”

Dusty bolted upright and scrambled for his sidearm. He pointed his pistol at Keelah and looked up at her with bleary eyes.

“Oh, it’s you. Dang it, Keelah. I could have shot you.”

“Not likely. The safety’s on.” Dusty looked embarrassed. Tucked the gun back into his waistband before rubbing a hand across his eyes. “When’s your break?” Keelah asked him.

“Not for another three hours. You wouldn’t happen to have any buffout would you? I can’t seem to keep my eyes open.”

Keelah shook her head. “Why don’t you ask Red for some?”

“She’s all out of meds. I think there’s a half of a tablet left but she’s saving it in case of a mutie attack. We always have one or two injuries after they hit us.”

“You may not have to worry about super mutants any longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you later. Do me a favor first. Round everyone up and have them meet me in the common room in half an hour. Okay?”

“Sure thing.” Dusty rose to his feet. Tilted his head at Susie and Officer Mack before staggering off to complete his task.

“Come on,” Keelah said to Susie and Hannon. “Let’s go find Red.”

They made their way towards Red’s clinic. Keelah’s companions stared in puzzlement at the distressed town. The stacked debris and car parts that served as a wall. The bloated sandbags that
fortified the leaning houses.

“So this is Big Town, huh?” Susie remarked. She sidestepped the uncovered hole in the ground that served as the town’s latrine. “Bit of a misnomer, don’t you think?”

“This way.”

Keelah led them into Red’s clinic. It was early but hopefully the young doctor was up and about.

They found the good doctor in her office, combining discolored liquids in small jars.

Keelah stopped in the doorway and smiled. “Science experiment?” she asked.

Red looked up. Grinned when she saw her friend. “I’m working on a cough syrup. Little bit of ginger root and eucalyptus oil. See what I can come up with.” Red left her chair. Crossed over to Keelah. “Back so soon?”

“Yeah. I bought someone who can help protect Big Town while you’re at the vault. That is…if you still want to help with the baby.”

“Of course I will.” Red extended a hand to Susie. “I’m Red. Big Town’s official doctor and unofficial mayor.”

The doc exchanged pleasantries with Susie and Officer Hannon before returning her attention to Keelah.

“Boy, when you put your mind to something, Keelah, you get it done. I’m impressed.”

“Hey, you’re the one who’s about to deliver a baby. Save the kudos for yourself.” She patted Red on the back. “Hope you like poetry, Red. I have a feeling Beatrice is going to write you a Shakespearean masterpiece.”

Red looked confused. “Beatrice…?”

Dusty wandered in. Spoke around a loud yawn. “Everyone’s gathered in the common room Keelah. You may want to hurry. Sticky started in on one of his stories and I think Flash is going to deck him.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Dusty left the room and Red turned a bewildered look on Keelah. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t just come here to get you to help Christine. I also have a bit of a proposition for you. I talked to the vault overseer, and she’s willing to let you and all the Big Towners move into the vault, if you’re willing to serve as the resident doctor.” When Red only stared back blankly, Keelah rushed on. “I know it was presumptuous of me, and I’m springing this on you all of a sudden, but I figured the vault would be an upgrade from Big Town. You won’t have to worry about super mutant attacks anymore. And the vault has clean food and water. They even have a library and movie theater. It’s no TenPenny Tower or anything like that and there’s a constant draft and the occasional radroach, but—”

Red put a hand against Keelah’s arm to stop her frenetic rambling. “Keelah, you don’t have to convince me. I think it’s a wonderful idea. I’m just so happy that you would think of us.”

Red threw her arms around Keelah; hugged her tight. The small woman practically vibrated in
Keelah’s arms.

Keelah chuckled in relief and hugged Red back. “No problem.”

Red let go of Keelah and immediately hugged Susie Mack. Then Officer Hannon. “You guys are lifesavers,” the doctor stated happily. “And I mean that literally.”

Susie and Officer Hannon looked startled by the affectionate response. Susie blushed and Officer Hannon fidgeted uncharacteristically. But Keelah could tell that both vaulters were touched by Red’s unrestrained gratitude.

“Should we go tell everyone else?” Keelah asked Red.

“Yes. Are we leaving now? We’ll have to pack. Not that we have much to pack. Oh goodness, we have so much to do!”

“Whoa, whoa. Calm down there Red. For now we’re only moving you. There’s still a lot to figure out in regards to getting everyone to the vault safely. Plus, I have to go talk to the Lamplighters. We want to invite them too.”


“Well, don’t plan the family reunion just yet. The Little Lamplighters have to agree to move into the vault.”

Red pulled back from the embrace. “You don’t think they will?”

“They hate mungos and there’s nothing but mungos in the vault.”

“Maybe I should go with you and talk to them. They’ll listen to me. I used to be mayor of Lamplight once upon a time.”

“That’s a good idea, but I don’t think we have the time. Christine’s ‘bout ready to pop. But I’ll tell MacCready you think they should come.”

“If you can convince Lucy, she’ll get the other Lamplighters to come. She’s momma bear.”

Keelah smiled tiredly. Thought about the pint-sized doctor with the stadium-sized heart. “Yeah, I know.”

Red clapped her hands together. “Well, I’ll go tell everyone the good news. Then I’ll get packed so we can go.” She surveyed her sparse office. “It shouldn’t take me long.” Red turned to Susie and Officer Hannon. “Which one of you is staying in Big Town?”

Officer Hannon raised his hand. Red grabbed that hand. Tugged the tall man towards the clinic door. “Come with me. I’ll give you a quick tour of our town then introduce you to all the Big Towners. You probably haven’t seen a super mutant before so let me give you a rundown on them as well.”

Keelah could hear Red chattering at Officer Hannon as she led him out of the room.

Susie turned to Keelah. “You sure you don’t want me to stay with Officer Hannon and help out here? Those mutants sound pretty bad.”

“No. I need you to escort Red back to the vault.”
“By myself? You’re not coming with us?”

“I think it’s best if I head on to Little Lamplight. See if the Lamplighters are interested in moving into the vault. If they are, I have a lot of maneuvering I need to do. Might have to recruit a few extra hands to help with the escort. I need all the prep time I can get. You take care of Red, and I’ll handle things on this end. We’ll meet back at the vault in a couple of days.”

Susie nodded in the affirmative, but the blonde looked worried.

“What’s wrong?” Keelah asked her.

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for taking the doc back to the vault on my own. I had a tough enough time killing those boatflies last night.”

“Bloatflies. And you did great.”

“Only because you were with me. What if the doc and I run into more of those things? Or into one of those Deathclaws from before?”

“You shoot them.”

“Gee, thanks for the pep talk,” Susie said sarcastically.

“Look, Susie…Red’s good with a gun, and she’s seen the worst the wasteland has to offer. The two of you just need to watch each other’s backs and keep your weapons ready. The coordinates to the vault are in your Pip-Boy. Move quickly, stay quiet, and you’ll be fine.”

But Susie didn’t look so confident. The blonde tried to affect a cool demeanor but her hands trembled against her thighs. Keelah placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Susie, I wouldn’t have asked you to come if I didn’t think you could do it.”

Susie took a deep breath. Bounced on her heels in an effort to perk herself up. “I can do this,” she boldly exclaimed

“Yes, you can.”

“I’m damn good with a rifle.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I’m the most bad ass person to ever come out of Vault 101.” Keelah quirked an eyebrow. Susie shrugged. “You know…besides you.”

Keelah laughed out loud. “You are the baddest of the badasses, Suze.” Keelah squeezed the woman’s shoulders. “There. You feel better now?”

“Yeah.” Susie looped her arms around Keelah. Hugged the wastelander tight.

Keelah was startled by the sudden embrace. “So many hugs today,” she murmured into the vaulter’s hair.

“Shut up and squeeze me,” Susie said irritably. “You may be the last person I get to hug.”

Keelah pulled the woman close. Patted her on the back reassuredly. “You’ll be fine Susie. I promise.”
Susie scowled against Keelah’s shoulder. Pinched the wastelander on the forearm. “I’d better be.”

“Ouch!” Keelah pulled away. Glared at Susie as she rubbed the sore spot on her arm.


Keelah pursed her lips. Tried to look peeved. But she couldn’t help but laugh at her ridiculous friend. “Come on Susie. Red’s waiting for us.” Keelah headed for the door. Susie trailed her. “And don’t think I’m going to forget about that pinch. I owe you one.”

“You would pinch me? Really?”

“You pinched me first!”

“I pinched you out of love. You intend to pinch me out of revenge. That’s despicable.”

They left the room bickering.

The Big Towners agreed unanimously to move into Vault 101. It wasn’t even much of a debate. Big Town’s horrid living conditions had long pushed the residents to the edge. They were perpetually hungry, fearful, and malcontent. The prospect of living someplace clean and secure was too much to resist. And knowing that they could possibly be reunited with their Lamplight brethren was the proverbial icing on the cake.

Keelah watched as the Big Towners cavorted around the common room. They were exuberant; ecstatic. Flash twirled Kimba in an impromptu dance. Sticky sang an out-of-tune melody at the top of his lungs. Even the disgruntled Pappy was smiling. And Bittercup watched the festivities with a playful gleam in her eyes.

Bittercup pulled Keelah into a corner. The common room was so loud with celebration that the heavily rouged woman had to lean close and whisper in Keelah’s ear.

“This is the best gift you could have gotten me,” Bittercup said softly. “I hate this place. And I’ve always wanted to see the world.”

Keelah gave the young woman a muted smile. The Big Towners wouldn’t actually be seeing the world. The sole purpose of a vault was to do the exact opposite—to secret from the world. To pretend as if the outside world didn’t exist.

But Keelah opted not to spoil the woman’s fantasy. The wastelander removed a wrapped item from her pocket. Handed it to Bittercup. “I bought you something this time,” she said cheerfully. Bittercup pulled back the cloth to reveal a slightly smushed sweetroll. “That’s the best dessert you’ll ever taste,” Keelah declared proudly.

Bittercup broke the sweetroll in half. Gave Keelah a portion before biting into her own.

The two women stood shoulder to shoulder. Huddled beneath a cracked ceiling and devoured their sweet treat.

Keelah licked her fingers, hunting for renegade sugar and frosted cream. Bittercup smirked at the display of greediness. She put a finger against Keelah’s mouth; flicked away a stray crumb.

Keelah raised her eyes. Realized that Bittercup was standing just a little bit closer than she had been
before. And now even closer. Was Bittercup wearing some sort of lipstick? Or was that frosting on those approaching lips?

Someone cleared their throat loudly.

Keelah tore her attention away from Bittercup’s shimmering mouth. The throat-clearing interloper was Susie Mack. And the blonde vaulter looked pissed.

“Red and I are ready to head out. You going to walk us to the gate?”

Susie’s gaze shifted from Bittercup to Keelah. The blonde’s eyes finally settled on Keelah and narrowed into tiny sits.

Keelah felt her face grow warm. “Sure, let’s go.” She turned to Bittercup. “I’ll see you when we come back to take everyone to the vault.”

“I’ll be here. Try not to die before then.”

Keelah squeezed the woman’s arm. Waved goodbye to the other Big Towners before leaving the common room. Susie followed quietly but whirled on Keelah the moment they’d cleared the door.

“What was that all about?” Susie demanded.

“What was what all about?”

“You and that girl were practically making out in there.”

“We weren’t making out. We were sharing a sweetroll.”

“Is that some sort of euphemism?”

Keelah quickened her pace. “Leave it Susie. It’s none of your business.”

“I mean, she’s pretty and all, but I thought you and Amata…”

Keelah stopped walking. “Me and Amata what?”

Susie hesitated. Her blue eyes moved rapidly across Keelah’s face. “Amata really cares about you, Keelah. She spent three years singing your praises to any 101er who would listen. And she waited by that damn door like some 50s housewife waiting for her sweetheart to come back from war.”

Keelah’s eyes flashed. “Amata and I are just friends, Susie. Nothing more. Hell, we’re not even that. And if you and I are going to work together, it’s really important that you don’t broach this conversation again.”

For a moment it looked like Susie was going to argue the point. But the blonde quickly swallowed back any comment she might have made. But her eyes said enough. They were accusatory. Disappointed.

Keelah turned away. Spied Red standing by the moat, talking with Dusty and Officer Hannon.

“C’mon. Red’s waiting for us. I’ll walk with you for the first mile.”

The pair head towards the city’s gates. Their march was a silent one, but the accusation hung between them:
Susie thought Keelah was being unfaithful to Amata.

And what was worse, deep down, Keelah felt the same way.

Un-fucking-believable.

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Officer Hannon stayed behind to guard Big Town.

Red packed her medical supplies and headed with Susie towards Vault 101.

Keelah walked with the two women for one hour but left them near a railroad crossing. Red hugged her again. Susie pinched her and muttered something about Keelah keeping her lips to herself.

Keelah waited until the women crested the hill before turning west and heading towards Little Lamplight.

It would take her a few days to get back to Vault 101. By the time she returned, Christine would probably have given birth to Little Monica, and Red would have settled in as the vault’s new doctor.

*Just a little while longer and this crazy idea will have come to fruition,* Keelah thought as she hunkered down in a gutted school bus and tried to find a semi-comfortable seat to sleep in. It was 11 PM and she’d walked a hole into her new pair of socks. She would sleep a few hours before continuing on to Little Lamplight. She would sleep and try not to think of Amata’s pained eyes. Or Sarah’s judgmental ones. Or the hope and affection she saw in Bittercup’s.

She’d placed a mine in front of the splintered school bus door. Any raider or hungry animal that tried to accost her during sleep would get a nasty surprise.

She wrapped her arms around herself. Tight. Tried to pretend she had a blanket. The wasteland was cold at night. Unbearably so. And between the frigid temperature and the eerie quiet, it was hard for Keelah to fall asleep.

She turned on her Pip-Boy and scrolled to Agatha’s station to find a little solace. Agatha’s violin had become a welcome presence over these past few years. Keelah could always count on Agatha and her Stradivarius to provide a little pick-me-up. Or serve as a mournful lullaby.

Keelah was greeted by static. The scratching noise of a radio station with no broadcast.

She frowned down at her Pip-Boy. Agatha usually performed during this time. And even those hours when she took a break for sleep or supper, the musician usually played pre-recorded music to fill the dead air.

Keelah adjusted her Pip-Boy settings. Turned to GNR to make sure her device was working properly.

But there was Three-Dog’s voice:

*Hey everybody, this is Three Dog, your friendly neighborhood disc jockey. What's a disc? Hell if I know, but I'm gonna keep talking anyway.*

Keelah flipped back to Agatha’s station. Silence. Not even a rustle to indicate someone moving in the background.

*Hmmm. Agatha must be having trouble with her signal again. I’ll have to make a point to stop*
through and check it out. Probably some frayed wires somewhere.

Keelah settled for GNR. Let Three-Dog’s melodic voice coax her into an easy sleep.

A hulking figure scurried near the school bus door, sniffing. Surveying. But it turned away when it caught sight of easier prey: a hobbled Brahmin.

Three-Dog crooned. Keelah slept. And the wasteland moved with a life of its own.

She made it to Big Town by mid-morning. She kept track of the time it took her to get from Big Town to Little Lamplight; added the information to her Pip-Boy so that she could use the data when she plotted the safest route for the escort back to Vault 101.

The information would be useful only if the Lamplighters decided to leave the caverns.

Yes, Little Lamplight was cold and dirty and there was never enough food or medicine to keep the Lamplighters satisfied, but the caverns were still the Lamplighters’ home. And the Lamplighters had grown accustomed to controlling their own lives. To making their own rules. They’d probably be adverse to sharing living quarters with adults. To have mungos making decisions for them; coddling them; treating them like children.

Keelah wasn’t confident that the Lamplighters would move into the vault. They were an opinionated bunch. And justifiably prejudiced against grown-ups.

Why wasn’t I blessed with more charisma? Keelah thought sullenly as she let herself into the cavern’s front door. It would take a whole hell of a lot convincing to get the more obstinate Lamplighters like MacCready and Princess and Squirrel to consider such a drastic move.

Keelah paused at the STOP sign. Waited for the customary greeting:

“Stop right there or I’ll blow your fucking head off!”

Keelah gestured tiredly. “MacCready, I think you just like swearing at me.”

“Probably. Come on in.”

Keelah waited until the secondary door opened. Then moved into the musty cavern. Per usual, she was greeted by an exuberant pack of Lamplighters.

“Back already Key-Lock? Are you staying for lunch this time?”

“Where’s Dogmeat? My pup, Muttface, misses him.”

“Any more comics for us?”

MacCready waved the Lamplighters away. He looked irritable. Like always. But also even more sickly and pale. “Give the woman some space, will you? Besides, don’t you all have chores to do? Sammy, go get started on lunch.”

Lamplight’s new cook turned to Keelah. “Should I set an extra plate for you? I’ve added something new to the menu. I think you’ll like it.”

“What is it?” Keelah asked warily.
Shepard’s Pie.”

*That didn’t sound so bad.*

Sammy grinned triumphantly. “Squirrel and Penny found a dead dog near that wreck outside. It was pretty decomposed, but I’m pretty sure it was a German Shepard. Add some potatoes and cave salt and voila!”

Keelah tried not to gag. “No, thanks Sammy. I had a big breakfast.”

MacCready shooed the other Lamplighters away. “Get!”

The mayor waited until his young charges had departed before addressing Keelah. “You back to investigate that vault for us? That banging’s got even louder.”

“No, MacCready. That’s not why I’m here. But I think I might have a solution to that problem. Can I speak with you and Lucy for a sec?”

MacCready narrowed his eyes. Already suspicious. But the ill-tempered mayor motioned Keelah to follow him. “Lucy’s in the clinic,” he said. “Hopefully we won’t be interrupting.”

They did interrupt Lucy. The teenaged doctor was giving Zip a check-up. The 12-year old Nuka Cola addict was seated on the table, bare-chested, swinging his legs. Keelah couldn’t help but notice the red splotches that covered Zip’s chest. Tiny oval-shaped blisters that looked painful. And possibly contagious.

Keelah gulped. Thought about the potential for an outbreak if Lamplighters did move into the vault. “What’s wrong with Zip?” she asked Lucy.

The young doctor straightened from her inspection of Zip’s back. Rubbed some type of cream across the boy’s thin frame while she addressed Keelah. “Chicken pox, I think. I made up a treatment from some oatmeal Squirrel and Penny found outside. It should do the trick.”

Keelah moved closer. Studied the inflamed marks on Zip’s skin. “Yeah. I think that is chicken pox. We had a few cases in the vault when I was growing up. There’s a spray we used. I can see if the vault has any more left. Just in case anymore Lamplighters catch it.”

“I would appreciate that. Thanks.”


“Sorry Zip, I don’t. But next time, I promise.”

The young boy pouted but immediately forgot his disappointment when Lucy told him he was free to go. The 12-year old pulled on his T-shirt and sprinted from the room.

“So whatta ya need to talk to us about?” MacCready asked. He leaned against the clinic wall; crossed his arms and tried his best to disguise his choppy breathing.

“Well…” Keelah hesitated. *Come on charisma! Work for me for at least a few minutes.* “The two of you know that I grew up in a vault. Vault 101. It was a pretty decent place to live. All things considered. Clean. Lots of room to move around. And dances on Sundays.” She cleared her throat. Damn, she was terrible at this.

MacCready sucked his teeth. “Should I have pen and paper so that I can record this biography? Get
Keelah directed her attention to the better mannered Lamplighter in the room. “Anyway, the vault where I grew up has room for more occupants. I talked to them and they’d be willing to let Little Lamplighters move in.”

Lucy gasped. MacCready frowned. “What makes you think we want to move in with a bunch of mungos?” he asked crossly.

“It’s a safe place to live. You won’t have to worry about slavers and monsters anymore. The vault has plenty of food and a cook who can prepare meals you’ll actually want to eat. There’s a school and running water. And you’ll each have beds, bathrooms.” Keelah took a breath. She felt like she was reading from a brochure.

“We have beds here,” MacCready retorted. His eyes flashing angrily. “And our own school. Penny’s been teaching the kids how to read ever since your friend in the weird dress left that book behind. And maybe we don’t have your frou frou food. Or water that comes from a tap, but we get along just fine without mungos. So no thanks.”

Keelah turned to the doctor. “Lucy?”

The young doctor brushed hair away from her face. Turned with a sigh to MacCready. “I think we should do it RJ. We don’t know what’s going to come running out of Murder Pass. And it’s getting harder for me to treat all the illnesses we get. Bumble’s got a cough that won’t go away, and you need a more experienced doctor for that cold of yours.”

MacCready glared. “There ain’t nothing wrong with me that a little sleep won’t fix.”

“But you don’t sleep,” Lucy countered. “Don’t you and Princess get tired of camping out in front of the gates all night and day, waiting for monsters or slavers? Let’s let someone else play hero for a while.”

MacCready’s face contorted. “You don’t think I can protect Little Lamplight, huh? Is that what it is? Well, I’m not a coward Lucy. And I don’t need no mungo to look out for me.”

“I never said you were a coward, RJ.” Lucy actually looked hurt that MacCready would accuse her of such a thing. “You’re a good leader. And all the kids look up to you. But you’re sick MacCready. And I don’t have the equipment or the wherewithal to help you.”

“Red could help him,” Keelah interrupted. “The Big Towners are moving into the vault. Red thinks you should join them. You can all be together again.”

Lucy immediately perked up. “Red is going?” The teenaged doctor had learned everything she knew from Red. Red was like a sister to her.

Lucy walked over to MacCready. Put a hand on the mayor’s shoulder. “Come on RJ. If we move into the vault, we can all be together again. Like we used to be.”

“But it won’t be like it used to be. We have a voice here. We decide what’s best for us. If we move into her vault, those mungos are going to tell us what to do! Besides, you know we can’t trust them. Remember those journals we found in the store? The first Lamplighters went to Vault 87 to ask the mungos for help and the mungos turned them away. Left the Lamplighters to die in the caverns. And think about the mungos who kidnapped Squirrel and Sammy and Penny. Mungos have never cared about us!”
Keelah stepped forward. “I care about you MacCready. I care about all of you.”

The mayor rolled his eyes. “You’re not the same as all of them.”

“Think about it this way MacCready,” Keelah continued. “When the Big Towners move into the vault, Big Town will cease to exist. Where will the Lamplighters go when they turn 16? Squirrel and Éclair’s birthdays are next week.”

“And yours is in four months,” Lucy added; her brow drawn with worry.

But MacCready only stared back at them; his face tight; his back ramrod straight.

Keelah sighed. “MacCready, you wanted me to move into the cavern, right? Move in and help you keep the Lamplighters safe? Well, moving into the vault is sort of like a compromise. You still get grownups who can help fight off monsters and slavers and…I don’t know…I suppose I can talk to the overseer and make sure none of the grownups boss you guys around too much. I mean…the vault has rules and everything like that…” MacCready frowned. “…but the overseer is nice and understanding, and she’s a hell of a people person…” Keelah couldn’t help but smile, thinking about how Amata successfully managed to be a politician and a damned good person all at the same time. The wastelander shook her head to get her thoughts back on track. “Anyway…I’m sure there’s a way the Lamplighters can move into the vault and still retain some of your independence. But we have to try first. It could work out,” she said hopefully.

MacCready mulled the offer over. The teenager nodded his head in thought; the movement so rigorous that his combat helmet slipped over his ears, covering half his face. The mayor quickly straightened the helmet; fixed Keelah with a penetrating stare.

“No compulsory bedtimes. A lot of the Lamplighters have insomnia and Zip hardly ever sleeps. Trying to force us to keep a nighttime schedule would be unfair.”

"I think we can manage that.”

“And no child labor. I know you mungos like to enslave little kids and force us to wash your boots and shit, but ain’t no one going to take advantage of a Lamplighter while I’m around.”

“We’re not going to enslave you MacCready.” Goodness, it was tragic that she even had to make such a promise. “Each of you will probably have an assigned chore, but it wouldn’t be anything more challenging than you do right now. As a matter of fact, the work detail you’ll have in the vault will probably be much easier. And boring.”

“And we get to keep our weapons,” MacCready concluded.

“How many weapons do you have?”

“Well, I have my rifle. And Princess has a slingshot.”

Keelah felt a headache coming on. “That should be fine. Anything else?” She turned to Lucy. “You have any questions or concerns Lucy?”

The doctor shook her head. Smiled tiredly. “I trust you Key-lock. We all feel safer when you’re around, so I actually look forward to living in the vault with you.”

Keelah rubbed the back of her neck. “Well…see…the thing is…I won’t actually be living there.”

“What?!” It was a yelp. And MacCready looked livid. “You want us to live someplace you won’t
even be?”

“I’ll be around. I live thirty minutes away. Plus, Red will be there. And Dusty and Kimba and all your old friends.”

“I thought you said this vault was your home?” Lucy asked softly. Her eyes inquisitive.

“It used to be my home. I grew up there. But I live someplace else now.” Keelah tried her most encouraging voice. “But I’ll be at the vault a lot. You’ll get sick of seeing me, I’ll be there so often.” She trailed off. Her reasoning sounded lame even to her own ears.

“No dice, mungo.” MacCready stated simply. “If you’re not there, we’re not there. No way we’re moving into some mungo factory without you.”

Keelah deflated. Felt her headache blossom into a full-blown migraine.

In the end, Keelah convinced the Little Lamplighters to move into Vault 101.

And the Little Lamplighters convinced Keelah to move in as well.

Chapter End Notes

So my little nephew hipped me to Bethesda's game app "Fallout Shelter." Not quite sure how I missed this game since it's more than a year old. I've been playing it for a week now and really like it. It keeps me contented why I wait to play FO4. Chapter title is sort of a reference to that game and the Rolling Stone song of the same name (Gimme Shelter).
Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer gathers a crew to help her with the escort. And an age old mystery presents itself.

Chapter Notes

Spoilers for the DLC “The Pitt” ahead just in case you haven’t played.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 20 – Walking After Midnight

“So you *are* moving into the vault?”

Amata juggled her cargo delicately, moving the bundle from her right arm to her left while making a soft cooing sound that made her impossibly more attractive.

Keelah shifted in the space beside her old friend; throwing away a soiled diaper and preparing a fresh one. “Only temporarily. I told the Lamplighters that I’d stay here the first month. Until they get used to their new surroundings.” Keelah waited for Amata to place the baby on the soft cloth before fastening the diaper. Readjusting the baby’s jumper.

Keelah wiggled her fingers in the baby’s face, grinning happily when the infant managed to snag one of her fingers and tug on it clumsily.

Baby Monica was eight days old. And like a lot of the infants born in the post-apocalyptic world, Monica was considerably underweight and wan. But the little girl was bright-eyed and adorable. And she’d gained a vault full of admirers who thought she hung the moon.

Keelah picked the baby up and bounced her once, twice, before passing her back to Amata. Christine and Derrick had made Keelah and Amata the baby’s godparents and both women were fulfilling their duties early. Babysitting for the young parents while they got some much needed rest.

Amata carried the baby over to the couch in her bedroom; took a seat and began to rock the baby while making the cooing sound from before. Keelah shook her head in surprise (it was remarkable how Amata could go from collected vault leader to sweet-voiced babysitter in seconds).

The wastelander plopped into the space beside Amata; shook the rattle she’d gotten from Derrick. Baby Monica reached for the noisy toy; her uncoordinated fingers opening and closing clumsily.

“She’s adorable isn’t she?” Amata asked Keelah. Her eyes never leaving the tiny figure in her arms.
“She is. Babies are the only beings on the planet that can look cute with spittle on their face.”

Amata chuckled. Used a cloth napkin to blot away said spit. “You want to hold her?” she asked Keelah.

“Oh no. I don’t want to drop her. Besides, she looks pretty comfortable in your arms.”

And the baby did. Amata held Baby Monica expertly. Like someone accustomed to cosseting children. It was unexpected. Considering the vault hadn’t had many children living in it in the past decade.

Keelah shook the rattle again. Imagined that the unpleasant tinkling sounded like a song.

“So a month, huh?” Amata asked. Continuing their conversation from before.

“Give or take.”

“Your negotiations with the Lamplighters must have been intense. You’ve been gone for more than a week. We were worried.” Amata finally lifted her eyes. Levied Keelah with a purposefully neutral stare.

“I stayed a few days at the cavern to help them tidy up and prepare for the move. Plus they’ve been worried about monsters in the vault connected to their cave. So I spent a couple of days poking around in there.”

“And where there monsters?”

“Not any that I could find. Just a lot of dirt and dank. The noises they heard could have been raiders who’ve since moved on. Or scavengers looking for gear.” Keelah shrugged. “Doesn’t matter now. The Lamplighters will be in 101 soon enough.”

Amata nodded. “And where will you stay for the month you’re here?”

“I was hoping I could get my old room back? Next to the clinic?” she asked hopefully.

“I’m sorry Kee’. We’ve already given those quarters to Red. It made sense to move her there since she’s the new doctor.”

“Oh…yeah…I guess that does make sense. How are things working out with Red, by the way?”

Amata’s face stretched into a smile. “It’s been great having a doctor back in our midst. She’s scheduled everyone for a check-up and is making her way through those appointments. She’s got Stanley on a sleep schedule that has helped considerably with his headaches. She’s also been really good company. She’s enlivened our evening meals with stories from the outside.” Amata laughed, recalling something. “Is there really a gang in the wasteland that consists totally of hockey players?”

Keelah chuckled. “Yeah. The Sudden-Death Overtime Gang. They’re a bit…odd…but they’re the nicest raiders you’ll run into on the outside. They even asked me to join their team. Wanted me to put on roller blades and try out.” The two women giggled at the absurdity. “I’m glad to hear Red is settling in okay.”

“Yeah. Sorry that it cost you your room, but the vault has plenty of vacancies. We can find you another private quarter. You want a room on the first floor or the second?”

“It doesn’t matter.”
Keelah felt a tug on her hand. Looked down and saw that Baby Monica had grasped her finger again. The wastelander smiled reverently. Amata noticed.

“You should hold her,” Amata encouraged.

“But I have sweaty palms,” Keelah deflected. “And babies are already slippery from all the drool.”

Amata rolled her eyes. Gently pressed Baby Monica into Keelah’s arms.

The wastelander stiffened; looked liable to keel over from anxiety. But she eventually settled herself. Positioned the newborn baby into a comfortable position in her arms and gently rocked the infant back and forth.

“Not so bad, huh?” Amata queried.

“Not so bad.”

But Amata couldn’t help but notice the way Keelah’s hands trembled. “Is this the first time you’ve held a baby?”

“Well…”

Keelah thought about Marie. The newborn baby of the Pitt’s leader Ashur and his scientist wife Sandra. Keelah had gone to Pittsburg at the behest of a former slave, Wernher, to lend support to a slave rebellion; to steal a “cure” that would help the Pitt’s badly mutated slave population.

She’d made it to the smog-filled town only to discover that the “cure” was a newborn baby. One Wernher wanted her to kidnap so that he could perform experiments on her. Extract the cure from the baby’s blood and bone.

Under the watchful eye of Sandra, Keelah had held Marie. Twirled herself and the baby in a slow circle as she murmured an unintelligible stream of sound that only infants understood.

Wernher wanted her to abduct Marie. To bind the brown-eyed infant in a sack and carry her to him. But Keelah put the baby back in the cradle.

She’d been so enraged by Wernher’s deception that she’d aborted her mission. She’d broken the double-crossing man’s nose then marched out of the Pitt with a troubled conscience. She was ashamed at herself for not doing more to help the slaves gain their freedom. But she was also disturbed by the fact that infants were considered fair game in a battle for power.

Damn Wernher and Ashur. Damn her for being rendered impotent by the moral ambiguity of her mission.

Keelah blinked back the bad memories. Distracted herself by staring at Baby Monica’s smiling face.

“I’ve held a baby before,” she finally responded. “I was afraid I’d drop her too.”

Amata scooted closer. Until her leg pressed against Keelah’s and the two women’s shoulders aligned.

“You’re doing great,” the Overseer complimented. And she leaned over Baby Monica and made a face so ridiculous that both Keelah and the infant giggled.

“You’re going to make a good mom,” Keelah told the woman.
Amata was startled by the comment. Her head whipped up and she met Keelah’s gaze with stunned eyes. “You think so?”

“Of course. You’re nice. You’re patient. And you have just the right amount of bossiness that’ll be useful for parenting.”

Amata swatted Keelah’s leg. The wastelander laughed again.

“I never even considered being a parent,” Amata admitted; somewhat self-consciously. “I haven’t exactly had the best role model with my father. And my mom died when I was a little girl.” She looked away. Bit her bottom lip. “I like kids, but…I wouldn’t want to damage a child. Be too much. Or not enough.”

Keelah readjusted Baby Monica until she had a free hand. She placed the hand on Amata’s knee. Squeezed. “Amata, you’re not too much. You’re not too little. You’re just right.”

Amata turned to face Keelah. Smiled broadly. “Keelah, are you trying to cheer me up by quoting Goldilocks and the Three Bears?”

Keelah blushed. *My impeccable charm strikes again!* “Uh…”

But Amata didn’t seem put off by Keelah’s indelicate phrasing. The overseer placed her hand on top of Keelah’s. Twined their fingers and stared without reservation into Keelah’s eyes.

Both women had spent their week apart reminding themselves to treat the other like a work associate; to set firm boundaries and avoid blurring the lines of their uneasy alliance.

But here they were. Staring without hesitation. Practically holding hands.

Keelah leaned forward. Amata gripped her hand.

Amata’s bedroom door swished open.

“Oh my…I have to get used to doors doing that.”

It was Red. The bespectacled doctor swept into the room with a flourish. She eyed the mechanical door curiously. Stepped back into the corridor to activate it again.

She was back inside the bedroom in seconds; marveling at the moving door; exclaiming about the vault’s technological advances.

By this time, Keelah had jerked away from Amata. The overseer had risen to her feet.

“Something I can help you with, Red?” Amata asked breathlessly.

Red waved a sheaf of papers. “Sorry to interrupt Amata, but I’ve put together that requisition list of medical supplies the clinic will need. I was going to leave it on your desk but your guard said you were back here. Did you want to go over it?”

Amata stole a glance at Keelah. The younger leader looked torn. “Yes, but…”

Keelah rose gingerly to her feet. Made sure the baby was secure. “I’ll just take Baby Monica back to her parents. Leave you two to your work.”

“Hold on a sec-…” Amata tried to interject, but Keelah strode towards the door. Red moved further into the bedroom.
“I was so glad to hear that you convinced the Lamplighters to move in,” Red directed to Keelah. “I’d like to travel back with you when you collect them and the Big Towners. Help with the escort.”

Keelah nodded. “That sounds like a good idea. You’ll probably need to do a medical evaluation of the Lamplighters anyway. I want to make sure that none of them are too sick to travel. Or have any infectious diseases. We can’t risk an outbreak in the vault.”

“Absolutely.” Red leaned forward and put a finger against Baby Monica’s nose. She tweaked the baby’s nose and smiled.

“By the way, you did a great job,” Keelah told the doctor. “Both the baby and Christine are healthy and that’s all thanks to you. I have some caps set aside that I was going to use to pay a doctor. They’re yours.”

Keelah had lost a mother to childbirth. She knew how dangerous the procedure was. How easily a physician could lose mother or child. Or both. A few thousand caps was a pittance for a safe delivery.

But Red shook her head. “You don’t have to pay me Keelah. You got the Big Towners and Lamplighters someplace safe to live. That’s all I need.” She grinned up at Keelah. “Although I wouldn’t turn down a good meal. Susie told me you make a mean breakfast.”

Keelah rolled her eyes. The wastelander had made Susie breakfast the morning after the blonde vaulter spent the night in her Megaton home. Keelah had prepared an imitation omelet; an entree she’d concocted from YumYum deviled eggs and softshell mirelurk meat.

“I guess the two of you had a nice long chat during your walk to the vault?” Keelah asked.

Red grinned. “Yep. So is that a yes to breakfast?”

“Yes. I’ll fix you up something when I come back to the vault. I’m off to Megaton for a few days. Have to meet up with a couple of friends who are going to help with the escort.”

Amata stepped forward then. Crossed her arms as she studied Keelah. “Is there anything you need from the vault to help with the transport?”

Keelah was going to scratch her head as she considered Amata’s question, but then she remembered she had a baby in her arms. She settled for scrunching her nose. “I could always use extra hands, but if Red is coming along we should be fine. Red and Susie plus the people I recruited, should be more than enough. I’m going to program my Handybot to combat mode and bring him with us too. If you could ask Stanley to let us borrow Andy, that would help.”

“You have my permission to use Andy,” Amata answered swiftly.

“Great. I’ll program him when I get back. It should only take a couple of days to draw up a route and prepare my companions.”

“And how long do you expect the escort to the vault to take?” Amata asked.

“It could take a week or two. With so many people, it’s going to be slow-moving. And more than likely, we’re going to run into some trouble along the way.”

Amata sighed. Looked worried for a second before she remembered to school her features. “Okay. Well…we’ll make sure we have everything sorted on our end for when you get back. Just…be careful.”
“We will.” Keelah turned to Red. “I’ll come fetch you and Susie in a couple of days. You may want to bring a doctor’s bag with you. More than a few of the Lamplighters are sick.”

Red nodded. “Will do.”

“At least one has chicken pox. We have a spray in the clinic that works. The one in the green bottle.”

“Got it.”

Keelah let loose a deep breath. Looked between Amata and Red. One face animated, the other concerned.

“Now I’m off to deliver a baby,” Keelah said playfully, before nodding a farewell to both women and leaving the room.

Baby Monica gurgled happily in her arms, and Keelah found herself humming an upbeat tune.

She had her work cut out for her—transporting twenty people across the wasteland safely. But for now she focused on the person who’d already made a safe journey.

Baby Monica. The first vault baby in more than ten years.

*You’re going to have a good life kid.* She thought. *You have two parents who adore you. A doting grandfather. And a vault full of folks who can’t wait to spoil you.*

The baby reached for Keelah’s nose. Revealed a mouth full of gums and giggled when Keelah made a silly face.

Pretty soon the vault would be filled with the sound of even more children’s laughter. The thought made Keelah hold Baby Monica all the more gingerly as she made her way down the quiet hallway.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

While at Little Lamplight, Keelah had sent a radio transmission to friends of hers, asking them to meet her in Megaton if they had the time to assist her with an important mission.

The sun had set by the time the wastelander made it from Vault 101 to Megaton, and Keelah immediately raced to her house to see if any of the people she’d contacted were waiting for her. But no one was there. Just another pamphlet from the Eternal Lighters flapping against her door.

Keelah opened her front door. Tossed her supply sack inside before turning and heading towards Moira’s supply shop. The eccentric woman closed Craterside Supply in the early evening. Keelah needed supplies and she only had a few minutes to get to the other side of Megaton before the store closed.

The wasteland sniper burst through the shop door with only a minute to spare, startling Moira who was standing behind the counter fiddling with her cash register and causing the stone-faced merc who guarded Moira’s door to put his hand on his gun.

The guard cut his eyes at Keelah when he recognized who she was—pissed that she’d startled him for no reason.

“Geez Keelah!” Moira exclaimed, “You ran in here like a pack of mole rats was chasing you.” An expectant look suddenly crossed the kooky shopkeeper's face. “They aren’t, are they?” And she actually looked past Keelah, at her front door, as if she were hoping that a gaggle of mutated rats
would burst into the store.

“No mole rats Moira. I was just trying to get here before the store closed.”

“Well, you’re in luck. I’m actually staying open late tonight. I have a new specimen to study.”

“What’s that?” Keelah made her way over to the counter; turned her attention to the hodge podge of items Moira kept on her cluttered countertop.

“A Deathclaw egg,” Moira said proudly. Her chubby cheeks aflame with excitement. “I’ve waited ages to get my hands on one. All of the folks I sent out to retrieve one never came back. Poor things. But I lucked up and got myself another super assistant and he managed to get me one. He even came back mostly unscathed.”

“Who in the hell would hunt a Deathclaw egg for you?”

On cue, Charon emerged from Moira’s storeroom. The wasteland merc’s leather armor was ripped nearly to shreds. And his naturally crimson hair was even more red from the blood that covered his face and head.

“Oh, fuck.” Keelah sputtered.

The ghoul stopped in front of Keelah. Stared at her with impassive eyes. “She made me investigate a Deathclaw den. It was unpleasant.”

Keelah turned wide eyes on Moira. “You told me you were sending him to scavenge for food supplies!”

Moira shrugged. “Aren’t eggs a form of food?”

Keelah narrowed her eyes at Moira. Gave Charon an apologetic pat against the arm. “Sorry about that Charon. I thought this was a straightforward job.” She pursed her lips at Moira. “I should have known better.”

And she really should have, shouldn’t she? After all, Moira had convinced her to irradiate herself to deadly levels; to cripple both her arms and legs; hell, somehow Moira had duped Keelah into traversing a city known as Minefield. Keelah should have better interrogated the shopkeeper when she’d asked if Charon could fetch foodstuffs for her.

Charon waved off Keelah’s apology. “I’ve experienced worse,” he said gruffly. Before heading towards the door. “Shower,” he said simply. Anticipating the question before Keelah could even ask. There was blood splattered against the back of his armor as well. And elongated cuts against his peeling skin. Undoubtedly the result of a Deathclaw swipe.

“Thanks again Chare Bear,” Moira trilled. Charon stopped in his tracks but didn’t turn around. Keelah felt a momentary panic for Moira’s well-being. But the wasteland merc simply released a heavy breath. Put a blood-stained hand against the doorknob. “One more thing,” Moira continued. “I hear tale that there’s a Mirelurk Queen in Rock Creek Caverns. Any interest in a little spelunking?” she asked Charon.

“No.”

Charon left the store.

Moira turned to Keelah. “What about you Keelaidoscope?”
“Please don’t call me that. And no. Moira, I just can’t risk any more limbs for you, okay? I just came by to buy some Stimpacks. And any Med-X and buffout you have in stock.”

Moira pouted in disappointment but made her way to her medical supply cache. “How many do you need?”

“Fifty of each.”

“Geez! Someone’s not coming down with a nasty chem addiction, is she?” Moira asked in that sing-song way of hers.

“No,” Keelah said, somewhat impatiently. “I just have a long mission ahead and need supplies.”

“Well…as you’re completing your mission, if you just so happen to pass by Rock Creek Caverns—”

“Moira, please. Can I just get the supplies? I’m expecting someone and don’t want to keep them waiting.”

The shopkeeper rustled through her medical cache. “Fine. But I don’t have enough Stimpacks here. Let me get some from the back. One sec.”

The shopkeeper retreated behind a door in the back of the store.

Keelah wandered around the mid-sized store. Absent-mindedly touched items; inspected the displayed weapons.

Moira sold a little bit of everything. Medical supplies; weapons; clothing. Keelah purchased mostly chems and ammo from the redhead, but she had to admit, the shopkeeper had some damned good merchandise for sale.

“Moira, how much for this officer’s sword?” Keelah called out.

“Which one?” Moira shouted from the back room.

“The one with the blade.”

“They all have blades.”

“Uh…it has a blue handle.”

“Oh…it’s 2500 caps.”

“2500??! Seriously? I’ve bought swords for a quarter of that price.” Keelah studied the gleaming rapier; marveled at the craftsmanship; the serrated blade.

“That sword isn’t like other swords. It’s special,” Moira commented.

Keelah maneuvered the sword behind her back. Made a wide arc with the weapon; heard a loud swoosh as the sharp blade cut through air.

“What’s so special about it?” Keelah asked. Moira muttered something that the wastelander couldn’t hear. “Huh?” But Moira didn’t answer. Keelah pulled the sword closer to her face; noticed that there was a tiny button near the handle; shaped like a snake. “What the…?”

She pressed the button and the sword lit up a like a Christmas tree. Emitting a blue electrical shock that raced down Keelah’s arm; a faint tingle.
Moira made her way back to the room. Saw Keelah brandishing the glowing sword and rushed over to her; yanking the sword out of her hands.

“Careful there Keels. One wrong move and this thing will take your arm off.”

Moira clicked the button; powering the sword down; then she returned it to its display case.

“Where’d you get that thing?” Keelah asked. Still a bit in awe of the sword’s capabilities. She’d seen a lot of unique weaponry in her day. Alien blasters. Power fists. The auto axe. But an officer’s sword that emitted electricity? That was freaking awesome!

“I bought it off a one-armed man,” Moira said casually. The shopkeeper took her place behind the counter. Assembled the stack of Stimpacks and chems into a neat pile. “You want me to add the sword to your total?”

Keelah stared at the sword. Indecisive. But the wastelander eventually shrugged. “No. I have a closet full of weapons I don’t even use. I’ll try to exercise some restraint.”

Moira began totaling up the cost of medical supplies; her tongue peeking out from her mouth as she added up figures; made scribbles against her work pad.

Keelah waited quietly. Let her eyes roam across the shop walls; so full of failed experiments and merchandise that not even a sliver of plaster was visible.

Keelah’s eyes stopped on the blue vault suit hanging just behind the counter. She’d been seeing that vault suit for four years now and had never thought much about it. Had never even asked Moira how she got it.

The jumpsuit was badly frayed and faded by time to a chalky sky blue. But it was clearly a vault suit. A modified version with a bulletproof vest attached.

“Hey Moira,” Keelah began. “I never asked you…but where’d you get the vault jumpsuit?”

Moira didn’t look up from her math calculations. “My dad bought it off a vaultie about…I dunno…fifteen or twenty years ago. I was just a sprite then. Sweeping out the shop and making inventions out of the scrap Pop would buy off travelers. One day this vaultie came into the store wearing that thing. She looked real banged up. I guess the wasteland hadn’t been kind to her. She asked Pop if he could modify her jumpsuit. Make it more durable and able to withstand bullets and such. Well…gee…Pop didn’t know diddly about inventing things like that. But lucky for her, I did. I jury rigged her vault suit. Turned it into some pretty decent armor, if I can say so myself. But the girl never came back for it. I guess the wasteland got her.”

It was a morbid deduction to reach and Keelah’s face fell at the story’s conclusion. “Can I have a look at the jumpsuit?” she asked Moira.

“You can look but don’t touch Kells. That’s a collector’s item and the material has gotten really flimsy over the years.”

Keelah made her way behind the counter. Peered close at the jumpsuit to see if she could divine more details. Vault-Tec jumpsuits were indistinguishable from each other. From one vault to another, the vault suits were the same color blue with the same type of trim. The only thing that set them apart were the three numbers imprinted on the front and the back that signified the wearer’s vault.

Keelah angled her head to better see around the bullet proof vest. What vault had Moira’s old customer come from?
Keelah could just barely make out the faded print. Her eyes widened. Vault 101.

Keelah nearly reached out to touch the jumpsuit when she recalled Moira’s warning about the suit’s fragility.

“Moira…” she stammered. “You wouldn’t happen to remember the vaulter’s name would you?”

Keelah’s mind raced. Could the young woman in the jumpsuit have been Jonas’ mother, Anne? The 101er who had led the first vault expedition all those years ago? Anne and the other surveyors had disappeared suddenly. Had never been heard from again. Could this vault jump suit be a remnant of those lost scouts?

“I don’t remember her name,” Moira answered. “Why?”

“She was from the same vault as me. This woman…” Keelah wracked her brain. Tried to piece together the timeline. “You said fifteen, twenty years ago?”

Moira shrugged. “Yeah. Could have been longer though. I was a kid. And the Craterside Supply gets so many customers. They all start to look alike after a while.”

The shopkeeper placed the medical supplies into a sack. Pushed the bag towards Keelah. ”1600 caps. That’s with a friendly discount.”

Keelah dug into her pockets; removed a bulging bag of caps and began counting them out. Her mind was still awhirl with thoughts of Anne Palmer and the survey team. It would probably mean something to Old Lady Palmer if she could bring back something of her daughter’s. If she could take the old woman this jumpsuit.

“Let me buy the jumpsuit from you,” Keelah asked Moira. She’d already counted out the 1600 caps. She dug her hand back into the money bag to produce more.

“It’s not for sale,” Moira repeated.

“Please?” Keelah entreated. “I think I know the person who wore this suit. Her mother is still in the vault. She would want this.”

“I can sympathize, Keeloid. I can. But this jumpsuit was my first successful invention. I couldn’t part with it under any circumstances.”

And Keelah could tell by the firm set of Moira’s jaw that the woman meant it, and no amount of pleading or cap-negotiating would change her mind.

Keelah stared at the vault jumpsuit. Chagrined. The jumpsuit was proof that Anne Palmer and the survey team had made it safely to Megaton. The hidden files in the Overseer’s computer had indicated that they survey team had been on their third trip to the wasteland when they’d disappeared. Had they been on their way to Megaton?

“Moira, were there any more vaulters with the woman when she came into your store?”

Moira scratched a spot on her neck. Tried to remember. “Not that I recall. If there were more of them, I’m sure she would have asked for all of their jumpsuits to be modified. She seemed pretty insistent about upgrading the suit. Like she was scared that there was trouble waiting for her or something.”

That must have meant that Anne was the lone survivor of the expedition. Something awful must
have happened to the team. Perhaps an ambush as they made the trek towards Megaton. Anne had managed to survive and had come to the Craterside Supply to get her armor upgraded so that she could make the return trip to the vault. Something had deterred her. Permanently.

Keelah’s hand clenched into fists. “Damn it,” she muttered. “The Overseer sent them to their deaths and didn’t even bother to commemorate their sacrifice.”

It made her sad to think about it. Old Lady Palmer waiting for a daughter to return. Jonas growing up without a mother. And the Overseer blotting the surveyors’ names from the records as if they’d never even existed.

And whatever happened to Anne? Why didn’t she come back for her vault suit? What manner of man or beast waylaid her?

Moira’s face contorted at the sad look on Keelah’s face. “Look here Keebra, I can’t sell you the jumpsuit, but I have something else you might be interested in. That vaultie didn’t have the money to pay for the modifications, so she gave me her Pip-Boy in exchange.”

Keelah’s eyes lit up. “She did? Where is it?”

“Oh, it’s somewhere around here.” Moira knelt behind the counter. Began rummaging through overstuffed bins. She talked as she rummaged. “Now… I could never get it to work. It was beat up pretty bad. That vaultie must have been using her Pip-Boy as a weapon or something. But you figured out a way to disarm that atomic bomb outside, so maybe you can fix the Pip-Boy… Aha! Here it is!” Moira popped up from behind the counter. Extended a very dusty and very clunky-looking Pip-Boy to Keelah.

“I’ve never even seen this model,” Keelah whispered. Turning the heavy device over in her hands; taking note of the tan color; the odd array of buttons and dials. It had to be at least two decades older than the model she wore. “What do you want for it?” Keelah asked. “Want to round my purchases up to 2000 caps and call it even?”

Moira shook her head. Presented Keelah with an innocent smile. “I’ll give you the Pip-Boy and the medical supplies gratis. If you do one thing for me.”

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. Already suspicious. “What?”

“Well… tale is there’s a Mirelurk Queen in Rock Creek Caverns…”

Keelah secured the supply sack to her back and began the walk back to her Megaton home. She studied the rusty Pip-Boy in her hands. Pushed at buttons and twisted knobs to see if she could generate some sign of life. But the Pip-Boy’s screen remained black.

Keelah tucked the device into the bag. She’d take the Pip-Boy apart when she got home. See if there were any mechanical issues with the device.

When she entered her Megaton home, the wastelander found her living room full of people.

Butcher lifted his head from the book he was leafing through. Smiled softly at Keelah. “Charon let us in,” he stated. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Where’s Charon?”
“Upstairs in the bathroom.”

Keelah set her supplies on the table by the door. Went over to Butcher and clasped his hand in greeting before doing the same with Reilly and Donovan. “I’m glad you guys could make it.”

“Once a Ranger, always a Ranger,” Reilly commented. “You’ve helped us out of tight spots before.”

Donovan made room for Keelah on the couch he was sprawled on. Ran a hand through his tousled hair and grinned at his friend. “Butcher and I had just gotten back from exploring the south metro tunnels when we got your broadcast. We headed this way as soon as we could.”

Keelah sank into the couch cushions. Gave the sweet-faced man an affectionate pound on the shoulder. “You guys are the best. I owe you one.”

“What is this important mission anyway?” Reilly asked. The squad leader shifted in her chair and Keelah couldn’t help but notice the grimace of pain the woman tried to hide as her right leg move awkwardly. Butcher noticed the pained expression as well and the doctor immediately moved to his girlfriend’s side. Knelt in front of her and began to massage her leg from the knee down.

Keelah smiled. Tried not to stare too hard at her besotted friends. “I’ll fill you in on all the details as soon as Charon comes down.” Keelah eyes flitted across the room. Noticing a conspicuous absence. “Where’s Brick?”

Donovan leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. A prelude to sleep. “She’s at the Brass Lantern. Said she was dehydrated from the long walk and needed a drink. I guess Jenny Stahl is quenching her thirst as we speak.”

“Don’t be crude Donovan,” Reilly reprimanded.

Donovan yawned into his hands. “I wasn’t being crude. Jenny makes a damned good Rob Roy. It’s Brick’s favorite.”

Keelah laughed at her companions. Jumped to her feet and reclaimed her supply sack. “Let me take these items to my room and check on Charon. Then we can all go to the Brass Lantern for a drink, and I’ll bring you up to speed on this mission.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Butcher said.

Keelah made her way up the stairs. She smiled softly when she saw Butcher press a gentle kiss to Reilly’s knee. The squad leader immediately leaned forward and placed an answering kiss against the medic’s forehead.

Donovan snored.

“Thanks, you guys,” Keelah called down the stairs. The resulting murmurs let Keelah know that the rangers had heard her.

Keelah tossed the medical supplies on her bed. She’d sort them later. Divide them between her companions so that they could each have a decent supply of meds. She set the Pip-Boy on her desk next to her personal copy of the Wasteland Survival Guide and the mason jar that housed a sliver of her brain.

She couldn’t hear the shower running which meant Charon was probably changing in the guest
The wastelander went to Charon’s bedroom. Knocked softly on the door.

“Can I come in?” she called.

She heard a murmured yes. Then opened the door and entered the tiny bedroom. The guest room (formerly a storage area) had been transformed in the past few months. Gone were the metal shelves and ratty couch. The room now contained a twin-sized bed; a metal desk; a bookshelf; and a couple of towering cabinets that housed all of Charon’s weapons and armor.

Charon stood in the middle of the room. He was bare-chested; his waist wrapped with a faded towel. His fire-red hair was still damp and plastered against his forehead. Without his armor, the scars Charon had collected from radiation poisoning and years of battle were prominent. And prevalent. Like most ghouls, Charon didn’t have much skin left. His entire body looked like an open sore. Looked like it was in constant pain or agitation.

But Keelah and Charon had been companions for years now; had seen each other in various stages of undress and injury. Keelah didn’t gawk. She simply moved further into the room. Passed Charon a towel she saw resting on his dresser so that the ghoul could dry his hair.

Keelah perched on the end of the desk. “We’re going to head to the Brass Lantern for dinner. We’ll go over the escort mission then.”

“I’ll meet you there shortly.”

Keelah could see deep gashes in Charon’s chest and forearms. Many of them still bleeding.

“Do you need any treatment?” she asked him. “For the Deathclaw cuts?”

“No. I have medicine. Besides, ghouls heal quickly.”

Keelah nodded. Not wanting to push. “You don’t have to do any more tasks for Moira. I didn’t know she was going to send you into a Deathclaw lair.”

Charon tossed the soiled face towel into the hamper near the door. “I’ve experienced worse,” he said. Repeating the line he’d said at Moira’s supply shop.

Keelah pushed herself off of the desk. “I’ll take the rangers on to the Brass Lantern. See if we can’t snag a booth. What do you want me to order for you?”

“Nothing.”

“Mirelurk cakes?”

“No.”

“Those Brahmin patty things you like?”

“No.”

“Jenny might have made soup. And last time I was here, she had a new item. Salamander fajitas. They were pretty good.”

Charon stared at her. His light hair and dark eyes the only unscathed part of his body. “Soup will be fine,” he murmured.

Keelah smiled. “Good. See you in a bit.” She headed for the door.
“Hey.”

Keelah turned around “Yeah?”

“You’re not indebted to them, you know?” Charon’s eyes were a brilliant hue. Much more distracting than his blemished body. The wasteland merc was being vague with his pronouns but Keelah knew he was talking about the 101ers. “Your father made mistakes. But we pay for our own mistakes not the mistakes of others.”

“That’s not why I’m doing this.”

“Oh?” Charon responded, disbelievingly. He crossed over to his supply cabinet. Removed a wool undershirt and pulled it on. The heavy fabric pulled against the mercenary’s sensitive skin and Charon winced.

“I just want them to be safe. The Big Towners. The Lamplighters. Even the 101ers. I just want them all to be safe.”

Charon’s mouth twisted from some stray memory, and the mercenary ducked his head and chuckled darkly. “You remind me of my sister,” he said softly. His words so forlorn-sounding and unexpected that Keelah felt herself go dizzy. “Too obliging for your own good.”

“You have a sister?”

“Had.”

“Oh.” Keelah didn’t know what to say so she said nothing. She knew Charon wouldn’t appreciate any platitude she could offer anyway.

“It’s fine and all to safeguard other people,” Charon continued. Pulling a combat suit from the locker and dusting off cobwebs. “But not if it jeopardizes your own well-being. You’ve spent four years in this desert and still haven’t learned to be selfish.” It was sharp criticism, and the mercenary stared directly into Keelah’s eyes to hammer home his point. “That’s gonna get you killed some day.”

Keelah scowled. “Lucky for you, then, since you’re my primary beneficiary.”

Charon glared at her. Keelah glared back.

They were a couple of idiots. Charon trying to communicate his concern through tough talk and criticism. And Keelah responding to her friend’s poorly worded affection with anger and sarcasm.

“I’ll see you at the Brass Lantern,” Keelah grumbled. Before stomping out of the room.

Charon wasn’t an effusive person. Didn’t even like to communicate in full sentences. So the seasoned mercenary opted for the most succinct response to his and Keelah’s most recent miscommunication.

“Shit.”

Keelah sat sandwiched between Donovan and Brick in a tattered booth at the Brass Lantern. She’d collected Dogmeat on her way to the restaurant (Sheriff Simms’s son, Harden, kept the pup for Keelah those times she made extended trips), and the dog lay curled beneath the table; his face and paws resting on Keelah’s boots.
Butcher, Reilly and Charon sat across from Keelah. The mercenary seemed uncomfortable with the tight fit in the cramped booth, but he suffered gamely; folding his long arms into his lap so that he wouldn’t jostle Reilly or upend the food and drink that cluttered the table.

Keelah jabbed her finger at a spot on a map she had stretched across the table. The group had spent the past hour and a half plotting a safe path from Vault 101 to Big Town and Little Lamplight. The map was covered with squiggled lines and arrows and a couple of stains from the food and drink the group had consumed.

“So how long do you expect this excursion to take?” Brick asked. The self-assured ranger chewed on a toothpick as she divided her attention between trip planning and Jenny Stahl-watching.

“At least a week,” Keelah replied. “Maybe two if we run into trouble. We have quite a few kids who’ll be traveling with us. They have short legs and aren’t used to this kind of travel.”

Brick grunted. “This is a weird ass caravan, Keelah. Rangers and mercs and kiddos and Handybots. We might as well be a traveling circus.”

“I always thought you’d make a hell of a clown,” Donovan said, laughing merrily. Brick reached over Keelah to punch the cheeky ranger.

Keelah put her arms up. Prevented the two rangers from tussling further. “Now I know this is an ambitious undertaking, but I think we can manage it. With the five of us, plus Red, Susie and Officer Hannon, we’ll have eight skilled escorts. We’ll also have the Handybots providing aerial support.”

“And Dogmeat providing ground support, huh?” Brick asked. Reaching below the table to scratch behind the dog’s ears.

“Yes. So what do you all think?” Keelah cast a glance at her table of companions. Curious to hear their thoughts.

Reilly leaned forward. “You said five of us. There are six of us here.”

“She's right. Your math sucks Keelah,” Brick commented unnecessarily.

Keelah glared at the obnoxious ranger. But when she turned back to Reilly, Keelah's eyes were abashed. “Well...see...I was thinking...with your leg and all, maybe you’d want to stay here in Megaton. Or wait for us at the vault.”

Brick and Donovan exchanged meaningful glances. Averted their eyes so they wouldn’t have to look at their squad leader.

Reilly frowned. Leaned even more across the table so that she could better see Keelah’s face in the dim lighting. “Are you saying that I would be a liability on this trip?” she asked. Her voice was low and carried a discernible edge. Keelah had clearly offended her.

“No! Of course I’m not saying that.” Keelah contested.

“Because I managed to walk all the way from the ranger compound to Megaton with no problem,” Reilly continued.

“Yes. I see that.” Keelah was grateful that her brown skin hid the heavy blush blanketing her skin. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Reilly. You’re a hell of a scout and soldier. We all know that. I just thought two weeks of non-stop walking would be hard on you. I didn’t want to exacerbate your injury.”
Keelah had been the one to operate on the ranger after all—when Reilly had been knocked unconscious by an explosion at the Statesmen Hotel. Reilly’s right leg had been crushed upon impact. The bones so badly damaged that Keelah couldn’t even feel them as she operated on the leg. As she maneuvered bones back into place; secured Reilly’s leg in a cast.

Reilly’s lingering infirmity made Keelah feel guilty. Like she’d done something wrong when she reset Reilly’s leg all those years ago. Some miscalculation on her part that had resulted in Reilly having a permanent limp and intermittent pain that was so severe that the ranger had to ice her leg constantly; pump Med-X into her thigh; get frequent massages.

A tense silence overtook the table. Keelah and Reilly stared at each other; each woman silently contemplating.

Keelah made a decision. “We can break for camp every six hours or so. The Lamplighters will need frequent breaks anyway.” She pointed at a spot on the map. “Maybe here near Smith Casey’s Garage. And another break here, near the Moonbeam Outdoor Cinema.” Keelah risked a glance at Reilly. “What do you think? You know the wasteland better than anyone else.”

It was an apology. Her way of saying: You’re not a liability. You’re invaluable to this team.

Reilly nodded at Keelah. Accepting. Then pulled the map closer so that she could study it. “It would be best if we camped here,” she said, pointing to an area east of Little Lamplight. “It has a campground area. And a lot of vehicles we can use for cover in case of an ambush.”

Keelah pushed a pencil across the table to Reilly. “Go ahead and make the notations. I’m going to get us another round of drinks.” They would all add the information to their geo-mappers later.

Keelah paused a moment, staring at Reilly to make sure they were on good footing again. The ranger leader smiled. Bumped Keelah’s knee under the table. Keelah grinned back and squirmed her way from between Brick and Donovan.

Charon rose from the table. “I’ll help you,” he volunteered. Trailing Keelah to the bar.

Keelah waved at Leo Stahl, gesturing him over. The friendly barhop wandered over; perking up when he saw Keelah. “Hey, friend. When’d you get back?”

“A few hours ago.”

“We need to get a drink and catch up. Wanna meet me at the Water Treatment Plant later?”

Leo didn’t use Jet anymore and no longer had to seek out the Water Treatment Plant to satisfy his chem addiction. But the eldest Stahl was deeply introverted. Spent all of his free time in the vacant building playing with a deck of cards and using bits of repurposed charcoal to draw still art.

“No can do Leo. I’m kind of caught up in a thing right now and will be out of town for a little while. But maybe we can get that drink when I get back.”

The bartender leaned across the bar. Lowered his voice and whispered conspiratorially. “Be careful out there. Did you hear about all those people who have gone missing? Sheriff Simms said that a Brahmin showed up here just the other day. Loaded down with goods but absent its merchant. Blood all over the damn thing. Sheriff thinks those fishermen got the merchant.”

The Fisher of Men. The group Sheriff Simms had warned Keelah about more than a week ago.

“It wasn’t Doc Hoff’s brahmin was it? Or Crazy Wolfgang’s?”
“No, I don’t think it was one of the regular caravans. The supplies weren’t the sort of things those Canterbury Common folks carry.” Leo used a stained rag to wipe at a blemish on the countertop. “I’m not sure who the brahmin belonged to but whoever the merchant was, he's out of a lot of blood. Poor bastard. Just be on the lookout. The wasteland has enough bad guys out there without these fisherman sickos.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Keelah sighed heavily. Was newly excited to drink a shit ton of alcohol.

“Let me get another round of Rob Roys. And a few beers.” She turned to Charon to see if he wanted coffee. The mercenary didn’t drink alcohol.

But Charon was no longer standing beside her. She hadn’t even heard him walk off. Keelah looked over at their booth. But Charon wasn’t there either.

The wastelander frowned. Cast her gaze around the crowded restaurant looking for the familiar six foot frame. No Charon.

Must have had to use the facilities, she thought to herself.

“Here are your drinks.”

Leo accepted the caps Keelah handed him. Keelah tottered the tray of drinks back to the table. Slid into the space beside Reilly this time so that she could study the map along with her friend.

“Where’s Charon?” Butcher asked her.

“Piss stop.”

Keelah took a sip of her flavored beverage. Enjoyed the pleasant sting that jangled her nerve endings.

“Here’s to Reilly’s Rangers,” Donovan said cheerfully as he raised his glass.

“To Reilly’s Rangers,” they all repeated in unison.

Keelah took another sip of warm liquor. Felt a pleasant buzz as she turned warm smiles on her fellow rangers.

For a very long time, she’d resisted having friends in the Wasteland. She didn’t trust anyone after her experience with Vault 101. Thought personal relationships weakened a person; made them vulnerable. But here she was with a table full of friends. And there were even more people she cared about back in Big Town and Little Lamplight.

And then she had the person who was arguably her best friend. Charon.

I’ll apologize to him when I get home, Keelah thought to herself. I was a bit snotty to him earlier. Better yet, I’ll buy him some bubble gum and give it to him as a peace offering. The grumpy mercenary could barely stomach most foods (Radiation sickness had given ghouls extra sensitive taste buds; heightened senses. Even a small amount of alcohol could cause addiction. And sweeter items like Nuka Cola and Sugar Bombs aggravated ghouls’ stomachs. But Charon liked his jerky and his soups. And the merc had a particular fondness for spearmint gum).

Keelah smiled into her glass. Comforted by the thought that she and Charon would resolve their
quarrel.

Donovan and Brick were bickering over the final Rob Roy.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Donovan exclaimed. Trying to wrest the drink away from Brick.

“Have the bartender make you up another one.”

“Why don’t you have your girlfriend make you up another one?!”


Keelah slid her mostly full glass to Donovan. “Here. Have mine.”

“No, Keelah. I don’t want to take yours,” Donovan protested.

“It’s no problem. I need to have a clear head tonight anyway. I have a Pip-Boy at home that requires my attention.”

“A pip boy, huh?” Brick asked. “He good-looking?” Keelah rolled her eyes. "He sounds spry." The ranger over-enunciated the word. “Pip. As in…pip pip, hurray?” She waggled her eyebrows at Keelah and grinned mischievously.

“You’re incorrigible Brick,” Keelah said exasperatedly.

“You love it.” But the ranger was distracted by the sudden appearance of Jenny Stahl at the table. The pretty brunette smiled down at Brick. “My shift is over. You want to go for that walk now?”

“Absolutely.” Brick clamored up from the table; elbowing Donovan in the stomach in the process. Brick put an arm around Jenny’s waist. Grinned down at her table mates. “I’ll see you fine folks later.”

“We’re headed out day after tomorrow,” Keelah reminded her. “Don’t walk too far.”

“Yes, mom.” Brick said sarcastically. But then she turned; smiled sweetly at Jenny. “Let’s promenade, shall we?”

Donovan snickered into his drink. Even the fair-minded Butcher had to disguise a laugh.

The foursome watched in amusement as Brick led her love interest out of the restaurant.

“Love is a hell of a drug,” Donovan commented. Before pouring Brick’s abandoned alcohol into his glass.

“Yes it is,” Reilly whispered. Gripping Butcher's hand under the table.

“Yes, it is…” Keelah agreed. Her mind returning, for a moment, to Amata. To the kiss they almost shared in the Overseer’s bedroom.

Dogmeat seemed to sense Keelah’s worsening mood. The canine pressed a moist nose into the wastelander petted him; stroked his fur.

Charon didn't return to the restaurant.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
The foursome made their way to Keelah’s home a few hours later. It was past midnight and the city was still; unnervingly quiet.

Keelah led the rangers into her darkened home; switched on lights and set about preparing the living room for her guests.

Reilly and Butcher somehow found a way for both of their bodies to squeeze onto the small couch. Donovan prepared a pallet on the second floor; next to Keelah’s jukebox. They all figured Brick would be spending the evening with Jenny Stahl, so Keelah locked up her home. Powered on Wadsworth and made her way upstairs to deliver the chewing gum she’d purchased for Charon.

She knocked on the door; waited for permission to enter. When none came, she opened the bedroom door and walked into Charon’s room.

Charon wasn’t there. His bed was made. His used towels still in the hamper. The room looked exactly the way it had when Keelah had stormed out of it several hours ago.

Keelah’s brow furrowed. She exited the room. Closed the door and stared at it in puzzlement. As if the tarnished wood could provide answers.

Did Charon leave the city? Did he and Keelah’s disagreement make him so angry that he departed for Underworld?

But surely he would have told her before he’d left? And he knew Keelah was counting on him to help with the escort. Even if he was angry, Charon would never abandon a mission.

Keelah made her way into her bedroom. Quickly changed into something loose-fitting and comfortable as she tried to envision where Charon had run off to.

Relax Keelah. The man’s a seasoned mercenary. Wherever he is, he’s fine. Probably promenading around Megaton like Brick and Jenny Stahl.

She wasn’t altogether convinced, so Keelah decided to put on some music to help calm her nerves.

She turned on the transistor radio that sat near her bed. Took a seat at her desk and began re-inspecting the old-fashioned Pip-Boy.

Three-Dog was doing another public safety announcement about the importance of washing one’s hands before eating. Keelah turned the station. Crossed her fingers, hoping that Agatha had fixed her transmission issues.

But there was only silence. Again.

Keelah kept turning the dial until she picked up a music station. Something slow was playing. Mournful and low. A woman’s rich baritone filled the room.

Keelah fished tools out her dresser. Used the tiny instruments to disassemble the Pip-Boy. She studied the tangle of wires. Some of them so rusted and old that they’d lost their color and the protective plastic that covered them.

There were a few wires that had disintegrated. Some were no longer connected. Keelah went to work. Quietly and methodically. She was accustomed to this type of task. Had trained for years with Stanley: repairing machines; repurposing them.

Dogmeat’s snores and the music kept her company. It wasn’t a Stradivarius, but the guitar being
strummed was nice. And the lyrics to the song made something prickle beneath Keelah’s skin.

_I walk for miles…along the highway_

_Well that’s just my way…of saying I love you_

_I’m always walking…after midnight…searching for you._

Keelah frowned. _Damn Charon. You’d better not have gone back to Underworld_, she thought moodily as she reconnected loose wires. Twisted the metal ends around until she generated a small spark.

It only took her a few more minutes before she’d reassembled the Pip-Boy. She pressed down on a button. Felt a sense of relief when the Pip-Boy powered on.

If this was Anne Palmer’s Pip-Boy, the device would identify her. There had to be notes or voice logs. The Pip-Boy may have even recorded Ann’s physical stats. Like if she’d been irradiated the last time she wore the Pip-Boy. Or if she’d been at full health.

Keelah scrolled through the Pip-Boy, familiarizing herself with the outdated format. There didn’t seem to be any health records or voice logs. Not even an inventory list.

But there was a MEMO section. Keelah tapped the screen. Her heart caught in her throat. What would the notes reveal?

There were only two notes listed. Keelah clicked on the oldest one first.

_It’s hard to believe that soon I will be outside of Vault 101. Outdoors in the old world. I hope there are no monsters, and that the helmet I got from the med clinic will be sturdy enough to withstand the radiation. I am afraid, but I’ve learned that there are things more powerful than fear. Like love. And family. I take this next step for my sweet baby. A._

The note was signed ‘A.’

So this Pip-Boy _had_ belonged to Anne Palmer. And the vault suit in Moira’s supply shop.

Keelah clicked on the second note. Released a heavy breath as she read Anne’s final message.

_I can’t believe he locked the vault door. I survived the trip to Megaton and made it back home only to discover that the password had been changed. I intend to wait by this door in hope that he’ll change his mind and let me back in. I’ll wait forever if I have to. I simply cannot be separated from my precious baby. A._

Keelah put the Pip-Boy down; placed her head in her hands and sighed. Her heavy breathing stirred Dogmeat from his sleep, and the hound whined loudly. Adding his mourning to hers.

Keelah bit into a fingernail as she performed a mental exercise; connected the dots concerning Anne Palmer’s disappearance. Anne must have grown tired of waiting by the vault door. Her strength of spirit and steadfastness had been eroded by hunger and dehydration; and the constant threat of raiders and feral animals. The vault explorer must have made a return trip to Megaton to upgrade her vault suit and possibly get some supplies. But she’d never collected her vault suit; had never returned to the vault. Something had happened to her. But what?

It was a mystery that was decades old. And no one from Vault 101, save Old Lady Palmer, had even attempted to solve it. Or even bothered to unlock the vault door and go searching for their lost
neighbors.

Keelah couldn’t blame the younger generation of 101ers. They hadn’t even known Anne Palmer and the scout party existed. She’d only discovered the cover-up by accident. When she’d hacked the Overseer’s computer during her escape from the vault.

But the older vaulters…? Why hadn’t they done more to help the scouting party? Why didn’t they go look for them? Megaton wasn’t that far away.

And why in God’s name did the Overseer changed the vault password? That act alone doomed Anne Palmer.

Anne was right outside the vault door, Keelah thought miserably. She could have come home.

Keelah’s head began to throb.

Charon’s unexplained absence. Anne Palmer’s unfortunate demise.

The wastelander turned the Pip-Boy off; climbed into her bed. Closed her eyes.

The music playing in the background was almost prophetic:

*I go out walking…after midnight…out in the starlight*

*Just hoping you may be…*

*Somewhere walking…after midnight…searching for me.*

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Patsy Cline song. I love "Walking After Midnight." The song kind of established the tone for the tangent about Anne Palmer and the lost vault expedition party. Especially that last line where Patsy says she hopes her beloved is out there walking, searching for her.

I think that’s the saddest part about the lost scouting party. That no one from the vault went out and looked for them. The Overseer just concluded they were permanently lost and sealed the vault door. (sad face).
Glass Case, Cello Vase (part one)

Chapter Summary

The LW and company escort the Big Towners and Lamplighters to Vault 101. Everything does not go according to plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 21 – Glass Case, Cello Vase (part one)

Keelah spat into the dirt; tried to rid herself of some of the sick feeling that had been roiling through her body for the past five hours. The wastelander pulled her goggles from her eyes and checked her Pip-Boy again.

2:32 PM.

The escort was running behind schedule. Severely behind.

“I don’t think he’s coming,” Butcher commented; the expression on the ranger’s face sympathetic as he stared at Keelah and stated the obvious.

The team of seven was currently waiting outside of Vault 101. And had been for hours. They’d been joined by Red and Susie and the handybot, Andy, and should have started on their journey several hours ago. But their escort was short one member.

Charon.

The mercenary hadn’t shown back up at Keelah’s house. Not that first night. Not the second. The rangers and Keelah had waited an entire day for Charon. Pacing around Keelah’s small metal house; checking the time; making frequent trips to the front gate to see if the mercenary had returned.

Charon was a no-show. And now they’d lost part of another day waiting for him.

Keelah turned to Reilly. “Something’s wrong. Charon wouldn’t leave me in the lurch like this.”

The ranger leader put a hand against Keelah’s waist. “You want to postpone the escort? We could try again in a few days. Or maybe next week.”

Keelah shook her head. “No. It’s already taken a considerable amount of finagling just to get to this point.” She cast a gaze around the assembled team; taking note of the flushed brows and sunburned skin. She couldn’t ask the rangers to make this trip again. They’d already neglected their mapping work for her mission. And the Big Towners and Lamplighters were expecting them. It was now or never.
“We’ll just have to go without him,” Keelah decided; her face twisting into a frown.

She was worried about her grumpy friend. Wanted to track him down and demand an explanation for his absence. But she reasoned that Charon was still upset with her about their argument and had decided to remove himself for a few days. Keelah couldn’t fault the merc for wanting a break. He’d only just finished a dangerous mission for Moira; hadn’t even had time to rest and heal. If anyone deserved a day off, it was him.

Keelah would allow Charon his space. Then catch up with him in Underworld when they completed the transport.

_You’d better be waiting for me Charon_, Keelah though to herself, sulking, as she began her descent down the steep incline.

“Let’s move out,” she instructed; grabbing the reins of the Brahmin she’d rented from Nathan and clicking her tongue so that Dogmeat would follow.

The sizeable team started out across the wasteland. Keelah and Reilly taking lead, guiding the Brahmin; setting the pace.

The rest of the team followed behind. Susie and Red chatting softly; Brick and Butcher and Donovan stoic, their weapons raised.

The two handybots floated alongside; their metallic arms buzzing.

The escort team left a trail behind. Dozens of footprints etched in cracked sand. Their footprints were a marker. An ephemeral arrow.

But a biting wind soon came along behind. Gusting. Blew the tracks away.

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_Day Three of Escort_

The team broke for camp just west of the abandoned scrapyard. The sun had set hours ago and a glint of moonlight echoed off the gutted semis and tractor trailers. The smell of oil was strong, pungent, and Keelah led the group downwind of the metal heap.

The escort team had been walking nonstop for days and was exhausted, frazzled; nearing the point of collapse.

Butcher and Brick secured the perimeter while Donovan prepared a small fire. In just minutes the team had unfurled bedrolls; cracked open tins of food; stretched out on the ground in positions that would encourage blood circulation; that would ease their groaning muscles.

The seven of them sat, kneeled, leaned around the small bonfire. The flames gave off insignificant heat, but the crackle of red and orange was mesmerizing. For long moments no one spoke. They just stared into the flames. Saw shapes and colors that were fleeting.

“We need music,” Brick said suddenly. The tall women opened her hands towards the fire; tried to catch a little heat. “It’s a crime, having a campfire but no guitar.”

“You play?” Red asked as she hunched deeper into her woolen blanket; the firelight reflecting off her wire-rimmed glasses.
Brick shook her head. “I don’t play. But one of our mates, Theo, did. He was damn good too.” A look passed over Brick’s face. Something soft and sad that wasn’t usual on the garrulous ranger. “Theo was a klutz with everything. Couldn’t even carry a mini gun without tripping over the magazine. But the kid could play a guitar. He found it one day while we were out mapping near Fairfax Ruins. We stumbled upon this burned out pawn shop and there was this beat up Sweetwater guitar in a storage locker. Solid black. Pretty. But it had a hole punched through it. Probably from a bullet. And it was missing a string. Somehow Theo got that thing to play. Would serenade us as we walked from one end of this desert to the other.” Brick chuckled. Her eyes practically glowing in the firelight. “Here it was this clumsy ass guy who could barely keep his boots tied, playing a guitar like he was at the Grand Opry or something.” A whimsical look crossed the woman’s face. The other rangers nodded along; remembering. “It sure made traveling six days out of the week a whole lot easier.”

Brick huffed irritably. Scratched a spot on her leg and stopped speaking. Butcher looped an arm around Reilly’s waist. Whispered something in his girlfriend’s ear.

“You should have bought Theo along,” Red said cheerfully. Not noticing how painfully quiet the rangers had become. “We could have had a jamboree.”

The good doctor chuckled at her own joke, but no one else laughed. Red realized her mistake too late. “Oh my… I’m so sorry…”


Keelah stirred from her silent contemplation of the fire. Her thoughts disordered.

*Why would Charon leave without saying anything?*

“Huh…? What?” Keelah asked. Finally paying attention to the conversation going on around her.

“Will you play some music?” Donovan asked.

“Music?”

*Music!*

Keelah suddenly remembered something. “I have to make a quick detour,” she gasped. The wastelander jumped to her feet. Reached for the weapons she’d arranged in a neat line beside her. “I have a friend who lives nearby. I need to check on her.”

Keelah’s solemn tone caught Susie’s attention. The blonde vaulter pushed her way out of her bedroll. Made her way to Keelah’s side. “I’ll go with you.”

“That’s okay, Susie. It’s a short walk. Not even five miles. Why don’t you stay here and play something for the crew on your Pip-Boy?”

Susie shook her head. “It’s dark out. And we’ve already passed one ransacked caravan. No way I’m letting you go off on your own.”

Donovan joined their huddle. “She’s right Keelah. I’ll come along, too.” The ranger reached for his assault rifle.

“No,” Keelah argued. More sharply than she intended. “The person I’m going to see doesn’t appreciate uninvited guests. I don’t want to startle her by showing up with people she doesn’t
know.” Keelah refastened her supply pack. Tucked her combat knife into her boot. “Besides, I’m not going alone. I’m taking Dogmeat.” She whistled for her faithful canine. Patted him on his head when he trotted to her side.

But Susie still looked worried, and the vaulter’s blue eyes flitted over their surroundings.

The wasteland was unnerving at nighttime. Howling winds and hulking shadows. Menacing figures moving around in the background that had no form, made no sound.

“At least take one of the handybots,” Susie suggested.

“No. They’re better utilized circling the perimeter. Don’t worry Suze. I’ll be there and back before you get through Three-Dog’s nightly playlist.”

Keelah patted her friend on the arm; nodded at the rest of the escort team before turning on her heels and disappearing into the night.

Agatha lived just around the bend; in an isolated house beneath a crumbled overpass. It should only take Keelah an hour or so to check on the elderly woman; to repair her radio signal; and return to the campfire for a few hours’ sleep.

Keelah quickened her pace. Felt the soft ground give way beneath her feet as she sprinted towards her destination.

................

Keelah knew something was wrong the moment she crossed the short bridge that led to Agatha’s house.

Agatha was fastidious about her home’s appearance.

_I may have a desert for a backyard, Agatha would always say, but I want my front yard to look like something you would see in Good Housekeeping._

The elderly musician swept her stone walkway daily and kept potted plants near her front door for decoration. The plants were plastic, of course, but they were still pretty to look at.

Agatha had also placed two intact garden gnomes in her front yard.

_They’re sentries, she would joke with Keelah. And just so cute to look at with their button noses! I call them Old Dan and Little Ann._

Keelah carefully stepped over what appeared to be a porcelain eyeball. The garden gnomes had been smashed to pieces, and their fractured bodies littered the stone pathway. The potted plants had been upended; the plastic ivy scuffed and scattered.

Keelah stared dismally at the wooden front door. It was splintered; leaning off its hinges.

“Oh, Agatha…” Keelah sighed. Already distraught by what she expected to find inside.

She pushed the door in; felt it sway precariously; then used the light of her Pip-Boy to guide her to a kerosene lamp sitting on an end table. She flicked the lamp on. Turned in a circle and surveyed Agatha’s home.

Agatha’s residence was little more than a large room. No bedrooms or closets. Just a single, cavernous room with a bed and a refrigerator and the odds and ends Agatha had collected over the
years.

Keelah didn’t even have to move deep into the house to see all of the damage that had been done. Agatha’s radio had been smashed; the refrigerator emptied of supplies. Some of the food contents had spilled on the floor and there were blotches of brown and gray against the wall.

There was a single blood stain on the concrete floor. A small one. Red and oval and splashed neatly near the front door like a left-behind clue—a sign that Agatha had struggled mightily before losing; before being overwhelmed by her assailants.

Keelah moved to the other side of the bed; checked alongside it; beneath it. There was no body. No Agatha. No hint of what had happened to the elderly woman after she’d lost that drop of blood.

Keelah crossed back over to the table. Inspected the busted radio. Whoever had accosted Agatha hadn’t done it for caps. Radios fetched a pretty penny in the wasteland. There was no point in breaking the music box. And the assailants hadn’t even bothered to pick the ammo box Agatha kept beside her bed.

Agatha’s attackers—raiders or junkies or some wasteland itinerant who simply had nothing better to do—had vandalized Agatha’s home just for the hell of it.

Keelah stared down at a half-eaten plate of food. Some indistinguishable meat. A shriveled up potato that had grown mold.

Agatha had been in the middle of a meal when someone had broken down her door. The old woman probably hadn’t even had time to reach for the .32 she kept tucked beneath her mattress.

Keelah pressed a hand between the thin bed cushions. Yep. The tiny pistol was still there.

The wastelander sighed heavily; sank into a dejected slouch against the bed post.

This was something that she and the traveling merchant, Crow, had worried about for years. That some degenerate would happen upon Agatha’s hideaway and attack her. Kill the old woman for her meager possessions or abduct her so that she could be sold into slavery.

*They took the Stradivarius*, Keelah realized. When her eyes had cleared enough for her to see again. The violin and its case were missing from the mantel where Agatha placed them every night. *Must have realized that the violin was priceless. Took it and Agatha. Bastards!*

Keelah gave the disheveled room one final glance-over before turning off the light; walking back outside. It was completely unnecessary for her to close the front door. But she did it anyway. Used a bobby pin to reattach the hinge. Locked the door.

*Where’d they take you Agatha?* She asked herself as stared out into the inky blackness; as her footsteps crunched Agatha’s fallen garden gnomes into a fine powder.

Keelah would look for her friend. Try to bring her back home. But the desert was wide and scoundrels plentiful. Where would she even start?

The distressed wastelander directed her steps back towards the campfire; back towards her pending mission.

She had enough on her plate as it was. Didn’t have the time or resources to mobilize a rescue mission at the moment.
But she would do something about Agatha. And soon. The unfortunate folks who went missing in the wasteland—who were disappeared by slavers or ravenous beasts—they lived on borrowed time.

Wherever she was, the clock was ticking for Agatha. Keelah could only hope that the kindly woman was still alive.

“This way Dogmeat,” Keelah instructed, as she avoided a pool of irradiated water; leapt onto an outcrop of rock and marched upwards.

Her To-Do list was growing. Exponentially. The Big Towners and Lamplighters. The vault caravan. The mystery surrounding Anne Palmer. And now Agatha.

Keelah bit into the side of her cheek. Tasted blood.

The young woman couldn’t help but wonder how much easier her tasks would be if she had Charon by her side.

Day Five of Escort

They made it to Big Town only a day behind schedule. The measured pace they walked to accommodate Reilly’s debility contributed to their delay. The team had also had violent encounters with Yao Guis and feral ghouls as they made their trek. Donovan and Susie sustained serious injuries during the frays. Red and Butcher were able to patch both of them up but recommended that the group stop for a while until Donovan and Susie regained strength.

When the escort finally rolled into Big Town, it was mid-day and the entire team looked worse for wear.

Red led the bedraggled group over the moat and into the small settlement. Dusty and Officer Hannon were keeping watch and when they saw the shuffling group inch into Big Town, the pair of guards rushed over to doctor and company.

“Geez Red, you’ve been gone for two weeks! We thought you weren’t coming back for us,” Dusty exclaimed; throwing his arm around the doctor.

Red accepted the hug the guard impetuously gave her. Smiled tiredly into his shoulder. “Is everyone packed and ready to go? We’re going to take a short break then push on to Lamplight before it gets dark.”

Dusty pulled back from the embrace. Shot a sheepish grin at Officer Hannon before assuming the posture of a serious guard. “Everyone’s good to go. There wasn’t much to pack really. Pappy was dead set on taking the couch from the common room, but Kimba talked him out of it.”

Red rolled her eyes, disbelieving. Threw a look at Keelah. “I’ll go round everyone up. Make sure they’re only bringing the necessities. You guys are free to take a breather wherever you find a quiet spot.”

Dusty followed Red in the direction of the common room. The rest of the escort team dispersed. Some to find a secluded place to relieve their bladders. Others a soft spot where they could take a short nap. Keelah couldn’t help but notice that Susie and Donovan walked off together. Susie scrolling through her Pip-Boy, explaining its functions, while Donovan stared raptly.

Keelah turned her attention to Officer Hannon. The reticent guard had reclaimed his position by the
“How have these last couple of weeks treated you?” Keelah asked him.

Officer Hannon seemed surprised that Keelah had addressed him. His mouth stretched into a thin line as he considered his answer. “It hasn’t been the easiest assignment,” he admitted. “Super mutants have attacked at least three times. I wasn’t prepared for how…grotesque they are. But we managed to keep them at bay. No casualties.”

He paused. His head tilted expectantly as if he were waiting for a response. Keelah suddenly remembered that the officer was accustomed to giving reports to the overseer and getting feedback for his work. Criticism or praise.

“Oh…” Keelah stuttered. “Well…good job. Thanks again for helping out.” Officer Hannon nodded. His mouth still downturned but his face as soft as Keelah had ever seen it.

“I’ll keep guard if you want to take a break,” Keelah volunteered.

“No need,” Hannon responded. “You should rest along with your team.”

They both opted to stand by the front gate; staring out over the dunes. Their attention divided between the frenetic activity going on behind them and the yawning silence in front of them.

Within an hour the escort was ready to move out again. The walk to Little Lamplight would be treacherous. They’d added nearly a dozen people to their convoy. Most of whom had no combat experience. Such a large group would attract attention. They’d have to be careful of raiders and any other hostile faction that would consider them easy pickings.

Keelah split the team up into pairs. Every Big Towner who didn’t own a gun was assigned an armed escort. Brick was assigned to Flash; Susie got Kimba and so on. Keelah assigned them all randomly; making quick introductions as she counted them off. But Keelah made sure to keep two Big Towners for her own watch: Sticky and Timebomb.

Timebomb was peculiar. Had the uncanny ability of attracting danger. And Sticky? Well…his personality grated on even the most patient person. Keelah didn’t want a Ranger breaking character and decking the chatty teen. Or in Brick’s case, shooting him.

Keelah reminded the team to stick close and stay quiet; then led them out of Big Town for the last time.

They were all too tired to make conversation. Too tired and trepidatious. Dogmeat barked and chased a stray radroach. His tail wagging wildly as he bounded after his prey.

His bark would be the only sound the escort heard for miles.

They stopped near a gas station; took turns using the facilities; taking long drinks from the rusted water spouts; using dirt-stained hands to rub sleep from their eyes; grime.

The Big Towners seemed agitated; their movements jerky; their faces alternating from fatigued to panicked. Keelah figured it was the walking that was taking a toll on them. She extended their break an hour. Watched as the Big Towners played an impromptu game of catch.

The Big Towners tossed a wheel bearing back and forth; had to overexert themselves just to throw
the heavy thing; be extra careful when catching the heavy metal so that they didn’t injure themselves.

It was a completely ridiculous pastime. And needlessly dangerous. But Keelah let the youngsters continue uninterrupted. She found some shade beneath an overturned truck. Leaned back against the truck bed. Waited.

She was joined almost immediately by Bittercup. The doe-eyed woman slid into the space beside Keelah; placed her head on Keelah’s shoulder. She used a fingernail to scratch a line through the dust on Keelah’s forearm.

“Why’d you pair me up with that doctor guy?” Bittercup complained. “He’s boring.”

“Butcher’s job is to keep you safe. Not entertain you.”

“But a person can die from boredom, so he’s not doing a very good job.”

Keelah rolled her eyes. Peered across the parking lot and saw that Susie was watching them closely. Keelah sighed in irritation. Signaled the nosy blonde: *I’m not doing anything!*

Susie frowned. Pantomimed a movement that looked awfully like a pinch.

Keelah scowled. Let her head fall back against the truck bed. Pretended that the metal was soft.

“What do you believe in ghosts?” Bittercup asked her out of the blue.

“Ghosts?” Keelah’s brow furrowed. “Uh…I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

Bittercup’s right hand circled Keelah’s wrist. It wasn’t a romantic gesture. The Big Towner was simply taking note of how thin Keelah had gotten these past few months. Bittercup tsked under her breath. Dug into her pants pocket and brought forth a wrinkled apple. She placed the fruit in Keelah’s hand.

The wastelander used her knife to cut the overripe apple in two; passed the bigger piece back to Bittercup. They chewed in silence for a moment.

“This road we’re walking is haunted, you know,” Bittercup said. Her expressive eyes traveling down the broken highway. “This is the road Lamplighters take when they leave for Big Town.”

Keelah nodded. She knew that. She’d traveled this path many times before, transporting Sticky. Then Joseph. Then Knick Knack and Knock Knock.

“Most Lamplighters don’t make it,” Bittercup continued. “Raiders get them. Or muties. And the Lamplighters’ souls get trapped on this stretch of highway. They spend eternity walking back and forth. Looking for Big Town.” Her hand tightened around Keelah’s wrist. Her eyes squinted. As if she could actually make out the forms of ghostly children.

“Purgatory,” Keelah responded. The first word that came to her mind. “This highway is purgatory.”

But perhaps the entire wasteland was purgatory. A holding area where survivors of the atomic blast (the survivors were always considered the lucky ones, but were they really?) suffered in perpetuity. Suffered and waited.

Every single man, woman, and child in this godforsaken place was awaiting their own escort to “Big Town”.

Keelah choked on the final bite of apple. Had trouble getting the food down.
“Your pulse is racing,” Bittercup commented. Her fingers loosening their grip on Keelah’s wrist. Curling until they were holding hands.

“I’m just a little tired,” Keelah responded. Pressing her face into the cool metal of the truck; closing her eyes and starting a mental countdown. She would give herself until the count of sixty before rising. Just a little nap. Then she’d rouse herself and continue on with the expedition.

There were patterns behind her eyelids. Drooping flowers. Mangled gnomes.

“You never answered…Do you believe in ghosts?” Bittercup asked again.

Keelah was at thirty-five. She wanted to enjoy the finally twenty-five seconds so she answered quickly. “No.”

But some part of her resisted. Her mind warred. An internal dialogue ensued.

*What was Sergeant Montgomery then?*

A simulation. A replication of someone long dead. And his name was Benji.

*He was your friend.*

No.

*You even miss him sometimes.*

He wasn’t real.

*But it felt real didn’t it? The two of you fighting together? The comradery?*

Shut up.

*What about your mother? You saw her in the Sacred Bog. Lying there on the operating table…*

I said shut up!

*She called your name.*

It was a hallucination. I was drunk off psychedelic punga fruit and missing part of my brain.

*But you heard her.*

That was that riverboat captain, Tobar, fucking with me. That wasn’t my mom’s voice. Not my mom. Not my mom…

*Vault 112 then. All those people trapped on Tranquility Lane?*

Another simulation gone wrong.

*They were dead.*

They were in a vegetative state. But not ghosts.

*They weren’t alive. Just flickers of their former selves.*

Flick you!
Just admit it Keelah. When people die, they leave parts of themselves behind. And sometimes we encounter those remnants. They even seek us out.

Not true. By the way, you sound like a bad sci-fi zine.

You don’t believe in ghosts then?

I said no, didn’t I?

But you’re chasing a ghost.

Who?

Anne Palmer.

.......

You think you’re going to find her?

.......

You think you’re going to find Agatha?

Why won’t you shut the fuck up?!!

I don’t even think you’re looking for them. Not really. You’re still trying to find your father.

I’m ignoring you.

Or maybe you’re looking for your mother this time?

Fuck you!

Or Charon?

.......

“Keelah!”

Keelah jerked awake.

The sudden movement caused her head to slam against the truck siding and the wastelander swore loudly. “Shit!”

She rubbed the back of her head. Glared up at the person who had startled her into consciousness. It was Susie.

“You’ve been asleep for nearly an hour,” the vaulter explained. “You ready to move out?”

Keelah tottered to her feet. Gingerly touched the bruise that was already forming on the side of her head. “Yeah. Where’s Bittercup?”

“She’s over there with Red. She said you were tired and needed a few extra minutes to sleep.” Susie finally took notice of the dazed look on Keelah’s face. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just had a bad dream,” Keelah deflected. “How are you holding up?”
“I’m peachy. I just had the pleasure of hearing all about the exploits of Supa Dupa Dave and his near-sighted sidekick, Bucko Bob.”

Keelah gave a strangled laugh. Tried her best to hold on to the pleasant sensation. “Just wait until Sticky gets to the musical interlude,” she told Susie. “I never realized there were so many words that rhymed with brahmin.”

Susie wasn’t amused. “Please tell me you packed tape,” the vaulter entreated. “Just one strip around the kid’s mouth. Please. I’ll even leave a tiny hole so that he can breathe.”

That actually did make Keelah laugh. The wastelander rapped her fist against her forehead; tried to shake loose any lingering negative thoughts; then made her way over to the waiting convoy.

For the remainder of the walk to Little Lamplight, Sticky—ineffectual bard that he was—regaled the escort team with stories of Supa Dupa Dave, Bucko Bob, and the always popular Jokey Joe.

Susie counted. There were twenty-seven words that rhymed with brahmin.

They made it to Big Town just as the sun began to set and a blue-black blanket of darkness began to overtake the sky.

Red led the way into the lighted cavern. She’d been the former mayor of Little Lamplight after all. Thought there would be less chance of MacCready firing his rifle at the group of travelers if she was out front.

The escort halted near the faded STOP sign. The Big Towners chattering amongst themselves as they gazed about their old home.

MacCready stared down at them from his perch on the border wall. His trademark frown was in place, but the teenager’s face perceptibly softened when he saw Red and the other former Lamplighters.

Red grinned up at the small guard. “Hiya RJ.”

“Hey Red.” MacCready pulled the rope that secured the secondary door. “Come on in,” he instructed. Gesturing the convoy through the small gap in the wood.

It was uncharacteristic of him, to invite strangers like Reilly and her team into Little Lamplight. But the young mayor must have decided that such inhospitality was unwarranted seeing as the Lamplighters would be leaving the cavern soon.

The convoy filed into Little Lamplight. There were immediate cries of welcome and good cheer as the Lamplighters and Big Towners reunited.

Joseph swung his sister Penny around in a jubilant embrace. Lucy flung arms around Red; didn’t let go for long moments. Even Squirrel and MacCready were uncharacteristically jovial as they pounded fists with Flash and Shorty; accepted hugs from Kimba; engaged in some sort of intricate handshake with Dusty.

Knock Knock—who’d seemed to have lost all of her cheerfulness following her move to Big Town—launched into a series of wisecracks and jokes and somehow got Princess to chortle in a way that Keelah had never seen before.
And the youngest Lamplighters, Bumble and Zip and Biwwy, flitted between their reconciled friends; poking and prodding at their older counterparts; giggling madly as they played; overcome with joy that their long lost friends had returned.

“Where’s Chauncey?” MacCready asked Red. And the mayor peered behind Brick and Donovan to see if there were Big Towners hidden behind the rangers’ large frames. “And the twins, Orange and Kat?”

Keelah was puzzled. She’d never heard those names before. Hadn’t met those Lamplighters.

Red squeezed MacCready’s shoulder; her face crestfallen. “Chauncey and Orange and Kat never made it to Big Town, MacCready.”

The mayor’s face contorted. It looked like he was going to say something. Maybe even cry. But whatever his response would have been, the 15-year old blinked past it. Turned to Keelah. “You all are probably tired. We have space in the clinic and the store. You can set up there.”

Keelah nodded. “Thank you. We’ll spend a couple of days in the cavern, recuperating and preparing for the return trip. And Red wants to give all of the Lamplighters a once-over. Make sure you’re fit enough to travel.”

MacCready frowned. “We’re not babies. We can make the trip, no problem.”

Red put an arm around MacCready’s shoulder. Surreptitiously touched the boy’s forehead; gauging his temperature. “Keelah’s not trying to offend you RJ. But we’re going to need your help keeping the Lamplighters safe on the road, so we just want to make sure you’re in tip top shape, okay?”

MacCready’s mouth twisted but he nodded. Didn’t even complain as Red led him towards the medical clinic. Lucy followed. Shooting an appreciative glance at Keelah before disappearing behind the clinic door.

Keelah turned her attention to the assembled crowd. Rangers and Lamplighters and Big Towners. The pack of emaciated dogs that were frolicking with Dogmeat.

“So what happens next Key-Lock?” Squirrel asked. He’d been one of the most vocal opponents of moving into Vault 101 (he and Princess) and he stared distrustfully at the grownups who accompanied Keelah.

“Well…Red’s probably going to call the Lamplighters one at a time for a checkup. While you wait, you can catch up with your friends. Get packed. Whatever you want really. We’re not leaving for a while yet. We bought food. Maybe Éclair wouldn’t mind fixing something for us to eat.”

Keelah waited to see if Sammy would be offended by the slight, but the 13-year cook didn’t seem to mind. He was too busy trying to wrestle Shorty into a headlock.

The Lamplighters and Big Towners broke off into groups. Went off to wander the sprawling caverns for the last time.

Keelah led Éclair to the brahmin. Removed the foodstuffs he could use to prepare a meal. Butcher helped the teenager pack the crate of food to the kitchen.

Susie, Hannon, and the other rangers walked a circle around the craggy entryway; stared in awe at the moss-covered walls; the green pools of water that reflected light.

“I can’t believe kids live here,” Reilly commented sadly. And she smiled in a sweetbitter way as
Bumble raced by, shrieking and happy. Face flushed with glee as Kimba chased her.

Officer Hannon wasn’t as sentimental. “It’s going to be tough getting those kids back to the vault safely,” he stated. The security guard checked his weapon—an unconscious movement—as if he expected an attack to occur at any moment.

“I know,” Keelah answered. “But we have a lot of guns and experience between us…” Her eyes traveled over every adult in her presence; her gaze steady and sure. “I don’t want any casualties,” she declared. The barest amount of caution in her tone.

She didn’t mean to be so macabre. So pessimistic. But just look at what had happened to Agatha. What had happened to this unknown Chauncey and Orange and Kat. And god knows how many other Lamplighters caught between Lamplight caverns and Big Town.

There were too many variables in the wasteland. Too many villains. The escort team had to be prepared for the worst.

“Come on,” Keelah said. “I’ll show you where you can unpack your gear.”

She lead the team towards Knick Knack’s boarded up shop. Pointing out landmarks along the way. Reciting background information on Little Lamplight; its occupants.

There was no one to guard the front gate this time. But it didn’t matter. In a few days’ time, Little Lamplight would lose its final residents. The cave that had produced (and expelled) more than six generations of Lamplighters would be no more.

It comforted Keelah to know that no more Lamplighters would have to brave the wasteland on their own—seeking the fabled Big Town; finding slavers instead; death.

Keelah wasn’t sure if she believed in ghosts, but she had to admit that Bittercup was right. The highway they’d been traveling on—the one that would take them back to Vault 101—did feel haunted.

But perhaps that was only her nerves, rattling her.

Or maybe it was an omen.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to the movie, But I’m a Cheerleader. And if you’ve never heard the song ‘Glass Case, Cello Vase’ by Tattletale before, you should remedy that immediately. ALL the feels.

References to FO3 DLC “Point Lookout” and “Operation Anchorage.”
Chapter Summary

The LW and company escort the Big Towners and Lamplighters to Vault 101.
Everything does not go according to plan.

Chapter 22 – Glass Case, Cello Vase (part 2)

Keelah wasn’t sure how Éclair did it—without heat; without the proper cooking utensils—but the
teenaged chef managed to whip up a delicious meal for the Lamplighters and their guests. Salisbury
steaks and seared potatoes (only slightly underdone). And a sweet berry mash he concocted from
mutfruit and Sugar Bomb flakes.

The Lamplighters, Bigtowners, and escort team sat in mixed company in Spelunkers café. Devoured
the food greedily; made small talk as they familiarized themselves with their table mates.

Keelah had anticipated that the Lamplighters would be wary of the adults; shun them or avoid them
altogether. But the Lamplighters were curious about the grown-ups who had come to transport them
to the vault. All of the Lamplighters, save MacCready, Squirrel and Princess, peppered Reilly and
company with questions. Asked to hear stories about the rangers’ exploits. Gazed at and touched the
shiny green armor.

The nine-year old, Bumble, made herself comfortable in Butcher’s lap. Poked at the doctor’s spiky
haircut and giggled madly when Reilly tickled her.

Perhaps it was the satisfying meal. Or the fact that they’d been reunited with the Big Towners.
Whatever the reason, the Lamplighters were visibly relaxed. Happier than Keelah had ever seen
them.

It made Keelah smile. A soft smile. Barely there. The wastelander poked at her sliced potatoes.
Spectated quietly as she tried to summon an appetite.

Red plopped into the chair next to Keelah with an audible groan. Cracked her knuckles once. Two
times. Before digging into her own meal.

The doctor divided her time between watching her friends and cutting her steak into neat, thin strips.

“What’s the prognosis Doc?” Keelah asked her. “Are the Lamplighters well enough to travel?”

“Well…a few of them are a bit sick. Bumble and Biwwy have bad coughs. And Squirrel’s too pale
for my liking. Dang near skin and bones. I gave Bumble and Biwwy medicine that should help ease
their congestion. And Squirrel’s tough. He’ll be able to make the trip. I’m confident he’ll get his
weight and color back once he’s in the vault, eating and sleeping regularly. Zip’s still aggravated by
the chicken pox, but I treated him with that spray you told me about. He’ll be fine. RJ’s the one who
worries me. I think he has a chest infection. Maybe pneumonia. I gave him anti-biotics that should
help, but what the kid really needs is to get out of this dump. He’s always been a sickly one. Even
when he was a baby. Couldn’t walk two or three steps without gasping for breath.”

Red chuckled. Ducked her head bashfully. “It’s not just RJ. I spent a lot of time as mayor and doctor of Little Lamplight. So many years worried about their cuts and bruises. Their coughs. Their sleeplessness. Even after I’d left this place, I couldn’t stop worrying.”

The doctor’s face contorted; a sad expression. But she quickly perked herself back up. “RJ’s going to be fine,” she insisted. “They’re all going to be fine. Once they move into 101, the Lamplighters will be able to eat regularly. And sleep without worrying that some monster is going to break down the door or climb out of their dreams. They’ll have books and heat and water that doesn’t make them feel sick after drinking it.” Red bit into a piece of steak. Chewed delicately; a thoughtful look on her face. “Everything’s going to be fine,” she repeated. A repetition meant to motivate her; reassure.

“Fine and dandy,” Keelah agreed.

But even though she reiterated the sentiment, Keelah wasn’t so sure. Her eyes traveled over the Lamplighters seated at the half dozen tables in the restaurant. Most of the youngsters were thin and wan; too small for their ages. The Lamplighters wouldn’t be able to defend themselves if the escort ran into trouble on the road. Hell, they’d probably have difficulty even running away from a Deathclaw or feral ghoul; some desperate raider.

Keelah stabbed a fork into her potato. Produced a line of tiny holes that looked like a broken smile.

“Don’t play with your food Keelah,” Red reprimanded. Her natural inclination to mother on full display. “Eat up. You’re going to need your strength.”

Keelah frowned but finished her meal. Filled her stomach until she thought she would be sick.

At a table next to her, Reilly started a game of patty cake with Bumble. Bounced the grinning child on her good leg; exchanged sweet smiles with Butcher.

Brick and Princess scowled across the table at each other; sizing the other up; before Princess finally gave in. Asked Brick to show her her machine gun.

Donovan held his own at a table filled with raucous teenagers. Told corny jokes. Smiled indulgently at the teenagers’ coarseness and antics. The soft-spoken ranger didn’t even bat an eye when Flash flicked some food at him; used a bent spoon as a catapult. Stained Donovan’s shiny suit.

Susie defended Donovan. Frisbeed a potato chunk at Flash’s face; laughed when the food stuck to Flash’s cheek; called the Big Towner “potato head.”

The entire table dissolved into laughter. Even Flash grinned. Took the potato chunk and ate it. Winked at Susie: “Good one blondie.”

Overall, it was a pleasant evening. Stories and laughter. Good food and mirth.

But a few of the diners were reticent; introspective.

Keelah and Squirrel. Bittercup and MacCready.

These four were not lulled by the cheery festivities. They seemed to waiting for something. Waiting with bated breath.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
The team spent the next day clearing the caverns, packing up the Lamplighters’ meager possessions. They were able to fit most of the Lamplighters’ things into a single crate. Keelah affixed the wooden box to the Brahmin’s back. Took note that most of the items the Lamplighters wanted were broken toys, soiled books.

MacCready insisted that they take the fairy lights.

“Something to remember the place by,” the mayor said. Shrugging his shoulders as he said it. As if leaving the caves was no big deal.

But Keelah knew better. Little Lamplight was a horrid place to live, but it had been home for the Lamplighters. The place where they’d grown up. Made friends. Keelah knew something about that. That strange sensation of loving and hating a place in equal measure.

She carefully wrapped the fairy lights in a blanket; tucked the bundle into her travel bag.

MacCready raised an eyebrow when Keelah balanced the faded STOP sign on the Brahmin’s back.

“Eh…the vault will find some use for it,” she equivocated. Unwilling to admit that she’d grown attached to the traffic sign.

MacCready chuckled. The first time Keelah had ever seen him laugh. The fifteen-year elbowed Keelah out the way. Used rope to secure the traffic sign in place.

By nightfall they had everything ready to go. They’d spend one more evening in the caverns then head out at first light. Hopefully the early hour would help them avoid any hostile parties.

The group sat in a loose circle around a fire Donovan had built. Lazy and full; content to wait the night out beneath dripping rock.

The Lamplighters seemed anxious about the move but not distraught. Keelah poked a twig into the fire. Addressed the quiet youngsters: “Is there anything you Lighters want to do for your last night in the caves?”

“You wouldn’t happen to have any marshmallows, would you?” Éclair asked. His gray eyes dancing as he grinned mischievously at Keelah.

“I’ve never even seen a marshmallow kid,” Keelah responded. “How ‘bout a stick of gum?” She had plenty of bubblegum to spare seeing as Charon never claimed his. The wastelander tossed the chewy candy to Éclair; nodded at him to take one and pass the pack around.

“How ‘bout we tell ghost stories?” Sammy asked. His mouth comically wide as he chewed awkwardly on the gum. “Make it like a real campout.”

“No one wants to hear a ghost story Sammy,” Squirrel groused. “Hell, we’ve had enough ghosts and monsters to last us a lifetime. I wanna hear something funny.”

“I have a funny story,” Sticky volunteered. “About Supa Dupa Dave and his magic box of cereal.”

Princess groaned. “I swear if I ever meet Supa Dupa Dave, I’m going to push him off a cliff.”

“Supa Dupa Dave can fly, so good luck with that,” Sticky retorted. “Anyway…returning to my story…Supa Dupa Dave found a box of magic cereal. The cereal was glowy and green and had sparkles and everything. Supa Dupa Dave was hungry so he ate the magic cereal. But it turned out the cereal wasn’t magic. It was irradiated. And Supa Dupa Dave died.”
No one said anything for a moment.

“That’s the best Supa Dupa Dave story you’ve ever told,” Squirrel finally said.

“Really?” Sticky asked. Elated by the unexpected praise.

“Absolutely. I particularly liked the ending.”

Keelah snorted into her hand. Red bit her bottom lip, stifling a laugh.

Sticky grinned, oblivious; and forced a high-five on Squirrel.

“Okay, who’s next with a story?” Éclair asked. “Although it’s going to be hard to top that last one.”

“Shorty, how ‘bout you tell them about the time you almost got eaten by a super mutant?” Flash asked.

“No monster stories,” Squirrel complained.

“This ain’t no monster story. It’s a food story,” Flash argued. “Shorty here almost ended up as a crouton in a mutie salad. Ain’t that right Shorty?”

The diminutive Big Towner shrugged. “I’m not sure if they were going to really eat me. They just had me bound and gagged in a kitchen.” He gulped. “There was a pot boiling on the stove though.”

“I saw a super mutant once,” Penny chimed in. “When me and Squirrel were out scavenging. It started yelling at us and chased us a long ways. We had to hide in a drainage pipe. Remember that Squirrel?”

Squirrel shifted uncomfortably. Broke a piece of rotted wood between his fingers. “Why must we insist on talking about monsters? Ain’t it bad enough that we’re about to march headfirst into a pack of ‘em?”

“No, we’re not.” Lucy contradicted softly.

Squirrel frowned. “Come on…we all know there are monsters out there. A whole hell of a lot of them. And, yeah, Penny and I have seen them. Sammy has too. Ugly-looking things that ain’t in those books Joseph used to read us. There are some baddies out in the wasteland that we ain’t even begun to dream about. It’s stupid what we’re doing. Moving out of here. Maybe there are monsters in that vault in the back. Things that make noise and keep us up at night. But at least we had a door separating us from those monsters. There ain’t nothing going to separate us from monsters that are outside this cave.”

“Vault 101 has a door,” Keelah interjected. Her voice calm and soothing. “It has two doors actually. And security guards.”

“Yeah, but we still got to make it to the vault, don’t we?” Squirrel countered.

“Squirrel…” MacCready cautioned; his tone dropping to a dangerous decibel.

“Yeah, come on Squirrel. You’re killing the mood, man,” Éclair joked. Elbowing his friend playfully; trying to lighten his disposition.

But Squirrel wouldn’t be deterred. The lanky teenager took the broken pieces of wood; threw them angrily into the fire until the flames cackled and spat. “You just haven’t seen it yet,” he murmured. His eyes trained on the orange and purple flames. “When those slavers nabbed me an’ Penny and...
Sammy those years back, they took us to their hideout. Put us in a cage. Slapped bomb collars on us. Told us the collars would explode us if we tried to run.” His eyes flicked to Sammy. “How many people did we see get blown up Sammy?”

The 13-year old shrank under the question. Averted his eyes and gulped. “Four,” he squeaked.

“Four people,” Squirrel repeated. “Blown to bits right in front of us. Slavers didn’t even bother cleaning up the mess. Said it was a good reminder for the rest of us.”

Something dimmed in the boy’s eyes. Some light or emotion extinguished. Probably never to return.

Penny put a hand on Squirrel’s knee. “Don’t say anymore Squirrel. We said we were going to forget about that.”

“I can’t forget,” Squirrel snapped. The crackle of fire louder than his voice. “There are all kinds of monsters out there,” he continued. Nodding to the area outside of the cave’s walls. “All kinds. Ain’t nothing going to save us from them.”

“I’m going to keep you safe Squirrel,” Keelah told him. “I promise.”

The teenager stared back at her. His eyes dull and world-weary. Too old for his face. Too old. Squirrel looked like he was going to disagree with Keelah’s words. But then the teenager drew his knees to his chest; placed his head there; frowned; before returning his attention to the fire.

“I just wanted to hear a funny story,” he said.

So Knock Knock told a joke. Then another one.

Everyone laughed. Because, unlike Sticky, Knock Knock was a damn good storyteller. But it was a false cheer. Forced. The entire lot of them laughed out of performance.

Squirrel’s disheartening words stayed with the group for the rest of the night.

There are all kinds of monsters out there. Ain’t nothing going to save us from them.

There was a sustained quiet. Interrupted only by the occasional howl of one of the dogs; a gust of wind rattling the exterior door.

When the silence got to be too much, Penny pressed a book into Keelah’s hands.

“You promised Yearling you’d read this to me, remember?” Penny asked. It was the novel the Brotherhood Scribe had gifted Penny weeks ago. A Bridge to Terabithia.

Keelah stared down at the thin book. The novel was so yellowed by time that its cover art was no longer discernible. “You want me to read this now?” Keelah asked.

“I think it’ll make everyone feel better,” Penny responded. Smiling brightly at the wastelander. Her eyes as wide and hopeful as ever. Keelah marveled at the sight. How had Penny retained her youthfulness when Squirrel’s had dulled so remarkably?

Keelah cleared her throat. Turned to page one and began to read. She was surprised by how attentive everyone became—child and adult alike. How they repositioned their bodies; became wrapped up in a story about dreams and magic. A story where trees had voices and children had wings.

There was one passage in particular that Keelah felt the need to read twice:
It was Leslie who had taken him from the cow pasture into Terabithia and turned him into a king. He had thought that was it. Wasn't king the best you could be? Now it occurred to him that perhaps Terabithia was like a castle where you came to be knighted. After you stayed for a while and grew strong you had to move on. For hadn't Leslie, even in Terabithia, tried to push back the walls of his mind and make him see beyond to the shining world—huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile? (Handle with care—everything—even the predators.)

Now it was time for him to move out. She wasn't there, so he must go for both of them. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength.

As for the terrors ahead—for he did not fool himself that they were all behind him—well, you just have to stand up to your fear and not let it squeeze you white. Right, Leslie?

Right.

Keelah heard a sniffle. Wasn't sure if it was her own emotion or someone else’s. Didn’t know if the sound was one failed attempt to arrest tears or several. So she kept reading.

And for just a little while—the length of a one hundred page novel—the dreaded monsters were kept at bay. The meddlesome fear; the trepidation; the ever-present mortality that squeezed like a too-tight collar. All those uncertainties were silent. Subdued.

You just have to stand up to your fear and not let it squeeze you…. Right?

Right.

They headed out when the sky was at its most pale; the sun still hidden behind bulbous clouds; not even a murmur of sound or movement in their immediate area.

Donovan and Hannon took lead this time. Brick covered the rear with the heavy gun.

Keelah and Butcher, Reilly and Susie flanked the Big Towners and Lamplighters—created a moving shield—while Red and Dusty played wrangler. Kept the youngsters moving forward; corralled the dogs.

Keelah had programmed the handybots to high alert. The robots would shoot anything that posed a threat.

Their was a slow-moving progression. The kids sweated. The dogs whined.

Keelah predicted that it would take five days to make it to the vault. Five long days of keeping their charges safe.

They ran into their first hiccup on the second day. Somehow or another, Timebomb got separated from the group. Got distracted or confused and wandered off. It took a full thirty minutes before someone even noticed the eccentric Big Towner was missing.

Keelah bit back a string of curses as she paced between members of the escort team. She’d told herself to keep an eye on Timebomb! She knew that something like this could happen!
But there were so many moving bodies in their caravan. So many shadows creeping along the outskirts that she had to pay attention to.

“When’d you last seem him?” she asked Éclair.

“He was walking right behind me,” the teenager responded. His top-hat lying limply against his scalp; softened by his perspiration. “I turned to tell him to keep up and he wasn’t there.”

Keelah turned to their rear guard. “Brick?”

The ranger was last in line. Surely she’d seen Timebomb wander off.

Brick removed the sunglasses shielding her eyes. Wiped a sleeve across her reddened face. “I don’t know Keelah. We could have lost him when we cut through the Warrington tunnels. It was so damn dark. And those radroaches scuttled the team for a minute.”

It had been an off-the-cuff tactical decision by Keelah. To cut through the ruined tunnels and shave half a day off their trip. She’d expected the radroaches, and the team had killed the bugs quite easily. But somewhere in the midst of the gunfire and chaos, they’d lost Timebomb.

“I’ll go back for him,” she decided quickly. “It shouldn’t take long to double back.” She turned to Reilly. “Keep moving to our next rest stop. You’re sitting ducks if you wait here too long. I’ll catch up as soon as I can.”

Reilly nodded.

“I’ll go with you Keelah,” Donovan volunteered.

“No. You’re needed up front.” Keelah turned to one of the Big Towners. “Dusty? You up for some recon?”

Dusty’s eyes widened and he threw a panicked look at Red. The Big Town doctor immediately stepped forward. “I’ll go instead,” she offered.

Keelah shook her head. “Red, me and you both can’t leave. The Lighters and Big Towners wouldn’t move another five steps. Dusty can handle it. Right?” she asked the former guard.

Dusty nodded weakly.

Keelah turned back to Reilly. “Pair everyone off. And stop every thirty minutes to do a head count. We’re not losing any more people.”

Keelah clapped Dusty on the back. “Let’s go,” she commanded. Before breaking into a run. Headed down the path that would lead back to the Warrington tunnels. Dusty sprinted after her.

Keelah gave Dusty a sidelong glance as she ran; studied him quietly as he tried his best to keep pace with her. She’d recruited Dusty to join her because he was the fighter whose absence would least impact the caravan. But she’d also selected him because she knew the young man was brave.

He’d guarded Big Town for years without any sort of backup. Had rooted himself to a chair day and night and staved off waves and waves of super mutants and raiders. Dusty had done his due diligence even though he was overworked, skittish, always exhausted.

Keelah pulled the assault rifle from her back. Squeezed it. Couldn’t help but notice that Dusty did the same.
Behind them, Reilly assigned everyone a partner; then got the caravan moving again. The squad leader clasped Bumble’s hand; encouraged the little girl to keep walking. And the large group continued across the desert.


Four hours passed and Keelah and Dusty still hadn’t found Timebomb.

The Warrington tunnels were vast and poorly lit. There were hallways that stretched on and broken train cars that impeded progress. Keelah began to despair as even more time elapsed. Night was coming. And all manner of man and beast descended on the metro tunnels at night.

They had to find Timebomb before someone else did.

Keelah flashed her Pip-Boy light over a crumbling ticket booth. Checked inside to see if Timebomb was hiding there. He wasn’t.

She'd just made the decision to look for Timebomb elsewhere (maybe back at Smith Casey’s garage where they’d taken their first break?) when Dusty dropped to the ground. Slid to his belly and crawled to and fro on the grimy metal floor; inspecting every nook and cranny he could find.

“Here!” Dusty exclaimed.

The Big Towner grunted; struggling with something large. Then he tugged a dirt-darkened Timebomb out of a disintegrated ventilation shaft.

Keelah raced over. Used her hands to wipe dirt from Timebomb’s face; gripped the young man’s shoulders and waist. Checked for injuries.

“What happened, Timebomb?” she asked breathlessly.

Timebomb stared back at her in that tranquil way of his. “It got too loud,” he said. “So loud that I couldn’t hear.”

Keelah was confused by the peculiar phrasing. Turned wide eyes on Dusty. “How’d you know he’d be there?”

“I didn’t. But Timebomb tends to run off when things get too noisy. Says it hurts his head. There’s a compartment in the common room he used to always hide in. I just hoped....”

Timebomb still looked dazed. His grubby fingers twitching against his pants leg.

“You going to be able to walk Timebomb?” Keelah asked him.

“Walk?” he repeated. Not quite present. His eyes so still but his hands moving erratically.

Dusty patted the young man on his shoulder. “Hey, Timebomb, tell me something. What’s seven times seven?”

“Forty-nine,” Timebomb answered automatically.

“And seven times eight?”

“Fifty-six.”

“Seven times nine?”
“Sixty-three.”

Keelah watched amazed as Timebomb’s eyes cleared. And a tiny smile appeared on the Big Towner’s face as responded to Dusty’s questions.

Dusty continued to quiz Timebomb. Talking softly and steadily as he walked backwards; led Timebomb down the broken tracks and towards the exit.

The trio stepped out of the Warrington tunnels into moonlight. Keelah scanned the horizon; looking for potential threats.

“This way,” she said. Leading Dusty and Timebomb away from the moon-lit path and into the shadows.

They had a lot of ground to cover to catch up to the caravan.

As they walked, Dusty went through the entire multiplication table with Timebomb. Quizzed the young man again and again. A repetition of questions and numbers that was so fluid that Keelah suspected Dusty did this often—pulling Timebomb’s body out of a darkened place. Pulling his mind out as well.

The convoy was a little more than a day away from Vault 101. They’d been walking for six and a half days and were all exhausted, filthy, and more than a little irritable.

Squirrel and Princess had worn holes into their shoes. Officer Hannon had twisted an ankle. And Kimba had suffered a heat stroke; had bruised her face when she passed out, fell against stone.

The fatigued group made camp at the Reclining Groves Resort, a small area consisting of rundown homes and rusted cars.

Once upon a time the small community had been a suburban dream. Wood-frame houses and picket fences. Now it was a gruesome snapshot of what had happened to a town unprepared for war.

There was a sinkhole where the town’s school had been. Dead grass that would never again bloom.

And as the convoy made their way deeper into the ruined town, they stared at the school billboard that was still intact even after all this time.

A final message etched in big block letters:

**DON’T FORGET. TOMORROW’S THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL.**

Tomorrow would be the last day of *everything* for Reclining Groves.

They passed the ramshackle houses; rusted cars with doors still open (did they think they could outrun the bomb?).

Keelah led the group to a two-story house at the end of the street.

They would sleep here tonight. Their last night on the road. Then make the final push to Vault 101 in the morning.

. . . . . .
The kids played.

It was something to marvel at. Really. How they scampered over the rusted playground equipment. Somehow got the see-saw to move up and down. Took turns sliding down a dented slide.

Keelah and Reilly had chosen Reclining Groves as their final rest stop for this very reason. Because they knew there was a playground. Because they figured the Lamplighters would enjoy a bit of merriment after such an arduous trek. The playground equipment was old and barely functional. But it was enough.

Even the Big Towners horsed around. Flash and Shorty challenged each other to a chin-up contest. Repurposed the monkey bars and pulled their thin bodies up and down. Counted out loud; argued over form.

Knock Knock and Penny played tag. Sammy joined in. And Princess pushed herself as high as she could on the rickety swing.

The quiet ones (the one who had played grown up for so long that they’d forgotten how to play—Joseph and Lucy, MacCready and Squirrel—sat on a bench and watched their friends. But Keelah could tell by their faces (the dancing eyes, the muted smiles) that they enjoyed the spectacle. Seeing their friends so carefree.

Flash tried to recruit Keelah to play with them.

“Come on. We’re organizing a game of kickball,” he told her. “You can be one of the team captains.”

“I call other team captain!” Shorty yelled.

“Hell no!” Flash retorted. “I’m the other team captain. Now go look around and find us something we can use for a ball, Short Stuff.”

Shorty gave the older boy the finger. But quickly turned and began rooting around the row houses, looking for something that could pass for a kickball.

Keelah popped her back. Rubbed at a spot just above her hip that had been aggravating her. “I’m kind of bushed right now Flash. How ‘bout I cheer you on? Rah rah and all that stuff?”

Flash pursed his lips. Winked playfully. “Just say you’re too old to run around with us, Keelah. No need to make excuses.”

“Flash, I’m only two years older than you.”

“Yet here you are…rubbing your back and struggling to stay awake. Try not to drool when you fall into one of your old people dozes, alright?”

Keelah narrowed her eyes. Challenge accepted.

“Fine. I’ll play. Me and the escort team versus the Big Towners and Lamplighters.” Keelah turned to the adults seated on the ground beside her. “What do you say?” she asked them.

Brick grinned. “Loser cleans up after dinner.”

“You’re on,” Flash said. “I’ll gonna go set the bases.”

And the Big Towner ran off shouting for his friends; directing the youngsters to move mailboxes and
trash cans; cordon off an area that would serve as the field.

Keelah and the escort team rose slowly to their feet. Dusted dirt off their clothes; stretched.

“You gonna play too Hannon?” Keelah directed at the security officer.

Hannon had never been one for frivolity, and the ankle he’d twisted was still bothering him. But the guard surprised Keelah. Nodded that he would play.

“I was a pretty good little leaguer back in the day,” he told her. “Shouldn’t be too much different with a kick ball.”

“Good.” Keelah responded. She turned to Reilly. Raised an eyebrow at the ranger who hadn’t moved from her position on the ground. “Let’s go Reilly. We gotta teach these young’uns a lesson.”

“I dunno Keelah…” She pressed fingers into her right leg. Soothing her muscles. She’d done an admiral job—walking for so long on a busted leg—but the sustained activity was beginning to wear on her.

“Don’t worry about it,” Keelah reassured. “You can kick and someone else will run for you.”

“Like pinch hitting,” Officer Hannon supplied. Extending a hand and helping the squad leader to her feet.

Keelah took a few minutes to activate the handybots. Set them on patrol. Then she made her way to the playing area.

Flash and Susie had already started in on the trash talk, and Keelah could only laugh at how good Susie was with her comebacks. The blonde vaulter was downright savage!

Keelah was certain that everyone was going to start referring to Flash as “Potato Head” from now on.

But it was all in good fun. By the time Shorty returned with the deflated basketball he’d found in one of the houses, the group had forgotten about playing kickball and was simply standing around enjoying the spirited game of dozens Susie and Flash were engaged in.

“We gonna play or not?” Squirrel finally interrupted. Grabbing the basketball from Shorty and giving it a good practice kick.

The ball was too deflated to sail very far, but it would suffice. After a quick discussion of rules, the kickball game was underway.

They all sucked.

Even Officer Hannon. They were sore and tired and nearly half of them were wearing battle armor that limited their range of motion. It made for a very interesting kickball game.

Sammy kicked the ball directly into Donovan’s face, nearly breaking the ranger’s nose.

Biwwy ran the wrong direction. *Every* single time.

Zipp just *ran*. Even when it wasn’t his turn.

Flash and Shorty tackled base runners even though kickball wasn’t a contact sport.
Brick threw the ball too aggressively; sent Sticky flying.

Susie ran face-first into second base (a dumpster) and couldn’t move for a full five minutes.

And Butcher tripped when he tried to kick the ball; ended up rolling in an awkward somersault that was so damn funny that even Reilly laughed.

Bittercup was probably the worst of them all. The self-ascribed fashionista used the very tip of her shoe to tap the ball—sending it an entire two inches—then walked slow as molasses towards first base. Needless to say, she was tagged out immediately.

The entire game was disorganized and ridiculous and just a tad bit dangerous.

It was also a whole hell of a lot of fun.

No one bothered to keep score. After a while, they even forgot which teams they were on. High-fiving the person closest to them. Throwing the ball at whomever they thought they could hit.

It was the first time Keelah could remember feeling carefree in the wasteland. All this laughter and fun. An hour or two where she didn’t have to worry about eyebots and robots; antagonists who had claws, antagonist who had guns.

The Big Towners and Rangers must have felt similarly. They played with just as much abandon as the kids.

When it was Keelah’s turn at the plate, she kicked the ball as hard as she could. Sent the orange orb soaring into the sky. A deflated sun.

She took off. A mad dash across the dirt. She had to reach home before it came down.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Be careful with that bomb or you could lose the one you love.

Keelah woke from her sleep with a start. Her head ringing with Bloomseer Poplar’s warning about the Megaton bomb.

The wastelander sat up in her bedroll. Rubbed the sore spot near her back while she stared at the supine bodies on all sides of her. Everyone was sleeping soundly. Some snoring. Others were mumbling in their sleep.

They’d been exhausted after their kickball game. And the weeks’ worth of walking had taken its toll. After a simple meal of noodles and jerky, the team had hunkered down in the two-story home. Spread their bedrolls out on the living room floor and, one by one, fallen asleep.

“Everything okay?” she heard from above her.

Keelah glanced over at the front door. At the shadowy form that was speaking to her. Butcher stepped out of the shadows; made it easier for Keelah to see him.

“I’m fine,” she told the ranger. “Just got a tightness in my back I need to walk off.”

“Want me to give it a look?” the doctor asked her.

Keelah eased to her feet. Made sure not to disturb the people sleeping next to her. “No, I’m fine,” she told Butcher. Bending down to touch her toes. “Might use a little Med-X.”
She put her arms above her head. Counted to ten; then crossed over to the boarded up window. Peered out through the slates at the world outside. It was just beginning to get light outside. Probably four or five in the morning.

“I’ll relieve you,” she told Butcher. “Go ahead and get some sleep.”

“You sure?”

Keelah nodded.

The ranger placed his weapon on the table. Found an open space in the corner of the room and curled up into a ball.

Brick was guarding the back door. Keelah would rouse Donovan in an hour and have him spell his squad mate.

But for now she stared out of the window. Watched as the sky began to streak with color. Blues and orange, purples and gray. There were still beautiful things to behold in this world. They just didn’t come along that often. Didn’t stay very long.

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. She squinted. Tried to see behind the house across the street. She could have sworn she saw something moving. A flash of black. Something lurking.

She stared without blinking for an interminable amount of time. Suspicious and alert. But the only thing that moved outside was the rusted swing on the playground. Stirred by invisible wind.

“What’s black and white and red all over?” Sticky asked. Nearly tripping over his feet in his enthusiasm to tell his joke.

“A dead Zebra,” Squirrel answered.

“No, a newspaper,” Sticky corrected cheerfully.

“Newspapers aren’t red all over, moron,” Squirrel rebutted. “The paper is white. The ink is black. Ain’t nothing red about that.”


“Well, they aren’t read all over either. No one reads newspapers anymore.”

“Keep walking you guys,” Keelah told the boys. Nudging Sticky in his back to keep their part of the train moving.

They were approximately ten miles away from the vault. And making good time. If they kept this pace, they could make it to 101 before nightfall.

“Why’d the chicken cross the road?” Sticky asked.

Someone behind Keelah groaned loudly and Keelah took a moment to do a quick headcount. Made sure everyone was accounted for.

“The chicken didn’t cross the road. Someone dropped a nuclear bomb on the world and killed all the chickens,” Squirrel said irritably.
“Hey…won’t someone besides Squirrel answer me?” Sticky whined. “He’s ruining all the fun.”

“I disagree. Squirrel’s actually pretty damn funny,” Susie whispered in Keelah’s ear. Winking at Keelah before moving back to flank the right.

“There’s a diner just ahead,” Keelah told the group. “We’ll stop there for a break. Won’t be too long before we’re at the vault.”

“The first thing I want to do when we get there is take a shower,” Kimba declared. “I haven’t felt hot water in the longest time.”

“We haven’t felt hot water ever,” Bittercup amended.

“And that’s a long time,” Kimba said.

“I want to sleep in a soft bed,” Eclair said. “Have blankets that don’t smell like mold.”

“And pillows!” Sammy said. “Pillows as big as your head.” He looked at Keelah. “They do have pillows, don’t they?”

“Yes. The vault has pillows enough for all of you. And soft beds. And hot water.” Keelah told them. “You’ll love it.”

“Why’d you leave your vault anyway?” MacCready asked her. “If it was so great and all?”

Keelah stumbled. Nearly pitched forward and fell. But she caught herself just in time. Cleared her throat as she tried to think of an answer that would allow her to tell the truth without revealing too much.

“Well…um…” she stalled.

None of them knew that she’d been chased out of the vault. Not even the Rangers.

No one here knew about her troubled past with Vault 101 except Susie and Officer Hannon.

“What’s that over there?” Officer Hannon said suddenly. “Something moving behind those buildings.”

“Where?”

Keelah raised a hand. Drew the caravan to a stop. Stood in the space beside Officer Hannon. Stared with him at the gutted line of stores just off the path they were walking.

“There.” The security guard pointed with his rifle.


It was similar to the figure Keelah had seen that morning outside of the house.

“I can’t see well enough,” she said. Her hands automatically reaching for her rifle. Readying it. Just in case. “Everybody keep moving. It may not be a threat. But just in case…Red and Dusty, get the Lamplighters and Towners between you. If something happens, I want you to take them and run for the diner.”

The Lamplighters and Towners looked nervous. Began to murmur; looked over their shoulders anxiously.
“Just keep moving,” Keelah encouraged. Motioning them forward. But she and the rangers instinctively moved to the edge of the pathway; putting their bodies in the way of the moving shadow.

Keelah stared fruitlessly at the figure that she couldn’t distinguish.

It could be a raider. Could be a protectron. Could be a whole lot of nothing. A mirage bought on by fatigue.

But she knew she was wrong the moment she heard the sound. An ear-splitting shriek of heavy blades cutting through sky.

A Vertibird.

Which meant that the skulking figure was—

“Enclave!” Keelah shouted. She pressed against the bodies in front of her, pushing the Lamplighters and Big Towners toward the diner. “Run!” she screamed.

She turned in the direction of the helicopter, began firing at the armored bodies dropping out of the sky. Two Enclave soldiers. Then four. More than she could count when they kept coming and were already shooting electric beams of green and orange.

The Lamplighters and Big Towners scattered; falling over each other in their haste to get away. Red and Dusty tried to keep the youngsters moving; get them to run in the same direction. But it was pandemonium. Éclair and Squirrel went down in a tangle of arms and legs. And Zip was so confused that he ran towards the firefight. Not away from it.

Keelah and the Rangers, Officer Hannon and Susie exchanged fire with the Enclave soldiers. More soldiers spilled out the Vertibirds. And even more stormed from the crumpled buildings.

Had the Enclave been tracking the escort since this morning? Waiting until the group was out in the open before launching an attack?

Keelah threw a plasma grenade into the cluster of soldiers leaving the buildings. Watched in satisfaction as four of the soldiers went flying. Another disappeared altogether. Lost his body in the chemical explosion.

Keelah cursed. Looked over her shoulder and saw that the Lighters and Towners hadn’t made it very far. There were too many of them. They were terrified and uncoordinated. Red was practically dragging a screeching Bumble. And Timebomb had covered his ears. Sank to the ground and wailed.

“Hannon!” Keelah screamed. “Go help Red. Get the Lighters and Towners to the diner.”

The security guard backed his way towards Red, still firing, and Keelah turned her attention back to the fracas in front of her.

Most of the Enclave’s forces had been destroyed at Raven Rock. And the Brotherhood of Steel had spent the past two years clearing out the rest. But, fuck, why was it so damn hard to exterminate these sons-of-bitches? These Tesla-armor wearing fuckers just kept coming back!

There were twelve Enclave soldiers left. Not terribly overwhelming numbers. But the Enclave’s superior armor, their plasma weapons, made them hard to kill. Donovan shot one of the soldier’s at point blank range and the guy didn’t even move.
The Enclave soldier pointed his pistol at Donovan’s head. Pulled the trigger.

But Brick’s mini gun got the Enclave soldier first. The bellicose ranger fired a hail of bullets—so fucking loud and nonstop—into the throng of soldiers. Brick managed to take down three of them. Reloaded her machine gun. Started firing again.

Reilly and Butcher added their firepower. Shooting and running. Shooting and dodging.

Susie took a knee. Shot slowly and methodically. Patient kill shots.

Keelah had fought the Enclave long enough to know the chinks in their armor. She circled behind the Enclave soldiers. Delivered bullets to the mesh area between their necks and shoulders.

Butcher took a round to the shoulder. Went down hard grunting under the impact.

Reilly tried to cover the fallen ranger—firing successive shots at the Enclave soldier who’d wounded him; hoping to give Butcher time to recover—but she had her own Enclave fighter to deal with. A Hellfire Trooper who was advancing on her with an incinerator; spraying fire as he walked.

Butcher braced his weight on his elbow; tried to grip his gun and failed. The plasma round had damaged his shooting arm. Deadened that whole side of his body. Butcher fumbled the gun into his left hand. Tried to raise the rifle. Just barely got the gun up past his waist when the Enclave soldier stepped over him. Shot Butcher again.

Reilly screamed. Made the rash decision to turn her back on the Hellfire Trooper and throw her body at Butcher’s shooter. She would have been incinerated in seconds had not MacCready appeared behind the Hellfire fighter. The former mayor of Little Lamplight put his rifle near the trooper’s neck and squeezed.

The trooper’s body jerked. He fell to the ground, dropping the incinerator. MacCready stepped over the body—his face tight with emotion—then stalked over to help Reilly with the soldier she’d pinned to the ground.

There was so much gun fire. Loud hisses and pops.

And screams of the wounded and dying. Just out of the blue—war.

The Enclave’s numbers began to thin. Another stealth attack from Keelah. A headshot from Susie.

Keelah began to breathe a bit easier when Donovan killed the last of them. The ranger emptied an entire magazine into the final soldier. Murmuring Brotherhood of Steel proverbs even as he shot unerringly.

Keelah let her weapon fall to her side. Tried to keep her emotions in check as she turned in the direction of Butcher.

Please Butcher, she thought. You’re a tough guy.

But before she could reach him, she heard the sound of another Vertibird. Or maybe the same one returned.

This time the war plane dropped the soldiers right in front of the scrambling Lamplighters and Big Towners.

“No!” Keelah shouted.
It pained her to do it, but she had to ignore Butcher for the time being. She screamed at Brick and Susie to follow her and raced towards the throng of Lamplighters and Big Towners. Began to shoot at the Enclave soldiers before they’d even descended the helicopter.

“Get down!” she yelled. As she put her body in front of the young ones. Screaming and firing in a frenzy. Like a person who’d taken a hit of Jet.

There were fewer Enclave soldiers this time and Keelah lobbed a frag grenade into the chopper, hoping to bring the whole damn thing down.

The bomb went off but only rattled the helicopter. Still, the explosion worked to their advantage. The Enclave soldiers fell the last few feet to the ground, were momentarily dazed. Red was able to use that window of time to usher the Big Towners and Lamplighters off the road; out of the immediate range of fire.

“Motherfuckers!” Brick yelled. As her machine gun spit lead; punched holes into metal armor.

The Enclave soldiers recovered. Began to shoot wildly at Keelah and company. An Enclave officer —sniveling coward that he was—edged away from the firefight. Directed his gunfire at easier prey. The retreating forms of the Lamplighters and Big Towners.

Keelah put a bullet in his eye. Shot him twice more for the hell of it. Made his body spasm against the ground.

It didn’t take long for them to finish the rest of the Enclave soldiers. The Vertibird flew away. To retreat or regroup.

Keelah gasped for breath. Tried to calm her heart.

“Butcher…” she remembered. And she and Brick exchanged a look. Ran back towards their fallen friend.

Butcher was sprawled across Reilly’s lap; his coppery blood staining the woman’s uniform. So thick and red. So much damn blood.

“He’s still breathing,” Reilly murmured. Her face blotchy and red. She was on verge of a nervous breakdown but had been a leader a long time. She'd experienced this type of tragedy before with Theo. Knew the importance of composure. “I gave him a Stimpack, but we’ll need to do more if we want him to live.”

Keelah pressed her hand beneath the doctor’s back. Fumbling. Searching. “The wounds are clean, which is good. But tending a plasma wound isn’t the same as treating a gunshot wound. We need to get Butcher to the vault and quick.”

She checked Butcher’s pulse. It was faint but there. She jabbed another Stimpack into his abdomen. Unfastened his chest plate so that she could take stock of his injuries. The area around his chest was burned, skin already peeling, from where the plasma rounds had entered his body. And there was a quarter-sized hole in his chest and shoulder that oozed blood. Already near infected.

Reilly made a choked sound at the sight. Gripped the hand that Brick placed on her shoulder.

“Donovan, find Butcher’s med bag,” Keelah instructed. “I want you to clean as much of this blood as you can. And see if he has any type of antiseptic cream we can use to treat these burns. I’m going to get Red.”
They had to hurry. The Enclave could return. Finish what they started.

Keelah jumped to her feet. “Come with me MacCready.”

The teenager had already seen enough. Had even killed someone. There was no need for him to stand around and watch someone die slowly.

But what Keelah took him to wasn’t much better.

Keelah’s hands clenched at her sides and the wastelander nearly collapsed when she saw the twisted body. The blood and burnt skin; the fluttering eyes.

“What happened?” she croaked. As she kneeled beside Red. Stared down at the Big Towner who was clearly moments away from death.

“One of the soldiers shot at the kids. He jumped in the way.”

There was blood coming from Dusty’s mouth. So much blood that the young man gurgled; nearly choking.

He was trying to speak.


Dusty’s eyes moved to Keelah. “Help me up,” he garbled. “I can still walk…but…help me up.”

He tried to move; his fingers scrabbling uselessly in the dirt. And Keelah put a hand against his shoulder. Pressed down gently. Shushed him.

There was a hole where Dusty’s chest should have been. A mishmash of blood and tissue that could never be corrected. Yet, the proud guard still tried to right himself. Tried to lift his head.

Flash squatted beside his friend. Placed a hand against his Dusty’s forehead. “Don’t move Dusty. Don’t move, okay? Just be still for a minute. Take a break.”

And Flash—the Big Towner who prided himself on being macho—held his friend’s bloody face as tenderly as he could. Didn’t even bother to disguise the sobs wracking his body.

“Can’t you do something Red?” Joseph asked. “Anything?”

And Keelah suddenly realized that all of the Lamplighters and Big Towners were seeing this. Were watching their friend die in this gruesome way.

“Get them out of here, MacCready,” Keelah husked.

And the teenager who wasn’t mayor anymore ordered the Lamplighters away. Even the Big Towners followed him. Trudged slowly. Cried softly.

But Flash remained. And Keelah and Red. The doctor murmuring soft words into the dying man’s ear. And Flash crying while trying not to cry.

Dusty’s eyes fluttered. He coughed, dribbling blood down his chin. And once again, he tried to get up. Tried to regain control over his traitorous body.

Keelah gripped Dusty’s other hand. “Hey Dusty?” she whispered. “What’s seven times seven?”
Anything to distract the dying man; to keep him still.

Dusty couldn’t speak. That part of his body already gone. So Flash answered for him. “Forty nine.”

“And what’s seven times eight?” she asked. Jabbing a Stimpack into Dusty’s leg. The medicine wouldn’t keep him alive, but it would lessen some of the pain.

Flash answered again. “Fifty six.”

“Seven times nine?”

Red joined in. “Sixty three.”

And by the time they got to seventy, Dusty was dead.
Chapter Summary

The Big Towners and Lamplighters are welcomed to their new home. And Amata meets Bittercup.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 23 – Acquainted With the Night

Brick and Donovan gently lifted Butcher onto the operating table. The injured man’s left arm flopped uselessly against the cold metal and a trickle of blood left his body, prematurely staining the table and floor.

Red got right to work; grabbing medical instruments; loosening Butcher’s clothing to reveal his wounds. She barked orders to Keelah and Donovan: Grab that. Hold this. Steady, now, steady!

Reilly stood beside the operating table, clasping Butcher’s hand; her green ranger uniform streaked with blood from where she’d clutched Butcher’s body as they’d transported him to the vault on an improvised stretcher.

Brick sank into one of the visitors chairs. Murmured “fuck” over and over again as she watched her squad mate’s skin whiten and his breathing shallow.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!” she repeated.

“You should go see about the Lamplighters and Big Towners, Keelah,” Red told the wastelander as she injected Butcher with a syringe of clear liquid; checked his pulse; readied a scalpel.

“No, I’ll stay and help you,” Keelah protested.

“I can manage it,” Red stated. “The kids are messed up after what happened with Dusty. Just go.”

Keelah stepped away from the operating table; swallowed deeply. She thought about the shallow grave they’d dug along the side of the road a few hours ago. The quick work they had to make of Dusty’s burial and eulogy since they knew that the Enclave could return at any moment.

Keelah shot a glance at Reilly. Asking permission.

Reilly nodded at her friend. Closed her eyes briefly when Keelah put a hand against her shoulder and squeezed.

Then the wastelander ducked out of the medical clinic.

Hannon had taken the Lamplighters and Big Towners to the vault cafeteria. Susie had gone to fetch
the overseer.

The vault was near empty at this time of night. Just the guards moseying about and the occasional maintenance worker pushing a mop or broom. Susie would probably have to summon Amata from her living quarters.

When Keelah strode into the cafeteria, she found all of the Lighters and Towners huddled together in the booths, talking softly amongst themselves. Some of them were still crying. Their faces tear-streaked and blotchy; and Keelah felt an overwhelming sense of shame and guilt as she studied them.

She’d let the youngsters down so severely—had gotten one of their friends killed right in front of their eyes.

Keelah trudged towards the booths, her slowness of pace deliberate, and tried to summon the words she would need to comfort her young friends. Did any such words even exist?

Someone cleared their throat to Keelah’s left and Keelah turned.

Pepper Gomez, the cook, was standing behind the counter, wiping it down; sorting silverware. She was clearly finishing up for the night and preparing to close the kitchen.

Pepper motioned Keelah over.

When Keelah drew close, Pepper folded her arms across her chest and nodded at the Big Towners and Lamplighters.

“Looks like they’ve had a rough night,” Pepper murmured.

“More like a rough week.” Keelah licked dry lips. Hesitated before saying, “One of their friends died today.”

“I see.” Pepper released a breath. Rubbed a hand tiredly across her face before tucking her dishrag into the fold of her apron. “I’ll put coffee on. And some hot chocolate for the little ones. I also have some biscuits I can reheat.”

“That won’t be necessary, Pepper.”

Pepper narrowed her eyes at Keelah. “People need a little something when they’re grieving. I don’t know why that is, but it’s true. Some twice-heated biscuits and coffee is nothing. I’ll fix something more proper tomorrow.”

And the cook ignored Keelah’s protestations. Swept back into her kitchen to measure coffee grounds, boil water.

Keelah sighed. Turned around and took those final steps to the Lighters and Towners. She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t a bit wary about conversing with her young friends. She liked the Lamplighters and Big Towners; didn’t want to see the blame in their eyes; those same accusatory looks she’d gotten from the 101ers all those years ago during the vault crisis.

She stopped near the booth. Let her eyes travel over the forlorn faces. Her eyes came to rest on Flash. He was the closest thing Big Town had to a leader, after Red. And he’d been close to Dusty.

Keelah opened her mouth. Closed it. She still hadn’t found those words. She had to make due. “I’m sorry,” she said. To Flash. To all of them.
Flash slammed a fist into his thigh. Growled. “I’m a little shit! I was so busy running from those armored freaks when I should have been fighting back. I should have been helping. Maybe Dusty wouldn’ta died.”

Keelah shook her head. “You’re not trained to fight Enclave soldiers Flash. It’s not on you.”

“It’s my fault,” Knick Knack said. “The soldiers started shooting at me and Knock, and Dusty pushed me out of the way.”

The twins looked stricken; liable to dissolve into tears again, but the other Big Towners shushed them. Offered brief touches meant to comfort.

“We shouldn’t have left him there,” Squirrel said softly. “It seems wrong somehow…leaving Dusty on that road by himself.”

They’d wrapped Dusty’s body in a bedroll. Cleaned the blood from his face. Covered the hole in his chest as best they could. Then wrapped him—gently, gently—in a woolen blanket. Lowered him into a grave that was only three feet deep because they were rushed for time.

Then they’d left him there. Walked away.

“We shouldn’t have left him,” Squirrel repeated.

The other Big Towners nodded. Their faces etched in pain. Timebomb began to bang his head against the table. Slowly. Steadily. As if he were trying to injure himself but only incrementally.

Pappy threw an arm around the distressed youngster. Held him tight. Whispered something in his ear.

“Dusty’s not alone out there,” Bittercup said suddenly. And she pulled a napkin from one of the dispensers on the table. Begin to shred the soft tissue into small pieces. “That road is haunted. He has plenty of company.”

Pappy scowled. “Don’t start with that weird bullshit Bittercup. We feel bad enough as it is.”

And even Kimba, Bittercup’s even-tempered best friend, frowned disapprovingly at Bittercup’s indelicate words; her tissue paper confetti.

“It should make you feel better, Pappy. Make all of us feel better,” Bittercup persisted. “Dusty may not be with this group of Lamplighters anymore. ‘Cause we’re all Lamplighters, you know? When it comes down to it. He got separated from our group, but he’s walking with the others now. Chauncey and Orange and Kat. Ben.”

If it was possible, the Lamplighters and Big Towners eyes watered even more.


“Jarhead,” said Kimba.

“Cheese,” Lucy whispered.

“Rudy”

“Big Omar.”

“Cass.”
“Old Face Andre.”

They kept going for a few moments. Reciting the names of Lamplighters who had never made it to Big Town. Teenagers who’d gotten lost somewhere along the way.

Bittercup studied the shredded pieces of napkins; her head tilted curiously, as if she were examining a marvel one would find in the museum. Or perhaps the eccentric woman was divining some important message like those seers of ancient times who would shake stones, read the runes.

“He’s not alone,” Bittercup concluded. “Won’t be alone ever again.”

And they all nodded, even Keelah, because, fuck it, Bittercup seemed so certain. And, yes, the woman was macabre and odd; and different from the others in a way that made her seem alien at times. But right now, in this moment, Bittercup was offering the group something that felt a whole lot like hope and reassurance. Something that eased the sting of losing Dusty just a little.

Keelah patted Timebomb on the back. Delivered the comforting taps in the same rhythm that the young man had recently banged his head.

MacCready turned solemn eyes on her. “Thanks for getting us here,” he said.

His words shocked Keelah. She’d been expecting blame. Barbed questions.

“Yeah, thanks,” Flash agreed. Sincere. And the other Towners and Lamplighters chimed in. Nodding in the affirmative, smiling weakly when they said “Key-Lock.”

Keelah might have burst into tears—she was high-strung and exhausted enough to do it—but Amata walked in at that moment, followed by Officer Gomez and Susie. And Keelah was distracted enough to forestall her emotional breakdown.

Officer Gomez was carrying a large box and Susie had a clipboard in her hand.

Amata strode into the cafeteria in the overseer’s finest—sharply creased uniform; sparkling shoes; an officer’s pin—but there were small details that only Keelah would notice. Things that suggested Amata had been roused from sleep. The soft curls escaping a hastily tied bun; the bleary eyes and fixed smile.

Amata was playing the part of sprightly leader because it was expected of her. But it was clear to Keelah that the vault leader was just as exhausted and stressed as the rest of them were.

The Overseer put a hand against Keelah’s waist (briefly) before turning and addressing the room of newcomers with a smile.

“I’m Amata Almodovar. Overseer of Vault 101. On behalf of our entire vault I’d like to welcome you to our humble domicile.” Amata smiled good-naturedly when Sticky wiggled his fingers in an extravagant wave. “I had an orientation planned and was going to give you a tour of the facility, but I understand that it’s been a challenging day for you all…” Her voice softened and she exchanged a meaningful glance with Susie. “So I think it’s best if we skip the preliminaries for the time being and get you all into your new quarters so that you can shower and sleep.”

There was a murmur of approval from the Towners and Lighters and Amata smiled, pleased by the response.

The Overseer turned to Keelah. “I’ve designated an entire wing for them. Those living quarters near the classroom? I thought they’d be more comfortable if they were housed in the same area.”
Keelah looked confused. “How’d you have enough space in those quarters? Don’t the Macks live there? And the Thompsons?”

Amata smiled. The practiced smile of a politician. “The Macks and the Thompsons and the Gutierrez family have cheerfully volunteered those quarters to accommodate our newcomers. Those families have since transitioned to the east wing.” Amata turned back to her new charges. “I know it’ll take some time to get used to this place and to the people, but I want you to know that the moment you crossed the vault threshold, you became a full-fledge resident of 101. We want you here and we hope that you’ll be happy here.” She paused. Chose her next words carefully. “We have a counselor available, Mr. Brootch, who can talk to any of you about…today…or anything really…if you want.”

Amata hesitated again. Clearly struggling with what to say at this point. The Lamplighters and Big Towners just looked so fatigued and morose. The Overseer wanted to say something that would uplift them. But the words eluded her as much as they’d eluded Keelah.

Keelah intervened. “Talking to Mr. Brootch is a good idea,” she said. “But let’s start with those showers first. More than a few of them have been talking about hot water for days.”

“Alright then,” Amata said. Giving the Lamp/Towners a friendly smile. “Follow me and I’ll show you to your rooms.”

There was a rustle of noise as the Lamp/Towners rose from the booths; gathered what little items they had and stretched their aching limbs.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Pepper Gomez exclaimed as she bustled from the kitchen carrying a large tray of biscuits and steaming mugs. “Everybody gets a cuppa before you leave. And a biscuit. Made ‘em myself. Rum raisin with a touch of nutmeg.”

Amata frowned. “Pep, I don’t think you should be giving the kids rum raisin biscuits.”

“Oh, it’s mostly raisin,” Pepper deflected. And she went from person to person passing out hot chocolate and biscuits. Introducing herself to the Lamp/Towners and asking for names.

“Don’t forget we have welcome bags,” Officer Gomez chimed in. And the friendly guard joined his wife in distributing items to the Lamp/Towners. He extended a medium-sized felt bag to each Lamp/Towner. “Stanley and Officer Taylor put these bags together. You got your basics in there. Towels. Soap. A comb. Not sure if y’all like licorice, but I think they dropped a few of those in there as well. You got socks and toothbrushes, toothpaste. We’ll have to get your sizes before we can pass out undergarments and pajamas, of course. What else have we got?” He peered into one of the bags. “Deodorant and shampoo. And Beatrice pestered Stanley until he let her write each of you a poem, so you’ll find that in there. A little book of crossword puzzles. That was my idea, and uh—”

Pepper cut her husband off mid-sentence. “You’re taking the fun out of it Herman, if you tell them everything. Just let them be surprised.”

The officer blushed. “Well, yes, I suppose it would be more fun that way.” He pressed a bag into Sticky’s hand. Then stopped at last person in line. Keelah. Extended a bag to her.

“I get a welcome bag?” she asked warily.

“Yours is more like a welcome back bag,” he said cheerfully. And he gave Keelah a quick bump with his hip before rejoining Amata at the front of the cafeteria.

“Everyone ready?” Amata asked.
And the Lamp/Towners nodded in unison.

They begin to follow Amata out of the room. Keelah perched on a barstool; watched the procession move out.

Squirrel stopped in his tracks. Whirled around to face Keelah. “You’re coming right? Walking us to our rooms?”

“You want me to?” Keelah asked.

“Shit yeah.” Squirrel shrugged. Clearly confused that he’d have to explain something so obvious to Keelah. “We feel safer when you’re around”

Still? Keelah wanted to say. But didn’t. You still feel safe even after what happened to Dusty?

But she bit back those words. Tossed her welcome (back) bag awkwardly from one hand to another.

“I’ll walk with you,” she told them.

And she brought up the rear when Amata led the group out of the cafeteria. Accepting the cup of coffee Pepper pressed into her hand before following her friends to their new accommodations.

MacCready had warned Keelah that many of the Lamplighters had insomnia and would probably spend most of their nights and early mornings roaming the vault hallways, trying to exhaust themselves into sleep. But here it was, two hours after they’d reached Vault 101, and every single Little Lamplighter and Big Towner was secure in their new living quarters, fast asleep.

The trip had taken a lot out of them. The youngest ones—Biwwy, Zipp, and Bumble—hadn’t even protested when Lucy and MacCready told them to call it a night. Biwwy had said good night in that whistling way of his; and all three little ones had climbed into their bunk beds. Fresh faced and clean-smelling. They’d been out in seconds.

The older ones had stayed awake a bit longer. Scrutinizing their furnished bedrooms as they rehashed the day; commiserated. But even they’d retired earlier than Keelah had suspected. Seduced by soft mattresses and clean sheets, they’d said their good nights to Keelah; practiced turning off a bedroom light; then promptly feel asleep.

Keelah found herself alone in the cafeteria at two o’clock in the morning, nursing a cold and bitter-tasting coffee; wishing she had liquor, any kind, to spice the beverage up.

She took a sip of the cold brew. Winced as an image flashed into her mind; a gurgling Dusty with blood all over his face.

I can still walk Keelah. Just help me up.

God damn it! She should have been better prepared. More vigilant. None of this would have happened if she’d done her job properly.

If I hadn’t altered the schedule and cut through the Warrington Tunnels, we’d probably never even run across those Enclave bastards. We wouldn’t have made it to Reclining Groves for a whole ‘nother day. Would have missed the Enclave altogether.

They’d played fucking kickball when Keelah should have known better. You never let down your
Fuck, she needed whiskey. Maybe some moonshine to take the edge off. More and more she’d been thinking about giving Ultrajet a try and letting the enhanced chem fuck her up proper-like, but she was afraid of developing another addiction.

*I need to be sober anyway. I promised the Lamplighters thirty days of co-habitation, and I don’t want to be pissy drunk around them. Plus, there’s Agatha to think about it. I have to be focused to figure out where the hell she could be.*

Another unsatisfying sip of coffee as the voice in her head grew louder and even more self-deprecating.

*You fucked up, you know that right? All that fucking armor you have in your lockers at home and you didn’t think to bring any to give to the Big Towners and Lamplighters? Dusty might as well have been wearing a fucking paper bag considering how that plasma round went through him. Tore him the fuck up. You saw!*

A sip so hard that her teeth clinked against the glass.

*And your father was a doctor. James, the motherfucking egghead scientist. Bought purified water to the wasteland. Yet you couldn’t do shit to help Dusty. Just let the poor guy bleed to death in front of his friends. Didn’t you pay attention at all to your dad when he worked in the clinic? You could have done more than offer a stimpack, Keelah. Dusty deserved more than that.*

Her hands clenched around the mug.

*Maybe you should have just left them in Big Town and Little Lamplight. Sure, they’d be cold and hungry but, fuck, Dusty would still be alive.*

She thought about throwing the cup across the room. Wondered if the glass would break into several pieces or a thousand.

*And what about Butcher, hmmm? He might not make it either. You invited him and the Rangers into this bullshit plan of yours and now he’s lying on an operating table damn near burned to bits. How could you do this to him? To Reilly?*

And if the glass *did* break into a thousand pieces, would there be a shard big enough to—

“Keelah?”

Keelah stirred herself from her thoughts. Put the cup down on the table when she realized it had been raised near her head. Whether she was going to drink from the cup or throw it, she wasn’t sure. But Keelah slid the mug away from her, stared up at her unexpected visitor.

Amata slid into the seat across from Keelah. Greeted her friend with a weary smile.

“I just showed Donovan and Brick to their rooms. We put a cot in the clinic for Reilly. She’s still there, talking things over with Red.”

Amata did that effortlessly. Learned people’s names. Said the names warmly like the people were important to her. Friends instead of strangers.

“I told the rangers that they are welcome to stay for as long as they need while Butcher convalesces.”
Keelah nodded. A thank you.

Red had given them her prognosis for Butcher a half-hour ago. Had tried to sound positive as the rangers and Keelah stared at Butcher’s pale body; his shuttered eyes.

_There’s nothing more I can do for him. Right now all we can do is wait and hope he comes to. I know it looks bad right now, but Butcher is breathing on his own, and that’s good. We’re just lucky that he was wearing quality armor. That chest plate absorbed a lot of the contact. Probably saved his life._

Keelah rubbed a hand across her face. Was somewhat surprised when she couldn’t even feel it. Was her face numb or her hand? Maybe both?

Amata gave the haggard-looking woman a worried look. “You look like you could use some sleep.”

Keelah shook her head. “We left the dogs in the vault tunnel. I need to go see about them. Get them settled. Give ‘em food and water. And there’s a Brahmin tied up in the men’s restroom. I have to put it somewhere before it gives one of the 101ers a heart attack.”

“We can let one of the officers handle the dogs and Brahmin. I know you’re exhausted. Susie and Hannon went to bed an hour ago, and even Reilly has settled into her cot.”

“She’s not going to sleep,” Keelah said. She knew the ranger leader too well. “She may lie there, but so long as Butcher is unconscious, she won’t sleep a wink.”

“She and Butcher are partners?”

“Yes.”

Amata nodded politely. Adding the information to her mental rolodex.

Keelah fidgeted. Her mind all over the place. Thinking about Dusty, Butcher, Agatha.

And where the fuck was Charon?!

Amata glanced down at the coffee cup that Keelah had pushed away. “You want fresh coffee?” the Overseer asked her.

“No. I didn’t even want that cup.” Keelah rubbed her temples. Tried to massage some silence into her head.

“Shall we go upstairs?” Amata asked.

Keelah looked almost scandalized by the question, and Amata blushed a deep shade of red.

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” Amata stammered. “We wouldn’t go _together_. Not in that way. I just thought you might want to use my old bedroom. You know where everything is already and you’ve slept there so often…I figured you would be more comfortable there.” Keelah didn’t respond immediately and Amata rushed on. “Of course…there are other quarters available. You may even want a room near the Big Towners and Lamplighters…”

“I just…” Keelah sighed heavily. “I’m probably not even going to sleep tonight, so it doesn’t even matter.”

“You should sleep,” Amata admonished gently.
“What was Susie doing with that clipboard earlier?”

It annoyed Amata that Keelah changed the subject—Keelah could tell—but the Overseer bit back any complaint she would have made. Sighed softly before answering, “It was a questionnaire I made up so that we could get more information on the Lamplighters and Big Towner’s. Shoe sizes. Date of births. Things like that. You know the vault makes a big deal about birthdays.”

Keelah nodded. “There are two birthdays next week actually. Squirrel and Éclair.”

“Éclair’s the one with the hat, right? And Squirrel’s the one…?”

“With the frown.”

“Do you think they’d be open to a party?”

“Éclair would love it. Squirrel would hate it. But I’ll ask them just to be sure.”

“But if you ask them, it’ll ruin the element of surprise.”

“Trust me Amata. The Lamplighters and Big Towners aren’t people who’ll appreciate surprises. If you’re going to throw them a party, give them advance notice. God, I can only imagine what would happen if someone blew a party horn in Princess’ or MacCready’s faces.”

All of a sudden there was shriek from down the hall, and Officer Wolf went racing by, screaming at the top of his lungs about ‘toilet dragons.’

“Speaking of surprises,” Keelah said, rising from the booth. She had a Brahmin to situate.

Amata stood with her. “Do you need my help?”

“Thanks, but no. You’re the one who should get some rest. You have a vault to run. And twenty new people to deal with starting tomorrow.” Keelah shrugged. “And…to be honest…I don’t think I’m very good company right now. I just want to sit someplace quiet and think.”

“Oh.”

Amata was skilled at schooling her features and presenting an air of coolness. But her eyes always gave her away. Always. They were so damn expressive; and Keelah could see, clear as day, by the way Amata’s eyes contracted and turned a shade darker, that she’d hurt Amata’s feelings.

“I’m not saying I don’t want you around…” Keelah started, but Amata cut her off.

“You’ve just spent twelve days traveling with a caravan of people. Of course you’d want some time to yourself. I completely understand.” Amata placed her arms behind her back. Made sure her posture matched her professional tone. “Come see me tomorrow morning. We can discuss the best time for rescheduling the orientation. And you can give me more personal details on the Lamplighters and Big Towners. I’m curious to learn more about them, and I want to make sure I’m considering all of their needs.”

“Amata—”

Keelah’s tone was apologetic, but the wastelander didn’t know what to say, so she opted to remain silent.

Amata seemed at a loss for words herself.
After another minute of tense silence, Amata excused herself.

“I have an early day tomorrow. I should return to my quarters.”

“And I should go see about a cow.”

They separated without saying goodbye.

Four AM found Keelah sitting in the same booth in the cafeteria. She’d situated the dogs in the tunnels comfortably. Tied the Brahmin to a pole in the vault entranceway. Checked on Reilly and Butcher (She’d been right. Reilly wasn’t sleeping. The ranger leader just sat on her cot staring blankly at her lover’s still body). After sitting quietly with Reilly for a bit, Keelah had returned to the cafeteria. Poured herself a second cup of coffee that she still hadn’t touched.

She just sat there, alone; staring at the discolored self-esteem poster that hung above the jukebox. A blonde-haired vaulter smiling at himself in the mirror with a caption below that read: **What Matters Most Is How You See Yourself.**

Keelah briefly considered defacing the poster. Adding a handlebar mustache or crossing out a few letters to see if she could spell something obscene.

These self-esteem posters had always pissed her off. For as long as she could remember, Vault 101 had tried to combat Vault Depressive Syndrome with lame ass poster campaigns and mandatory weekly socials such as dances and movie nights. For some reason, vault leadership thought that cartooned vaulters and slow songs would better treat a person’s depression than honest conversation would.

Keelah overcame her childish impulse; just barely; then turned her attention to her Pip-Boy and added a few quick notes; things she needed to follow up on when she got back to Megaton.

Red walked into the cafeteria. Stopped at Keelah’s booth and stared down at her tiredly.

“What more of that coffee?” Red asked.

“I’ll get you a cup. Have a seat.”

Red sank into the cushions gratefully and put her head on the table.

Keelah shuffled over to the kitchen area; poured a huge cup of coffee. “Sugar?” she asked.

Red lifted her head from the table. “Yes?”

Keelah chuckled. “I meant, do you want sugar?”

“I’m sorry…damn…I’m so tired. No. No sugar. But I’ll take cream if they have it.”

Keelah prepared the drink. Carried the mug back over to Red and reclaimed her seat.

Keelah couldn’t help teasing the bespectacled physician. “I can call you Sugar if you’d like. Doctor Sugar has a certain ring to it, I suppose.”

Red drank deeply from her cup. “Do that Keelah, and I’ll start calling you Key-Lock like the Lamplighters do.”
They smiled at each other. Their friendship strengthened by everything they’d been through these past few years (the Germantown Police Station, Christine Kendall’s pregnancy, now this).

“Where are you coming from?” Keelah asked the doctor.

“I checked on the little ones. Then gave MacCready more antibiotics.”

Red looked positively knackered. The doctor removed her glasses. Rubbed at her eyes.

“How are you holding up?” Keelah asked her. “I know how important the Lamplighters and Towners are to you. And Dusty…damn. I’m so sorry Red.”

Red put her glasses back on. Stared down into her cup of coffee with an expression too intense for such an inane activity.

“It happened so fast Keelah. Just a flash of light and then he was down.” She gave Keelah a pained look. “You know, Dusty never quite got over me and Shorty being abducted by those super mutants. He blamed himself for the attack. Said that he should have been more alert. Fought harder. There was nothing he could have done, of course. There were super mutants swarming the place when we me and Shorty got nabbed. And then you came along and rescued us anyway. But Dusty had a chip on his shoulder after that. He was ashamed. I think he was looking for a way to prove to us and himself that he was a good guardsman.” Her eyes glittered as she looked at Keelah. “He jumped right in front of that plasma round. That Enclave soldier wasn’t even aiming at him.”

“It’s my fault Red. Fuck… Reilly and I went over that route again and again. We planned for ferals and raiders and Deathclaws, but I didn’t think we’d run into Enclave this far west. I should have gotten power armor for everyone. Or something.”

“Keelah, the Lamplighters and Big Towners aren’t strong enough to wear power armor. Besides, don’t you have to be trained to wear those things?”

“Still. I knew we were down a man with Charon out. I should have hired an extra hand. Or postponed the trip altogether. If only I hadn’t insisted that we cut through the Warrington Tunnels! And I saw something moving outside the window this morning. I should have investigated properly. I should have down more.”

Keelah’s voice was paper-thin and pain-flecked, and Red put a hand on her friend’s forearm. Tried to calm the woman down. “Keelah, you could have planned this trip for a hundred years. Hired an entire battalion of soldiers to accompany us across the desert. But the sad fact is, you can’t outstrategize death. When your number’s called…it’s called.”

Keelah frowned. “That’s a grim outlook for a doctor to have. The entire point of your profession is to outstrategize death.”

“No, dear. Sometimes the point is to help a person accept death as a part of life.” Red sighed heavily. “I’ve buried a lot of friends in my lifetime. Lamplighters who got sick in the caverns. Big Towners who got sick in the settlement. You never get used to it. But you count your good days, and you accept your bad ones.” She patted Keelah’s arm again. “You got twenty-two of us to the vault safely. Overall, I would say that’s a good day.”

They didn’t speak again for the remainder of their time together.

Red sipped her coffee. Left an hour later to get some sleep.

Keelah sat alone in the booth, glaring at the self-esteem poster.
Pepper Gomez breezed into the kitchen at six AM and began setting up for breakfast. Keelah was still there.

“You want an omelet?” Pepper asked the wastelander, as she clanged pots around; began stirring the imitation eggs that were a vault staple.

“No.”

“You get any sleep?” Keelah grunted. “Well, get out of my kitchen girly and find yourself a bed. Your face could curdle milk.”

Keelah scowled but pushed her way out of the booth. She cleared her cup from the table and approached Pepper at the counter.

“Will you do me a favor and send a breakfast tray and cup of coffee to my friend in the clinic?”

Pepper nodded. Her razor-sharp eyes studying Keelah intently. “It should take ‘bout twenty minutes to get the food ready. I’ll take the tray over then. What’s your friend’s name?”

“Reilly.”

“I’ll make sure Reilly gets it.”

“Thanks.”

Keelah left the cafeteria. Slowly made her way to the wing that housed the Lamp/Towners. More than likely the youngsters would still be asleep, but Keelah figured she’d pass through anyway. See if any of them needed anything.

Most of the bedroom doors were closed, suggesting the Lamp/Towners were indeed still asleep, but Keelah found MacCready out and about, walking the hallways. His battle helmet squarely in place and his rifle affixed to his back.

“You’re up early MacCready.” she told him.

“Old habits,” he answered dismissively.

Keelah raised an eyebrow at the battle helmet and rifle. “You know you don’t have to patrol the hallways. The vault has guards who do that.”

“Old habits.”

Keelah snorted. Leaned up against a wall and let her head fall backwards while she took a quick breather. She was somewhat surprised when MacCready joined her. Mirrored her actions and propped his head against the wall.

“You think everybody’s going to acclimate well?” she asked him.

“Well enough,” he said. Scratching at a spot on his chin where a single hair grew. Keelah smiled fondly at the teenager. Was pleased to hear that he sounded better, breathing-wise. Red’s treatments were already working.

“And how are you?” Keelah asked. “You shot someone yesterday. Your first kill. That couldn’t have been easy.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” His tone was gruff. Cautionary.
“Well, if you ever decide you do want to talk about it…” She left the invitation open.

“The mayor of this place is pretty nice,” MacCready said without preamble.

“Amata?” MacCready nodded. “You reached that conclusion after only knowing her for an hour?”

“Well, she let us choose who we wanted to bunk with. And Princess said some real smart alecky stuff to her last night, and the mayor lady only smiled. She’s not…I dunno…mean and bossy like some mungos are.”

“Oh, she’s bossy. But she’s the good kind of bossy.”

Keelah smiled warmly. Not even realizing how besotted she looked.

MacCready gave her a knowing look. “You know, I asked you a question while we were out on the road. Asked you why’d you leave this place if it was so great?”

“You still waiting for that answer, huh?”

“No. Someone already told me.”

“Who?”

“Hannon. He filled me in last night while we were waiting in the cafeteria. Told me about the vault rebellion. How you got chased out of here. Twice.” MacCready looked bothered. He coughed in a way that had nothing to do with illness and everything to do with the uncomfortable conversation they were having. “It’s pretty awful how they treated you.”

“Yeah…But you don’t have to worry about that. The Lamplighters are safe here, I promise. I wouldn’t have bought you all here if I thought you’d be mistreated.”

“I know that.”

He was acknowledging that he trusted Keelah. His admission was a curious, unexpected, wonderful thing. Keelah grinned at him. Poked him in the shoulder affectionately.

“Did Hannon tell all of the Lighters and Big Towners?”

“No. Just me. And no worries. I don’t plan to blab to anyone.”

“Why not?”

“Cause the Lamplighters would want to leave. They wouldn’t trust anyone who didn’t like you.” MacCready scratched at his chin again. “I told Hannon that they should make it up to you.” He read the question in Keelah’s eyes. “The vault. They should make up for treating you so badly.”

Keelah turned her attention to the row of closed bedroom doors that housed nearly two dozen of her wasteland friends.

“They are,” she answered softly.

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Keelah and MacCready talked a few more minutes before he continued his patrol of the hallway. Keelah proceeded with her uncoordinated stroll through the north wing. There were no other Lamp/Towners up and about, so Keelah did an about-face. Prepared to stop by the clinic again and
see if there was any improvement with Butcher.

She yawned as she walked—ostentatiously, since no one was around to see—and was startled mid-yawn when a bedroom door opened and a Big Towner gestured her inside.

It was Bittercup.

“I want to show you something.” Bittercup said. Waving Keelah into her bedroom.

Keelah stumbled through the doorway. Tried not to yawn in Bittercup’s face and failed miserably.

“Why you up so early?” Keelah said; her yawn muffling her words and causing Bittercup to snicker.

“What?”

“Why are you up so early?” Keelah repeated.

“I’m part vampire. I do my best sleeping during the day.”

“Bittercup, you really shouldn’t joke about things like that. There are actual vampires in the wasteland, you know? And it’s not as glamorous a lifestyle as you’d think.”

Bittercup waved off Keelah’s concerns; tugged the wasteland deeper into the bedroom. “What do you think of my room? It’s nice, huh? I’ve never had a bedroom before. Or a bed even.”

Keelah circled the small bedroom. Nodding appreciatively. Most vault quarters (save the Overseer’s and professional-grade staff such as the doctor and chaplain) were fairly spartan. A bed, a dresser, a bookshelf or two. And wall decor that was overseer-approved.

But things had clearly changed under Amata’s leadership. There were potted plants on the table. Decorative bed sheets on the twin-sized beds. And lace curtains hung from the walls (How the maintenance staff had hung curtains and why they would even do such a thing considering the vault didn’t possess a single window to the outside, was beyond Keelah, but she had to admit that the curtains made the rooms more homely-feeling somehow).

But what was most impressive about the room was the walls. Bittercup’s bedroom walls—the grey, metal walls that were everywhere in Vault 101 and that could be so repetitive to look at—were covered with art. Drawings of pre-war animals and trees and flowers and geometric shapes that seemed to shift as you looked at them.

The drawings had all been done in marker—blacks and blues and oranges and greens.

“Did you draw these?” Keelah asked. Stunned. She stepped closer to the walls and drew her finger along the curve of a rose petal, sketched in the most brilliant red she’d ever seen.

“No, it was already like this when I got in. Everyone’s room has them.”

“I didn’t even notice last night. I guess I was too preoccupied with everything else.” She walked the length of the bedroom, gazing curiously at the series of sketches that adorned the walls. “Who could have done this?” she asked out loud. She got her answer when she saw the largest drawing. A winking dolphin leaping out of an ocean. The dorsal-finned mammal had fangs. Keelah laughed. “Freddie,” she said. “Good old Fredz.”

Keelah took a seat on Bittercup’s bed and let her laughter transmute into full-on giggles. She was
exhausted, a bit loopy, and hadn’t consumed anything more substantial than coffee in the past sixteen hours. Goodness, she was tired.

Bittercup sat beside her. Put a hand on the back of Keelah’s neck and began a slow massage.

Keelah leaned into the contact. “I like your room,” she told Bittercup.

“I share it with Kimba. She left this morning with Joseph to check out the library.”

“Who goes to the library at six thirty in the morning?”

“Nerds do.” Keelah laughed again and Bittercup intensified her ministrations against Keelah’s neck. “I think Joseph likes Kimba. Kimba doesn’t think so, but Joseph gets all googly-eyed when she’s around. And they’re always huddled over some book, reading and laughing.”

Keelah leaned back until she was lying across Bittercup’s bed. “Sounds romantic,” she said drowsily; before closing her eyes. “I’m going to rest my eyes for just a few seconds,” she told Bittercup.

Bittercup could only smirk as Keelah kicked off her boots. Nestled into a pillow.

“So you’ve really met vampires?” Bittercup asked the dosing woman. Pushing Keelah onto her side so that she could remove the woman’s weapons. She placed the guns on a nearby table.

“Yeah.”

“Yet you don’t believe in ghosts?”

Keelah mumbled into the pillow. “I’m not sure what I believe anymore. But it was nice what you said last night. About Dusty not traveling alone.”

Then she was snoring softly.

Bittercup smiled at her. Then turned her attention back to her bedroom. The cleanliness of the room; the plastic flowers; the art. The Big Towner smiled happily. It wasn’t something that she did often: smile and feel content. She wrapped her arms around her midsection. Tried her best to hold on to the positive feeling for as long as she could.

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It was loud knocking against the bedroom door that awakened Keelah. The wastelander came to with a snort and cast unfocused eyes on the person who was making the racket and interrupting her sleep.

It was Amata. Knocking against the side panel of a door that was already open.

And the Overseer looked pissed.

Keelah sat up in the bed. Realized with some horror that Bittercup had fallen asleep beside her; had pressed her body up against Keelah’s in a way that resembled cuddling.

Keelah’s eyes flicked back and forth between Bittercup’s serene face and Amata’s furious one. She stammered, “It’s not what it looks like—”

“We had an appointment this morning,” Amata responded in a clipped tone. “Or did you forget?”
“What time is it?” A quick glance at her Pip-Boy revealed that it was 12:32. “Oh shit. I'm sorry. I fell asleep.”

“Clearly.”

Keelah flinched at Amata’s tone; disentangled her body from Bittercup’s and did her best not to wake the slumbering woman. She slipped on her boots; all while taking great pains not to look at Amata’s face. She knew, without looking, that Amata was glaring.

Keelah reattached her weapons. Finally looked at the Overseer. Keelah bit her bottom lip. “You want to meet now?” she suggested lamely.

“I have another meeting at one, so hurry,” Amata said sharply. The Overseer turned on her heels, called over her shoulder: “And wake Bittercup so that she can have lunch. Pepper will close the kitchen soon.”

Then she was gone. Her footsteps echoing down the metal hallway.

Keelah swore under breath. Then turned to do what she was told.

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Amata was pacing her office when Keelah arrived six minutes later.

“Close the door,” Amata instructed. And Keelah slapped the wall panel, activating the sliding door.

She’d barely settled into the chair across from Amata’s desk when the Overseer lit into her.

“The least you could have done is shown a little courtesy and told me that you were canceling our morning meeting,” she snapped. “I’ve been waiting for you for hours.”

“I lost track of time.”

“You have a Pip-Boy attached to your arm that will keep track of time for you.”

“Amata…”

“Not to mention, there are clocks in virtually every room of this vault, so if you’d bothered to look up even once, you would have seen what time it was.”

“Amata, it was an accident. I was tired and fell asleep. I’m sorry.”

Amata stopped her rant. She looked contrite about her outburst and avoided Keelah’s gaze. The young leader didn’t have much of a temper, but when she did get angry, she was fiery. Keelah had seen Amata explode a time or two when they were growing up. But those rare tirades were usually directed at Butch and his Tunnel Snakes, so Keelah found herself in unfamiliar territory—being on the receiving end of an irate Amata.

Amata finally looked up. Stared at Keelah with wounded eyes. “I was worried, you know? When you didn’t show up this morning. I asked around and no one knew where you were or where you’d gone. Considering the state you were in last night, I thought you’d gone back into the wasteland. I thought something bad had happened.”

Amata was angry, but she was mostly hurt. Keelah felt ashamed.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to cause a panic. I just…fell asleep.”
“Yes, I saw that.” Amata’s eyes flashed with some unnamed emotion. “I couldn’t get you to sleep last night. Yet, somehow Bittercup did.”

Amata brushed a strand of hair out of her face. Licked her lips nervously as she prepared to ask a question she wasn’t sure she wanted an answer for. “Are you and Bittercup…together?” she asked delicately.

“Umm…” Geez. How was Keelah supposed to respond to that? She and Bittercup weren’t romantically involved, but Bittercup did consider Keelah to be her girlfriend. And Keelah had to admit that she liked spending time with the bizarre Big Towner. “Bittercup and I are friends,” she specified.

“Friends who share a bed?”

“Amata, you and I shared a bed for most of our adolescence.”

“Exactly! And I was in love with you that entire time.” Keelah exhaled sharply. How was she supposed to respond to that? “You do know that, right?” Amata asked softly. “That I’m still…?”

Amata put some distance between herself and Keelah. Walked over to the large window that took up most of her far wall. She stared down into the atrium the way her father used to.

“Are you never going to forgive me?”

The question was for Keelah but Amata directed it to the glass. Her voice was so soft and sad that Keelah felt her heart ache in response.

“It’s not about forgiveness Amata.”

“What’s it about then?”

Amata looked at her. And those brown eyes—those expressive brown eyes—pierced Keelah to her core. Made the wastelander’s heart catch in her throat.

“I don’t trust you.” There. There was the truth. In its barest form. “You would kick me out again, Amata. Expel me to the wasteland. If you were forced to choose between me and the vault.” Amata started to speak but Keelah interrupted her. “You don’t have to argue the point. We both know what I’m saying is true.” Keelah sighed miserably. “And I don’t even blame you. Not really. Because you’re good at what you do. And maybe the vault needs you as the Overseer more than I need you as a girlfriend.” But Keelah’s eyes watered. Invalidating her claim. “I can’t be with someone I don’t trust, so…I don’t know…maybe we can just work on being friends?” she asked Amata. The question so hesitant that it came out like a whisper.

Amata lifted her chin. Nodded weakly even as her own eyes filled with a discernible wet.

“Let’s get on with the meeting,” Amata husked. “I only have a few minutes before my next appointment.”

They both took their seats. Stared at everything but the person sitting across from them. The silence was deafening. Amata shuffled papers. Keelah’s toyed with a loose thread on her pants.

Amata finally cleared her throat. “I’d like to schedule one-on-ones with all of the Big Towners and Lamplighters. Get a sense of their personalities and skill sets so that I can assign them to the most appropriate work detail.”
“Is the vault not administering the G.O.A.T anymore?”

“No. I did away with it for good a couple of years ago. We all know that the G.O.A.T. was really just a way for my father to shoehorn people into jobs. I want 101ers to actually work in an area they’re interested in. It’s good for vault productivity and helps with morale more generally.”

Keelah smiled faintly. “You’re a damn good overseer, you know that?”

Amata waved off the praise. Her mouth stretched into a thin line as she extended a sheet of paper to Keelah.

Keelah stared at the document in puzzlement; it was covered with names and numbers.

“What’s this?” Keelah asked.

“Clothes sizes for the 101ers. Whenever you and Susie get the vault caravan up and running, they’d like to have wasteland clothes. Thought this list could help you keep track of things.”

“Thanks.”

Amata pushed a small box over to Keelah as well. “Susie explained the cap system to me. Well…as much as she could with her limited experience. But Red has enlightened me on how the economy works out there. I had Stanley bring these up from the storage room.” She pulled the lid back on the box. Revealed a sizeable amount of sparkling bottle caps. “There are three thousand bottle caps there. All the ones we’ve recycled from Nuka Cola bottles. Hopefully that’s enough to cover the clothing and whatever other costs that are associated with starting the caravan.”

Keelah folded the clothing list. Placed the document on top of the bottle caps before closing the box and setting it on her lap. “That should be more than enough. I’ll buy stimpacks and medicine with any caps that are left over.”

“Sounds good.”

“But it’ll probably be a while yet before Susie and I can really concentrate on the caravan. I want to make sure the Big Towners and Lamplighters get settled first. And I have a few personal tasks I need to get out of the way.”

“I understand.”

Amata was being succinct with her responses. And she was staring at Keelah as if the wastelander were an employee rather than a friend. It rankled Keelah a little bit—Amata’s tone and stern countenance—but she’d asked for this, hadn’t she? For Amata to treat her more platonically?

“I’ll put these caps in my safe at home,” Keelah continued. “I’m making a quick run to Megaton tonight.”

“I thought you planned to stay in the vault a month?” For a second, Amata’s mask slipped. She looked troubled by Keelah’s words.

“I am. I’m just going there and back. I need to take Dogmeat home and do some legwork for those personal tasks I mentioned earlier. I’ll be back before dark.”

Amata nodded. Studied the items on her desk. Picked up a pen. Put it back down. “Well, like I said weeks ago, you’re free to come and go from the vault as you please. You have the passcode to the vault door, and the guards know you’ll be in and out.”
“Thanks.”

Keelah took note of the way Amata’s lashes hid her eyes. Studied the caramel-colored freckles on the woman’s nose; that soft curve of jaw that would produce dimples whenever Amata smiled.

Keelah felt like an idiot. A lovesick idiot whose memory was too long to make a second chance possible.

“Anything else?” Keelah asked the Overseer.

“Just one thing.” Amata stared at her. Her eyes as somber and morose as Keelah had ever seen them. “The next time you have an assignation in Bittercup’s bedroom, do make sure that the door is closed. There are children about now. We wouldn’t want them interrupting your…sleep.”

They locked eyes. Communicated a myriad of things that were bitter and pain-filled and nowhere near close to the soft, sweet things that were lodged in both of their hearts.

Keelah gripped the box of bottle caps and left the room.

Amata took her place by the window; stared down into the atrium.

When Keelah walked into her line of sight, Amata moved away from the window. Returned to her desk.

And when Keelah stopped her march across the atrium and looked up to catch a glimpse of her friend, Amata was already gone.

Both women went about their day.

Chapter End Notes

I know that this is some Usher Raymond slow burn kind of stuff. Sorry.

There’s an allusion to a Xena episode in Keelah’s exchange with Red. There’s an episode, “A Good Day” where Gabrielle loses a friend to battle and Xena comments that, overall, it was a good day of fighting since causalities were minimal. Shout out to any Xenites! There’s also another really obscure reference to the HBO show, The Wire.

Chapter title a reference to a Robert Frost poem of the same name.
Chapter Summary

Keelah investigates Agatha's disappearance. And more jealousy?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 24—Ghostface Killas (Sittin’ On the Dock of the Bay)

Keelah made her way to the first floor of the vault; intent on telling the Lamp/Towners that she would be leaving the vault for a few hours. It took her longer than necessary to make the short trip from the Overseer's office to the main floor. Her thoughts were still on Amata. The pained expression on Amata’s face when Keelah had declared that she only wanted friendship; the anger and hurt that the Overseer hadn’t bothered to hide.

Keelah could only hope that, one day, she and Amata would be able to repair their friendship. Be able to reside in one another’s company without the lingering resentment and regret.

The wastelander found most of the Lamp/Towners congregating in the rec room—the large area of the vault where 101ers spent their free time. The rec room was also the area where social activities were held: dances, Little League baseball games, assemblies.

The rec room didn’t offer much. A table tennis set; a billiards table; a handful of board games; a Pinball machine that mysteriously had no pinball.

But 101ers enjoyed their free time nevertheless. Held weekly card games and maintained a competitive dart league.

The Lamp/Towners seemed equally enthralled with the oversized room. Keelah watched with a smile as the kids and teenagers frolicked about the space; swarmed the old-fashioned arcade game; chortled loudly.

Sticky and Sammy were playing some version of billiards that involved them shooting the pool balls into the holes as if they were basketballs.

Penny and Shorty were playing checkers.

Old Lady Palmer was leading Zipp, Biwwy and Bumble in some game that looked like Duck, Duck, Goose.

Keelah waved at Old Lady Palmer (got a broad smile and wave in return) then crossed over to the area where MacCreedy was sitting. The former mayor of Lamplight leaned forward in his chair, his face impassive, as he watched his peers cavort around.
Keelah took a seat in the chair next to the teenager. She nodded at the Lamp/Towners. “I guess they’re settling in okay,” she said.

MacCready shrugged noncommittally. “It takes their minds off Dusty.” MacCready scowled when he saw Sammy prepare to throw a billiards ball across the room. “Sammy, if you throw that thing, I swear I’m going to come over there and smack you.”

Sammy grinned embarrassedly before putting the billiards ball back on the table where it belonged.

MacCready cut his eyes at Keelah. “Earlier, I caught him trying to climb into one of those vents near the clinic. Said he was going scavenging.” He shook his head. “That kid is going to be the death of me.”

“Hopefully Amata will have the school up and running soon. It’ll give him something to do with all that energy.

“Good luck with that. Even Joseph couldn’t get the Lamplighters to go to school regularly.”

Keelah nodded. “We’ll see…Anyway, that’s not why I’m here. I have to make a quick run to Megaton. I should be back by nightfall, but I wanted to give you a heads up. Try to keep everyone in line while I’m gone, okay?”

“You’re going alone?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” A faint blush tinged MacCready’s cheeks and the teenager avoided Keelah’s gaze. Keelah guessed the reason for MacCready’s blush and was stunned. “You’re worried about me?” she asked incredulously.

“I’m not worried,” MacCready huffed. “It’s just…those Enclave jerks could still be out there.”

Keelah patted the boy on his leg. “Megaton’s not far. And the Enclave wouldn’t attack a settlement, so I’ll be fine.” She rose to her feet, preparing to leave. “Amata will be down in a bit to do the orientation. But if you have any questions before then, you can always ask Ms. Palmer.” She pointed the elderly woman out. “And Susie and Hannon will be around too.”

“Okay.”

They both watched as Sammy joined Old Lady Palmer’s game of Duck, Duck, Goose. Sammy was an uncoordinated mess. He nearly barreled Old Lady Palmer over.

“Geez, this kid is a handful,” MacCready muttered. And he walked over to Sammy and Old Lady Palmer so that he could supervise the game more closely.

Keelah chuckled before heading for the exit. She just needed to stop by the clinic really quickly to check on Butcher and Reilly.

Speaking of…

“Ms. Palmer?” she asked the wizened baker. “You mind if I interrupt your game for a bit?”

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Red was typing away at her computer when Keelah entered the clinic. Reilly was hunched over in a painful-looking slouch on her cot.

Keelah approached Red first. “Any improvement with Butcher?” she asked the doctor.

The doctor stopped typing. Adjusted her glasses. “No. But there also haven’t been any setbacks so that’s good.” Red turned her attention to Reilly. “I’m worried about her though. She hasn’t slept or eaten. Brick and Donovan tried to get her to take a break earlier, but Reilly refused. She’s pretty stubborn when she wants to be.”

“Tell me about it. Where are Brick and Donovan now?”

“Hannon asked for their help with something in the armory.”

Keelah nodded. She was listening to Red but not really hearing. Her attention was focused on Reilly and a motionless Butcher. “I’m leaving the vault for a few hours, but if something happens, have Amata send out an emergency signal, will you?”

“Of course.”

Keelah made her way to Reilly. Put a hand against the woman’s shoulder to stir her from her blank-faced fog.

Reilly jumped at the contact. “Wha…?”

“Hey Reilly, how you holding up?”

Reilly licked dry lips. Ran her hand through matted hair that contained dirt, specks of blood.

“I’m okay, I guess. Butcher’s eyes moved a little bit earlier. I thought he was waking up, but…” She sighed. “He’s been injured before. We all have. But it’s never been this bad.” When the ranger’s hands returned to her sides, they were trembling. “Butcher talked about retirement. After Theo died, it was all he talked about. Giving up mapping and finding a town that would take in a bunch of battle-hardened rangers. But mapping’s all I know. I talked him out of it. Now look at him.”

“He’ll pull through, Reilly. He will. But you’ve gotta take care of yourself too. Butcher would want that.” Keelah cast a glance at the cold food that lay on a table near Reilly. An untouched breakfast and lunch tray. “Let me get you some hot food,” Keelah offered.

“I’m not hungry.”

Reilly focused her attention on the slow rise and fall of Butcher’s chest. A bittersweet reminder that her lover was still alive.

“At least step outside for a few minutes. Walk around a bit. You have a visitor who wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“Come outside and see.”

Reilly followed Keelah to the clinic door. The ranger’s limp was even more pronounced after the extended bout of sitting.

Bumble was waiting outside the door, twirling in circles as she hummed some indistinct tune beneath her breath. The little girl came to an abrupt halt when she saw Reilly. Waved happily and giggled.
The look that crossed Reilly’s face when she saw Bumble—Keelah had only seen it one another time—when Vera, the hotel owner at Rivet City, had seen her nephew Brian for the first time. The look was a mixture of love and motherly affection. Sheer relief that the person on the receiving end of such an unguarded gaze existed.

Keelah wasn’t too surprised when Reilly opened her arms; wasn’t even surprised that Bumble sprang into them. Bumble had loved Reilly on sight. The feeling was obviously mutual.

“I missed you!” Bumble exclaimed. Pulling back slightly so that she could put her small hands against Reilly’s face. The little girl patted Reilly’s cheeks softly. A gesture that was contemplative; as if the little girl was making sure that Reilly was really there.

“I missed you too,” Reilly responded. And she took Bumble’s hands into hers. Squeezed softly.

“I bet Pepper has made more hot chocolate,” Keelah said. “Why don’t the two of you head over and have a cup?”

“I can’t,” Reilly said immediately. “Butcher…”

“Just one cup,” Keelah countered. *Hopefully Pepper will convince her to eat something too.*

Reilly’s eyes shifted from Keelah’s to Bumble’s. Two hopeful gazes. “One cup,” Reilly conceded.

And the ranger let Bumble tug her away.

The little girl chattered excitedly and squeezed Reilly’s hand in a way that was unexpected for someone who’d grown up fearing mungos.

Keelah watched the pair disappear around the corner; then the wastelander made her way to the vault door.

Keelah made good time to Megaton. With Wadsworth buzzing at her side and Dogmeat prancing at her heels, the wastelander made it to the fortified settlement in twenty minutes flat. Keelah guided Nathan’s brahmin up the city ramp; then flashed a wave to Deputy Weld, the Megaton protectron.

She was just about to let herself into the walled city when someone called out to her from behind.

Keelah turned to find a young man sprawled on the ground. The man was dirt-stained and clearly dehydrated. His parched lips stood in stark contrast to his brown skin, and he had an unnatural flush about him—the look of a person on the brink of sunstroke.

“Spare any water?” the man gasped. “If I don’t get water soon, I’m done for.”

Keelah reached into her pack. Removed a bottle of Aqua Pura and extended it to the man.

The water beggar flinched away from the sparkling bottle. “No, not that kind. I saw a fella drink that stuff once and it killed him. Burned a hole into his throat.”

Keelah shook the bottle. Tried to press it into the man’s hands. “This is purified water. It won’t hurt you. Besides, it’s all I got.”

But the water beggar shook his head. Wrapped his arms around his knees and began to rock back and forth, jittery. “No thanks. I’ll just do without. It don’t matter much anyway,” he murmured. His eyes dancing all around manically. “I’m a dead man. I’ve seen things that I shouldn’t. Won’t be long
now. Won’t be long at all.” He turned back to Keelah. “Will you do me a favor?” he asked. “Will you shoot me in the head before you leave? I would do it, but I’m all out of ammo.”

Keelah’s eyes widened and she took a step back. *What in the actual fuck?*

She took a good look at the water beggar. Realized that the young man didn’t look like the other down-on-their-luck drifters she’d seen out in the wasteland. This guy was outfitted in sturdy armor; was a healthy weight; had a pistol on his hip. He was dehydrated, yes, but he wasn’t emaciated and sickly-looking like the other water beggars she’d seen.

“What’s your story?” she asked the man.

“Name’s Ben,” he answered. “Ben Canning.” And he tucked his legs beneath himself; sat cross-legged in the dirt like he was a child. “I’m an adventurer. Came east to find a bit of intrigue and some caps.” He shook his head morosely. “Found much more than that. Much more.” His voice trailed off and he hiccupped. Looked like he was about to cry.

“I have some place to be,” Keelah told him. “But I’ll be back in a bit. I’ll help you then.”

The man stared at her with haunted eyes. “You’ll shoot me when you come back?” he asked hopefully.

“What?! No! I’ll bring you water. Something other than Aqua Pura.”

The man almost looked disappointed. He hunched his shoulders. An unconcerned shrug. “I rode a rocket once,” he said softly. “And survived it. I was happy at the time ‘cause everyone else just… boom! No more. But I survived.” His voice trembled. “I survived then, but now… I just want to die.” He closed his eyes. Hiccupped again and let the chest compression rattle his entire body. “Why won’t anyone help me die?” he groaned.

Keelah backed away from him. She wasn’t afraid of the water beggar. She’d seen enough tragedy in the wasteland to recognize benign madness. This guy was harmless. At least to everyone but himself.


Ben Canning didn’t acknowledge Keelah’s words. His golden eyes stared outward, seeing without seeing.

“Someone help me,” he said to no one in particular.

. . . . .

Keelah stopped home first. She reprogrammed Wadsworth to his default mode and set the robot loose on her dusty house. Then she took a long shower and washed away the blood and dirt she’d collected in her weeks’ worth of traveling.

She changed into a clean armor suit; secured the vault’s three thousand caps into her safe; then called for Dogmeat and left her house again.

She would take the brahmin back to Nathan; drop Dogmeat off with Sheriff Simms’s son Harden; then have a nice chat with the sheriff about the Fisher of Men. She wasn’t sure if the disreputable group had abducted Agatha, but she had no other leads to follow. Might as well begin her sleuthing there.
She found Sherriff Simms patrolling the area near the disabled atom bomb. The sheriff was scolding one of the members of the Church of Atom. Keelah waited until the sheriff had shooed the congregant away before approaching him.

“The Children of Atom usually don’t give you trouble,” Keelah told the law keeper.

Sheriff Simms removed his cowboy hat and knocked away some of the dust before returning it to his head. “They’re not troublemakers really. They just stand in this goop so long that they get irradiated and start puking everywhere. I have to come by every few hours and chase them off.” He spit into the dirt. Used the heel of his boot to kick dirt over the spittle. “You back in town for a while?” he asked Keelah.

“Only for a bit. I dropped Dogmeat off with Harden if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all. The boy’s been on me for years to get him a dog. Now that you have him keeping Dogmeat from time to time, it saves me the trouble of finding him one. There aren’t too many domesticated dogs out in the wasteland anymore.”

“Not too many domesticated anythings out there.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Sherriff Simms motioned Keelah to follow him as he continued his stroll around the city. “I’m guessing there’s a reason you sought me out. Jericho giving you trouble?”

“No. I just wanted to know more about these Fisher of Men you told me about. I think they might have grabbed a friend of mine.”

The sheriff sighed. “Sorry to hear that. These Fisher Men are evil bastards. No good comes to anyone they snatch.” He seemed to realize how morbid his words sounded and looked abashed. Smiled weakly at Keelah. “Sorry. Like I told you before, the Regulators don’t know much about the Fisher of Men. Fisher of Men isn’t even their names. It’s just what we call them. The group was really active some years back. Abducting people from the roads. Stealing them out of their homes. People go missing in the wasteland all the time, but it’s different with this group. They torture their victims. Make ‘em give up information about friends and loved ones. Then the Fisher Men send those loved ones a ransom note. Demanding caps in exchange for the safe return of their friends, family members.”

Keelah stopped next to the common house. Leaned against the side of the crumbling building as she considered Sheriff Simms’s words. “And did folks pay the ransoms?” she asked him.

“Eh…most people don’t have two caps to rub together let alone the thousands of caps the Fisher Men demand. I don’t think these sickos even intend to let the folks they nab go. They just send the ransom notes to be cruel. Like I said, evil bastards.”

“So no one ever paid?”

“A few did. But far as I know, no one was ever returned. Once the Fisher Men have you, you’re gone for good.” His face twisted with sympathy and he patted Keelah on the arm. “Sorry kid.”

But Keelah wasn’t so easily waylaid. “The Regulators don’t know where to find these fisher fucks? No beat on their hideouts or haunting grounds? Nothing?”

“The wasteland is big Keelah. And there’s no coordinated law enforcement out here. The Regulators do our best to curtail the criminal elements, but there’s only so much we can do when the baddies have just as many guns as we do and even more manpower.”
Keelah shook her head. “I need more than this if I’m going to find Agatha.”

“Well…try that old woman who sells fishcakes by the wharf.”

“Grandma Sparkle?”

“Yeah. Apparently her sons were taken a few years back. She may even still have the ransom note.”

Keelah was stunned. “Grandma Sparkle mentioned having sons. Mirelurk hunters, I think. But I didn’t know they were abducted.”

Sherriff Simms spit into the dirt again. “Like I said…people go missing all the time in the wasteland. After a while, it stops being noteworthy.”

Keelah got a quick bite to eat at the Brass Lantern. She gave Jenny Stahl an update on the escort mission and promised the restaurant owner that she’d pass along a message to Brick.

Then Keelah made her way back to her house. She needed to get her weapons so that she could make the trip to Wilhelm’s Wharf and talk to Grandma Sparkle. She would also take a few minutes to have a drink. She hadn’t had whiskey in nearly two weeks. Had a craving for the bitter liquor that was so strong that her mouth watered.

Keelah had promised herself that she wouldn’t drink more than two glasses of whiskey (*I need to be clearheaded when I talk to Grandma Sparkle*), but she was partway through a third shot when she heard a sound outside her front door. Someone trying to get in.

Keelah sank further into the plush chair. Eyed the micro SMG she’d placed on the coffee table. She wouldn’t kill the intruder. But she was tired and very near drunk; she reckoned she would beat the intruder’s ass. Maybe wave her gun around a little to make sure the burglar never broke into another house.

But when the front door banged open and the person on the other side of the door entered, Keelah was taken aback.

It wasn’t a trespasser. It was Charon.

The mercenary stood in the doorway, staring at Keelah. He seemed to be just as surprised by her presence as she was by his.

Charon closed the door behind him. He set his shotgun on the bookshelf. Removed his combat helmet. Unhooked his ammo magazine. He did it all slowly and methodically as if it were just another day. As if he hadn’t abandoned Keelah’s escort mission; hadn’t been missing for thirteen days straight.


“Yes.”

This was Charon’s home—had been for years—but he stood near the doorway as if he were a guest.

“Where were you?” Keelah asked him.

She stared into her glass. At the golden-brown liquid. Wondered briefly if the notes she was tasting
were oak or toffee. Maybe anise.

“I had a personal errand,” Charon said. Always succinct. Always non-specific.

Keelah drained her glass. Rose to feet and attached her weapons to her body. Just as slowly and methodically as Charon had removed his.

“You could have told me you were leaving, you know? I was counting on your assistance with the escort mission.” She finally looked at her friend. Her eyes blazing. But also disappointed. “We lost someone. Dusty.”

Charon made a sound that could have been him clearing his throat. He stared back at Keelah. His eyes unwavering; as still as a pool of water.

Keelah tossed something at the mercenary.

Charon caught the item. Stared down at it in confusion.

“I bought you gum,” Keelah told him. “As an apology for our fight. The Lamplighters ate most of it, but I saved you some.”

Keelah clicked on her Pip-Boy. Checked the time. She’d have to get a move on if she wanted to make it to Wilhelm’s Wharf and back to the vault before nightfall. The wastelander briefly considered taking a bottle of whiskey with her. Maybe scotch. She could drink as she walked to Grandma Sparkle’s. The walking would offset the drinking.

Charon interrupted her internal debate. “You going somewhere?” he asked.

“Yep. Gotta see a woman about some fish.”

“You want me to come along?”

Keelah laughed. A chuckle so dark and dry that it caused a ripple of emotion to flicker across Charon’s mutilated face. “Charon, I needed you weeks ago. Today? Not so much.”

Fuck the scotch. Keelah needed to get out of here. The wastelander grabbed a couple of bottles of dirty water (hopefully dirty water would satisfy Ben Canning) then pushed passed Charon to the front door.

Charon touched her arm. Stopped her. “I was going to catch up with you and the escort,” he told her. “I only expected to be gone a day or two. But…it took longer than I thought it would.”

Keelah whirled on him. “What took longer?”

“The aforementioned personal errand.”

“Aforementioned…?” Keelah chuckled again. Zero humor in her voice. “Where were you Charon?”

She glared at him. Her eyes fire-hot. Piercing.

Charon’s mouth turned down. He met her gaze head on but didn’t speak.

“Why the fuck do we live together and travel together if you won’t talk to me?!” Keelah asked the merc. She was shouting and didn’t even realize it.

“Like you’re so forthcoming?”
“Where were you?” Keelah repeated. “What was so damn important that you skipped out on me and our friends?”

“They’re your friends, not mine.”

His words were cold. Her eyes were hot. Keelah felt like she was sweating from the inside out.

“Tell me Charon! Tell me now, ‘cause I am this fucking close to…” Keelah looked away. She wasn’t sure what words were about to come out of her mouth, but she was certain that whatever vitriol she was liable to spew, it would alter their friendship permanently. “Just tell me that you left for a good reason, and I’ll let it go,” she said quietly. Her voice even. “Tell me that there was something out there that needed you more than I did.” She sighed. Her eyes gentler this time as she looked at Charon. “Just tell me something Charon.”

The mercenary straightened his shoulders. He was a head taller than Keelah, and he hovered over her, blocking out the light from the window behind him; creating a cold shadow that blanketed Keelah.

“You’re my employer. The contract stipulates that I tell you anything you request.”

Keelah read his mind. “But you don’t want to tell me?”

Charon’s silence was his answer.

Keelah laughed again. A laugh just as bitter as the first one. She dug into her pocket. Removed a scrap of paper that she’d been carrying for four years.

“I’m not your employer Charon. I’m your friend. It took me a while to get there but…fuck it…I thought I made it clear a long time ago that you were...That we…”

She released a heavy breath. Coughed loudly when she realized that she was close to tears.

Hell, Charon had been by her side through everything. When her father had died in a chemical fog. When Amata had kicked her out of the vault and broken her heart. He’d fought raiders alongside her; Deathclaws. He’d stared at her through the glass when she’d volunteered to start the purifier, effectively martyring herself.

Charon had looked distraught when she’d pushed that button; when the chamber began to fill with gas and Keelah began to choke. He’d looked devastated, and Charon never showed emotion. Never.

Keelah had thought all of those things meant something. But she must have been wrong.

She dropped the paper into Charon’s hand. Didn’t bother to watch and see if the mercenary caught it.

“Since you’re committed to seeing me as an employer, I’ll address you as such,” Keelah told him. She wrenched open the front door. Took a deep breath of stale air before turning back to Charon. “You’re fired Charon.”

Three words.

Then she was gone.

Charon stared after her. His disfigured eyelids blinking rapidly as Keelah’s words sank in.

The scrap of paper—his contract—fluttered from his hands. Slowly. So slow in its descent to the floor that it looked like a broken-winged bird.
Charon didn’t pick it up.

Keelah gave Ben Canning his water then took off in a sprint away from Megaton. The alcohol coursed through her veins—along with the anger, so molten—and when a scream decided to claw its way from her throat, she let it.

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“Are you back to do some trading, dearie?”

Grandma Sparkle finished wiping down one of her tables then flicked the rag into a nearby bucket. She patted her hands dry against her tattered dress and shot Keelah a soft smile as she pulled out her ordering pad.

“I don’t have much left in stock, I’m afraid. One of those water wagons came through here and they ‘bout cleaned me out of all my mirelurk cakes. But I got some beans on the stove and some instamash if you’re hungry.”

Keelah took a seat at one of the tables even though she had no intention of ordering food. “I’ll take coffee if you have it,” Keelah told the woman. “I’ll buy you a cup too.”

Grandma Sparkle smiled anew. “I’ll be right back.”

The elderly woman made her way inside the small shack that doubled as a restaurant and home.

Grandma Sparkle was brave. Living in a house that hugged the wharf so closely. Mirelurks were plentiful in this area. And could easily overwhelm the old woman if they attacked en masse while her back was turned. While she was stirring something on the stove.

The restaurateur had no employees; no neighbors; and got customers only when a caravan was passing through. Keelah didn’t know how the woman had managed to survive this long with nothing but a rifle to protect her from Mirelurks and raiders.

The old cook came out of her house with two steaming cups of coffee. She set Keelah’s cup down in front of her before pulling up a chair and joining the wastelander.

Grandma Sparkle took a sip of her hot beverage and sighed happily. “I hope you like it strong,” she told Keelah. “It’s the only way I drink it.”

“I do.”

And Keelah took a tentative sip; her mind already traveling ahead, thinking of ways she could delicately bring up the subject of Grandma Sparkle’s disappeared sons.

“The weather’s changing,” Grandma Sparkle commented cheerfully. “Can’t you tell? It’s getting colder. The winds are coming through. An easterly, I think.” Keelah nodded politely. “Did you know they named the winds? The meteorologists that is. All kinds of crazy names. Named hurricanes too. Seems like humans like to name anything we don’t understand ‘cause we think it’ll give us power over it. Help us control it. But look at how things turned out. Everything we named has outlived us. Ain’t it something? The wind is going to be here long after the last of us is gone.” And the old woman blew into her coffee as if she were making her point.

Keelah let the steaming mug warm her hands as she prepared to ask her questions.

“Grandma Sparkle, you mentioned your sons to me once before,” Keelah began. “Said they were
Mirelurk hunters?"

“Oh, yes. My boys are the best Mirelurk hunters you’ll find. They learned the trade from their father, you see. Have been trapping and catching Mirelurk since they were knee high.” She smiled softly. Her eyes alight as some memory took hold. “Sebastian is my youngest. Anderson is the oldest. Sebastian was always squeamish about hunting ‘lurks because you have to do a lot of diving, you know? And traipsing through dingy caves. Sebastian’s a bit scared of enclosed spaces. But Anderson looks out for him. Makes sure he makes it back home in one piece.”

The old woman sighed heavily. The frown on her face adding another wrinkle to her wizened face.

It didn’t escape Keelah’s attention that Grandma Sparkle spoke about her sons in the present tense. Perhaps the men weren’t really missing. Perhaps it was only a rumor that Grandma Sparkle’s sons had been taking by the Fisher of Men.

“Where are your sons now?” Keelah asked her. The question delivered in a breathless pitch.

“Oh…” Grandma Sparkle’s hands disappeared beneath the table. Keelah didn’t have to look to know that the woman was wringing her hands. “They got lost some years ago. Went out hunting and didn’t come back home.”

“Lost?”

Grandma Sparkle narrowed her eyes at Keelah. “Why you asking so many questions girl?”

“Because I have a friend who’s lost. I’m hoping to find her.”

Grandma Sparkle looked away. Turned her attention to the blue-black river that ran alongside her café. “They took her?”

“I think so.”

“Thinking ain’t knowing. But you’ll know for sure it’s them if you get a note.” Her eyes glittered. “They’ll find you.”

“Do you still have…your note?”

Grandma Sparkle jerked in her seat; as if Keelah’s words had wounded her. The old woman climbed gingerly to her feet. “One second.”

She disappeared into her shack.

Keelah got up from the table and stretched her legs. Walked a few steps from her left to her right to break up the tension that had settled in her body. The wastelander stared down the road towards the abandoned building that she knew served as a raider hideout.

Grandma Sparkle lived smack dab between Mirelurks and raiders. The old woman and her sons had been so focused on the enemies in their immediate vicinity that they hadn’t anticipated the Fisher of Men—these faceless perpetrators who struck quickly and quietly then disappeared just as stealthily.

“They’re ghosts, Keelah thought. No one’s seen them, but we know they’re out there somewhere.

Grandma Sparkle came out of her house carrying a sheet of brown paper. When the old woman drew closer, Keelah could see that the note was actually an old paper sack ripped into a jagged square to serve as stationary.
30,000 caps for your boys. Drop the money at the abandoned car fort outside of Shalebridge. There’s a blue Buick, no tires. Put the caps in the trunk. You tell anyone about this and we’ll know. It won’t be good for your sons. For 15,000 caps we’ll give one of your boys back. We'll let you choose which.

There was some sort of symbol near the end of a message. Perhaps a name crossed out or some final words that had gotten smudged over the years.

Keelah braved a glance at Grandma Sparkle. The old woman looked positively shattered. “Did you pay?” Keelah asked her.

“I didn’t have the caps. I scraped together about a thousand. My life savings and what I could borrow. Took it to the place they specified. But it must of not been enough because my boys never came home.”

Keelah knew Grandma Sparkle was doing her best not to cry. The old woman dug fingernails into her forearm; tried to use the physical pain to divert the tears. Keelah could sympathize. It was a coping strategy she employed often.

“How long ago was this?” Keelah asked Grandma Sparkle.

“Three years.”

“And you never got another note? Never heard from the Fisher of Men again?”

“Fisher of Men? That’s what they call themselves?”

“No. That’s just what folks around here call them.”

“I never heard another word from them.” Grandma Sparkle took the note back. “But my boys are smart. And they’ve fought Mirelurks their entire lives. They’re tough. I just have to hope that they got away. And maybe they’re making their way back to me.”

After three years? Keelah thought sadly. But she let the old woman have her delusion.

“Thanks for talking to me,” Keelah told her. “I know this wasn’t easy for you.”

Grandma Sparkle turned away from her. Faced the blue-black river again. Let the currents of water simulate the tears she wouldn’t allow herself to cry.

“I hope you find your friend,” Grandma Sparkle murmured. “And if you find these…Fisher of Men, I hope you make them pay.”

“I will.”

Keelah put caps on the table. Enough for her coffee and Grandma Sparkle’s.

Then she took her leave of Wilhelm’s Wharf. Left the old woman standing on the pier, waiting for sons that would never again return.
“I’ve seen some awful things in the Capital Wastes, but I must admit... these Fisher of Men seem to be of an ilk that I’ve never even imagined. Kidnapping? Torture? Ransom? My god!”

Red wrapped her arms around her midsection. And even though the doctor was in a temperature-controlled room, she shivered.

Keelah settled more comfortably into the visitor’s chair across from Red’s desk. “I know. It’s crazy. And who knows how many people they’ve abducted over the years? Makes me wonder about some of the towns I’ve passed through during my travels. One month, there are a couple of families living there. The next month, it’s a ghost town.”

Red shook her head, despairing. “You think these Fisher Men could be the reason why so many Lamplighters never made it to Big Town?”

“I don’t know Red. I’d like to think that most Lamplighters did make it. Maybe not to Big Town, but maybe to some other settlement or city where they’re being looked after.”

“I hope you’re right.” But Red didn’t look convinced.

“There’s a Lamplighter in Rivet City. Did you know that?”

“Really? Who?”

“Trinnie.”

Red’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know anyone by that name. What does she look like?”

“Thin. Tattoos. Blonde. But I don’t think that’s her original hair color. A really asymmetrical haircut.”

“She doesn’t sound like one of ours, but you never know. Names change. So do appearances.”

Keelah nodded. Pounded the heel of her hand against her forehead and tried to stave off a headache “So what are you going to do about Agatha?” Red asked her.

“I still don’t have much to go on, but I think tomorrow I’ll head over to the abandoned car fort they mentioned in that ransom note. Poke around and see if I can’t find something.” Keelah looked worried all of a sudden. “You don’t think the Lamplighters and Towners will mind all of this back and forth do you? I did promise them that I’d stick around for thirty days.”

Red smiled. “The Lamplighters and Big Towners are fine Keelah. They’re actually settling in quite well. And the orientation Amata held today went swimmingly. Amata has a way about her. I think more than a few of the Big Towners have a crush on her.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Amata did have a certain charm. A mix of spice and sweet that was wildly appealing.

“I wasn’t surprised either.” And Red smiled. A faint curve of her mouth that made Keelah’s eyebrow rise. “So take care of your business,” Red continued. “So long as the Lamplighters and Big Towners see your face regularly, they’ll be fine.”

“Great.” Keelah popped her knuckles. Rubbed at the spot on her back that still hadn’t quite healed.

“Speaking of Rivet City…you should consider stopping by there Keelah. Checking with a contact I
have there. She may have some information on these Fisher of Men.”

“Who’s the contact?’

“Remember when you asked me for information on Pinkerton and that android he rewired?”

“Yeah.” That had been four years ago when Keelah had been trying to track down Harkness, a synthetic security officer in Rivet City who thought he was human. “What about it?”

“Well Victoria Watts…I think you met her…She’s an abolitionist, and the person who helped Harkness escape captivity. Victoria travels all over the wasteland in her work with the Railroad. Meets all kinds of people. She may have heard something about these Fisher Men. May even have some information that will be useful to you.”

“That’s a great idea, Doc. Thanks!” Red smiled. Pleased by the praise. “I’m going to have to start calling you Encyclopedia Red,” Keelah joked. And the two women laughed heartily. “Want to grab some dinner? When I walked past the cafeteria earlier, I think I smelled grilled cheese.”

“Grilled cheese? I’ve never seen milk in the wasteland let alone cheese.”

“It’s imitation cheese. But still damn good. What do you say? Split a tray with me.”

“Sorry, but I already have dinner plans.”

“Oh. Lucy?”

“No.” Red powered down her computer. Put a stack of files into one of her desk drawers. “I’ve been accused of spending too many hours in the office and skipping meals, so someone’s been bringing me dinner every night to make sure I eat. We’ve sort of made it a nightly thing.”

Keelah leaned forward in her chair. Put her face in her hands and studied the doctor. “You sound like my dad. I used to have to bring him meals. I spent many an evening sitting at this very desk with him eating noodles and Brahmin steak.”

Red patted her friend on the hand. “You’re a good egg Keelah.”

“I’m a hungry egg.” Keelah rose to her feet. “I’ll catch up with you later. And if Victoria Watts turns out to be a good lead, I’ll owe you one.”

“You’ll owe me two. I’m still waiting on that homemade breakfast you promised me.”

Keelah grinned. “You like your eggs sunny side up or scrambled?”

“Do imitation eggs scramble?”

They laughed again.

Keelah’s good mood continued when she turned and saw the image across the room: Reilly asleep on the roll-away cot.


“Well, Reilly has a way about her too.”

And Keelah was about to say something more when Amata entered the clinic, carrying two trays of
Keelah and Amata locked eyes. Immediately looked away. There was still a lot of hostility between them. Hurt feelings.

Amata carried the trays of food to Red’s desk; set them down on the flat surface and took the seat that Keelah had just vacated.

“These grilled cheese sandwiches do look good Keelah,” Red said cheerfully. Completely oblivious to the thick tension that existed between her two guests.

Keelah could only nod. Her mouth tightening as she realized that Amata was Red’s nightly visitor. The two women had probably been dining together for more than a month. Ever since Red first arrived at Vault 101. They’d spent a month laughing together; swapping stories; developing a friendship.

Keelah's stomach churned.

It's not like I'm jealous or anything, Keelah told herself. Even as a muscle ticked in her jaw.

And she wasn’t jealous. Red was her friend and so was Amata. And there was nothing wrong with her friends being friends. Right?

But there was an unmistakable heat in Red’s eyes when the doctor accepted wrapped utensils from Amata. There was a new lightness to the doctor’s voice; a smile that bordered on wanting.

And it was easy to tell that Amata enjoyed Red’s company too. The Overseer’s face had discernibly softened. She seemed relaxed, and she joked with Red as she cut her sandwich into neat triangles.

Keelah suddenly felt out of place. Like she was intruding on something private.

She cleared her throat and Red finally acknowledged her. “Would you like to join us Keelah? There’s room enough at the desk.”

But Keelah shook her head.

Red had offered to let her join them; had even pushed back her chair as she prepared to get Keelah a dinner tray; but Amata had continued to cut into her sandwich; continued to ignore Keelah and concentrate on an activity that shouldn’t have required such intense focus.

“I’ll just eat in the cafeteria,” Keelah responded lamely. “It’ll give me an opportunity to check in with the Lamplighters and Towners.”

“Come see me before you head back out into the wasteland,” Red said. And she scooted her chair back into the desk. “I want to give you a once-over. See what’s going on with your back.”

Amata’s cool demeanor slipped at Red’s words. There was a brief look of concern on the Overseer’s face, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come.

“I never said there was anything wrong with my back,” Keelah protested.

Red smiled. “I’m a doctor Keelah. It’s my job to notice these things.” And the doctor gave Keelah her most stern look. “Tonight or tomorrow. But don’t leave without me checking you out.”

“Fine.” Keelah lifted a hand. Why she was waving at Red, she didn’t know. But she needed to do something with her hands. Before she threw something or broke down and punched her own stupid
Now her legs. *Walk away Keelah*, she instructed herself.

She pushed her way out of the clinic. Mindful of the spirited laughter that was taking place behind her. The jubilant voices; the palpable energy between the dining women.

Keelah ate her imitation grilled cheese sandwich in a back booth of the cafeteria. The wastelander was in poor spirits, but she took some pleasure in noticing how the Lamp/Towners seemed at ease sharing tables and booths with the 101ers. Hannon had endeared himself to the Lamp/Towners during the escort, and the senior officer had an entire table full of teenagers eating with him, laughing with him.

Old Lady Palmer seemed to be a hit as well. The youngest Lamplighters were practically glued to the woman’s side, and Keelah could almost see the old woman counting in her head, how many sweetrolls she needed to bake to accommodate all of the vault’s new boarders.

Keelah chewed on her final bit of sandwich. Watched with some interest as Bittercup left the table she was sharing with Kimba and Joseph and crossed over to hers.

There was an empty seat across from Keelah. Bittercup slid into the space beside Keelah.

“Why are you eating all alone?” Bittercup asked her, stealing a potato crisp from Keelah’s plate and crunching on it happily.

“All the other tables were full.”

Bittercup smirked. Clearly not believing Keelah. “I woke up from our afternoon nap and you were gone.”

Keelah swallowed more quickly than she’d intended to. Felt a piece of bread lodge painfully in her throat. She coughed. “I had an appointment with the Overseer.”

“How’d that go?”

“Fine.”

“The mayor lady seems really nice. She told us today that she’d let us choose whichever jobs we wanted. I think I’m going to try for hairstylist.”

“That sounds like a good fit for you.” But Keelah’s tone wasn’t as congratulatory as she’d intended it to be. The wastelander pushed her plate away. Suddenly felt sick even though she’d only eaten half of her meal.

Bittercup seemed to notice something was amiss. She put a hand on Keelah’s knee. Squeezed once. Twice.

Of course Susie walked into the cafeteria at that exact moment. The blonde vaulter couldn’t see Bittercup’s hand on Keelah’s knee, but she did see Keelah and Bittercup sharing a booth, sharing a cushion, sharing words that had to be softly spoken since both women’s heads were angled so closely together.

Susie was trailed by Freddie Gomez. The lanky 101er followed Susie to Keelah’s table. Took a seat
next to Susie when the blonde vaulter slid into the seat across from Keelah and Bittercup.

“You’re back,” Susie said without preamble.

Keelah eyed Susie. Communicated a warning when she saw Susie’s eyes slide to Bittercup. “I’m back,” the wastelander said. “Hey Freddie.”

“Hey.” The 101er grinned at Keelah. It had been a long while since they’d seen each other. He kicked Keelah beneath the table. Winked at her.


Freddie shrugged bashfully. “I was just glad Amata let me do it. There used to be a time when I’d get grounded for drawing on the walls.”

Bittercup perked up. “You’re the artist?” she asked Freddie.

“I wouldn’t call myself an artist…” The young man flushed; his face turning red. “I just like to doodle.”

“Everything was so…rad,” Bittercup complimented. The young woman was uncharacteristically animated. “I especially liked the dolphin. He seemed menacing somehow.”

“It’s a she, but Lady Mammalade is menacing.” Freddie leaned forward excitedly. Brushed his shoulder-length hair back from his face and practically quivered with enthusiasm. “She’s not your run-of-the-mill friendly dolphin. She’s a pissed off dolphin vamp with a score to settle. When she was younger her family was killed by these disgruntled fishermen…”

Just the mention of fishermen made Keelah’s head hurt. The wastelander held up a hand to stop Freddie’s spiel. She’d heard enough about Lady Mammalade when she was a teenager.

“I hate to interrupt, but I have a thing to do.” Keelah grabbed her discarded plate and motioned Bittercup to let her out of the booth.

“And I…uh…promised I’d help Keelah with that thing,” Susie added quickly And the blonde elbowed her way past Freddie; took her place by Keelah’s side.

Keelah was somewhat surprised when Bittercup reclaimed her seat at the table. “You’re staying Bittercup?” Keelah asked her.

“I want to hear more about the vampire dolphin.” And the Big Towner turned her attention back to her Freddie. Her eyes wide with interest. “So back to the fisherman. Are they Lady Mammalade’s primary antagonists?”

“Yeah, but there’s also a beluga whale with a bad attitude that Lady Mammalade has a few run-ins with. But I think he may end up being a love interest. I haven’t decided yet.”

Keelah could only shake her head as she walked away, Susie tailing her. The wastelander put her plate in its appropriate bin then headed out of the cafeteria.

Susie followed her. Bumping Keelah with her hip to get the wastelander to slow down.

“What’s wrong?” Susie asked her.

“Nothing.”
"I don’t believe you. Your face is all pinched and sad-looking. And Amata looked pretty down herself this morning."

"What makes you think I had anything to do with that?"

"’Cause you’re the only one who can make Amata look so despondent. You and her dad."

The comment made Keelah stop walking. The wastelander gave Susie a pained look. “Please don’t compare me to him.”

“Sorry.”

Keelah nodded, accepting the apology. But she didn’t resume walking. She just stared down the hallway; in the direction of the clinic where Amata and Red were having their evening meal.

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Susie said. And she grabbed Keelah by her belt. Pulled her in the opposite direction towards the vault door.

Susie keyed in the vault password. Stepped backwards as the metal door creaked open. “Did you notice anything when you came in earlier?” Susie asked Keelah.

“The dog smell?”

“No.”

Susie walked into the dark tunnel. Fumbled with something near her right.

After a second or two, the tunnel erupted in light.

The strings of fairy lights, from the Lamplight caverns, had been strung down each side of the tunnel. The lights gave off a warm, inviting glow. Made the tunnel seem more cozy somehow. Less like a grim passageway that led to the outdoors.

Susie smiled at the awed expression on Keelah’s face. “They’re a lot better than that low wattage lightbulb, huh?”

“Much better.”

“Me and Donovan are going to find a way to put the STOP sign near the front door too.”

Keelah touched Susie’s shoulder. “Thanks for this. The Lamplighters will love seeing this when they visit the dogs.”

“That’s not all. Come on.” Susie tugged Keelah deeper into the tunnel. It wasn’t long before she’d pulled Keelah outside, past the wooden lattice door into the wasteland.

“We going somewhere?” Keelah asked her, confusion evident in her voice.

“Just up the incline to this little nook I found.”

Susie led her to an outcrop of rock just above the vault door. They had to scamper a bit to get there; scrabble at rock and climb, climb, climb. But when they made it to the top and settled into the space that Susie indicated, Keelah could tell why the vaulter had made such an effort.

The view was breathtaking. An entire sky of stars above their head. Some that Keelah had never seen before.
“This is…wow.” Keelah took a seat in the dirt. Tilted her head back until all she saw was stars and sky.

“I figured you’d like it.”

Susie sat in the space beside her. So close that their sides touched and their breaths co-mingled.

Susie pointed to a pattern of stars to her right. “See that one? It looks like a bear. The head’s right there. And those are the paws.”

Keelah peered closer. “Yeah, I can see it. It’s nice.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes. Marveling at the starlight.

“How long have you been coming up here?” Keelah asked Susie.

“Ever since my trip to Megaton. When you pointed out the stars to me.” Keelah smiled. “I haven’t shown anyone else yet. Wanted you to see it first.”

Keelah chose her next words carefully. “You planning to bring Donovan up here?”

Susie gave her a sidelong glance. “Are you suggesting something Keelah?”

“Don’t play coy Susie Q.”

Susie chuckled. Punched Keelah in the arm affectionately. “I like Donovan. He’s sweet. And he’s expressed interest. But I don’t know.” She ran her fingers through her ponytail. A nervous gesture. “How’s it going to work? Him out there? Me in here?”

“Vault 101 is open now, Suze. It’s not a turnstile, of course, but it’s also not the prison it used to be. You and Donovan can find a way. And I’m sure Amata won’t be adverse to him visiting from time to time.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Susie looped an arm through Keelah’s. Patted the wastelander against her shoulder. “And what about you and your love interest, huh? Is this thing between you and Bittercup serious? ‘Cause I’m beginning to think that me running interference isn’t effective.”

“It isn’t effective. And it’s completely unnecessary since there’s no thing between me and Bittercup.”

“Oh, there’s a thing Keelah. Don’t deny it. I just don’t understand why you’d pursue something with Bittercup when you know how Amata feels about you.”

“Why do you care so much Susie?” And Keelah removed her arm from Susie’s grasp. Stared at her friend with a frustrated look on her face. “When we were growing up, you didn’t even talk to me. Or Amata. You didn’t talk to anyone. Now, all of a sudden, you and Amata are best friends and you’re trying to play matchmaker. What gives?”

For a second it looked like Susie wasn’t going to respond. Then the vaulter let loose a deep breath. “I guess I didn’t talk to people much back then because I had my hands full with family stuff. My parents are…difficult. And my brothers…” She sighed heavily. “It’s hard to make friends when you have brothers like Wally and Stevie. Wally was always terrorizing people with the Tunnel Snakes. And Stevie wasn’t much better with his baton and bad attitude. Most people gave me a wide berth. Thought I was just another bad-tempered Mack.”

Susie shrugged. Turned her attention back to the stars so that she wouldn’t have to see Keelah’s face.
“I would have been your friend Susie,” Keelah told her. “So would have Amata. You didn’t have to go it alone.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. We’re friends now, right?”

And Susie looped her arm back through Keelah’s; cupped the wastelander’s elbow as if she were afraid Keelah would pull away from her again.

And Keelah suddenly realized why the blonde was so affectionate with her—why she doled out so many pokes and pinches and punches. Susie had never truly had a friend growing up. Someone she could confide in; be silly with; someone with whom she could share her secrets and insecurities.

It made Keelah sad when she thought about it. So many of her peers in Vault 101 had had a miserable childhood. Had been hurting, alone.

Butch and Susie; Amata and Freddie.

_We spent so much time sniping at each other and avoiding one another when what we should have been doing was talking. Had we been honest with each other, maybe we would have realized how much we all had in common._

And now Butch was gone and Paul Jr was dead. Freddie was chronically depressed and no one knew what had become of Wally.

Keelah squeezed Susie’s hand, recalling the blonde teenager who would scowl at anyone in her proximity. Who would always find a seat in the furthest corner of the room; who trailed her big brothers, Stevie and Wally; putting out their fires, intervening in their fights.

No one had ever paid much attention to Susie Mack. Wally and Stevie’s personalities dwarfed their baby sister’s; invisibilized her.

“Thank you for bringing me up here,” Keelah told her friend. Her eyes fixed forward but her mind mired in the past.

“You’re welcome,” Susie murmured.

And the two of them remained seated there until the stars gave way to softer light.

Chapter End Notes

Ben Canning is a random encounter in Fallout 3. He really does ask the Lone Wanderer to kill him. I was always a little bit taken aback by his morbid request and decided to add him to this story and expand his character a bit.

Grandma Sparkle did have sons who were cut out of the base game. She mentions them as an aside during gameplay.

Chapter Title inspired by Wu Tang Klan and Otis Redding
Chapter Summary

LW/Amata feels.

Chapter Notes

As you may have heard, Lifetime is rebooting the film Beaches which will star Nia Long and Idina Menzel (double swoon). I’ve always appreciated the enduring friendship of CC Bloom and Hilary Whitney, and I decided to channel the movie with this throwback chapter of sorts.

I know there hasn’t been a ton of LW/Amata feels in this story, so hopefully this chapter makes up for that.

Chapter 25 – As Long as There’s the Two of Us

A Nascent Friendship - Eight Years Old

It was the muffled sound of crying that drew Keelah’s attention. The eight-year old had been playing on the stairs outside the reactor room—dropping marbles down the steep staircase one at a time to see which balls were bounciest—when she heard the strangled sobs.

She tiptoed down the rest of the stairs, collecting her game pieces along the way; and peeked around the door into the reactor room. Keelah knew that sometimes the older kids snuck down to the basement level to smoke cigarettes or steal a quiet moment with their sweethearts. The little girl didn’t want to see anything she wasn’t supposed to. But her curiosity got the best of her. Who would come all the way down to the smelly reactor room to cry?

The first thing she saw was curls. Long, springy ringlets of hair that looked like homespun wool. The head of hair hid the face of the person who was crying, but Keelah could easily identify the weeping child by the yellow bracelet dangling from her wrist.

It was Amata. The Overseer’s daughter.

No one in Vault 101 wore jewelry. Not unless you counted the facial piercings some of the older boys had. The disaffected teens would take serrated nails and mutilate their faces. Poke holes into their eyebrows and noses and call the homemade piercings cool even though they usually ended up in the infirmary right afterwards.

But the jewelry Amata wore wasn’t makeshift. It was pretty. Delicate. A gift she’d gotten from her mother on her third birthday and that she wore every day.
Most of the other vault children assumed Amata was trying to show off. Brandishing a heart-adorned bracelet when most of them popped rubber bands against their wrists; when the most they ever got on their birthdays was an extra helping at dinner and a sweet roll from Old Lady Palmer.

*Rich bitch, rich bitch,* the other kids would taunt. They would go so far as to pull Amata’s hair. Call her princess. Never noticing that Amata’s affluence—those gifts and privileges she received because she was the Overseer’s daughter—didn’t make her happy.

But Keelah noticed. She was perceptive like that. She saw the way the Overseer gifted his daughter objects but never gave her time. How the stern-faced leader would put his hand around Amata’s wrist rather than hold her hand.

And this wasn’t the first time Keelah had seen Amata crying all alone in some corner. But this was the first time the eight-year old decided to do something about it.

Keelah clomped into the reactor room, stomping loudly so that Amata would hear her and have enough time to compose herself.

By the time Keelah drew close to the Overseer’s daughter, Amata had cleared her face of tears; had pushed her hair into a respectable knot at the back of her head and gathered her emotions.

If it wasn’t for her reddened eyes and the barest pink that dusted her brown cheeks, Keelah would have never guessed that the little girl had been crying.

Amata sniffled. Blinked rapidly in an effort to remove the moisture from her lashes. “You scared me,” she told Keelah.

“Did you think I was a radroach or something?”

“No.” And the little girl summoned a handkerchief from somewhere in her vault jumpsuit; used the soft fabric to wipe her nose.

Keelah sized up the room’s floor. Quickly decided that it was more than suitable for a game of marbles. She knelt on the cold floor. Began lining her game pieces in a row.

“What are you doing?” Amata asked her.

“I’m going to shoot marbles.”

“With a gun?”

“What? No! Haven’t you ever played marbles before?”

“No.” Amata knelt in the space beside her. “Is that what these are?” She picked up one of the game pieces. Rolled the glass ball between her fingers and marveled at the brilliant orange coloring.

“That’s the shooter. It’s my favorite marble of all. Won it off Freddie Gomez last year and haven’t lost a game since.”

Keelah took the fluorescent marble out of Amata’s hands. Returned it to the ground with the rest of the game pieces. “You want me to teach you how to play?” she asked Amata.

Amata studied Keelah. Surprised by her friendliness; her generosity. “Yes,” the little girl said breathlessly.

And Keelah flashed the quiet girl an exuberant smile before launching into the basics of shooting
marbles.

They’d been playing for twenty minutes when Amata decided to initiate conversation. Keelah hadn’t spoken much since she’d explained the game’s rules, and Amata decided that she missed the other girl’s voice.

“You’re the doctor’s daughter. Catherine.”

“No one calls me Catherine.”

Keelah shot Amata’s marble; sent it spinning out of the ring.

“Oh,” Amata answered softly. Worried that she’d offended her new companion.

“Just call me Keelah.”

Keelah grinned at Amata (*No hard feelings*) before returning her attention to the game. A hint of tongue peeked between the eight-year old’s lips as she claimed another marble. Keelah whooped happily and slapped her thigh.

Amata was mesmerized. How could someone have so much fun spinning tiny bits of glass across a dirty floor?

“You don’t seem to mind that you’re losing,” Keelah said; pocketing yet another of Amata’s marbles. “I have nearly all of your marbles now.”

“Well…they’re *your* marbles. I’m only borrowing them.”

Keelah giggled. “That’s true. Still, on your next turn, try a bit harder to knock my marbles out of the ring. It’s no fun if you don’t threaten at least some of my pieces.”

Amata used her fingers to twirl the oversized orange marble. Sent the tiny orb spinning; revolutions that were too many to count.

“It’s so pretty,” Amata commented. Waiting until the toy came to rest before spinning it again.

“It’s not supposed to be pretty. It’s supposed to be accurate.”

And Keelah reclaimed the marble. Thumped it with her knuckle until it careened wildly.

Keelah’s movements were brute whereas Amata’s were delicate.

“You play, I’ll watch,” Amata volunteered.

And both girls seemed to enjoy this new arrangement since it felt more like playing *with* each other rather than against each other.

. . . . . . . . . .

Keelah was showing her new friend the proper way to do a handstand when Amata began to hum. Keelah flopped onto her back. Stared up at the ceiling and tried to catch her breath.

“What’s that?” she asked Amata.

“What’s what?”
“That song you were singing.”

“Oh… I’m sorry. I’ll stop.” And Amata fiddled with the bracelet on her wrist. Squeezed one of the plastic hearts between her fingers.

Keelah sat up on her elbows. “No, the song was nice. I just couldn’t hear.” Keelah tried to recall the melody. Sang a few words in a warbled tone.

Amata smiled. “It goes like this…”

And the Overseer’s daughter began to sing:

You are my sunshine  
My only sunshine  
You make me happy  
When skies are gray  
You’ll never know dear  
How much I love you  
Please don’t take my sunshine away

The song sounded even better when it was sang out loud.

Keelah repeated the last line. Felt an unfamiliar warmth bloom in her chest. “I don’t remember learning that song in choir,” she said.

“That’s not where I learned it. My mother used to sing that song to me. Every night before bed. She would say that… since the vault didn’t have a sun, I would have to do. I would have to be her sunshine.”

And for a moment it looked like Amata was going to cry again.

Keelah bit her bottom lip. Tried to decide whether another handstand would remove that tortured look from Amata’s face.

“Today’s my birthday,” Amata said suddenly.

“I didn’t know that. Happy Birthday.”

Amata nodded. Squeezed the bracelet again. A tangle of plastic hearts circling her wrist.

“Shouldn’t you be happy on your birthday?” Keelah asked her. “You’re going to get a cake and a party and probably a crap ton of presents, seeing as you’re the Overseer’s daughter and all.”

“It’s been my birthday all day, and I haven’t gotten a single thing yet.” Amata sniffled. “Besides, I don’t want a cake or a party. I don’t even want presents. My dad promised to spend the day with me. He was going to play me a record on his phonograph. Teach me how to dance.” She shook her head. “He promises me the same thing every year. And every year he forgets.”
Keelah tried her hardest not to make a face. She didn’t see how spending the day with the Overseer would be a gift. The man was a grump. And he had a mean face.

“What about your mom?” Keelah asked. “Did she forget your birthday too? Is that why you were crying?”

“My mom is dead. She died when I was a little girl.”

“You’re still a little girl.”

But even as she said it, Keelah doubted the validity of her words. Amata’s eyes weren’t the same as other kids. Neither was her posture. The Overseer’s daughter seemed mature.

No. Matured. As if growing up had been something that had happened against her will.

“My mom is dead too,” Keelah volunteered. And this time when she flicked her marble, she didn’t bother to watch where it rolled. “I never got to meet her.”

“I’m sorry.”

Keelah cut her eyes at Amata. “Why are you sorry?”

“I don’t know. ‘I’m sorry’ is just something that grown-ups say when they feel bad but don’t know what to do about it.”

“Then I’m sorry for you too.”

Keelah lay back against the ground. Not caring that the floor would stain her jumpsuit; and that her careless movements had sent her marbles scattering.

Amata joined her. Aligned her body with Keelah’s on the metal floor and only hissed a little when the cold seeped through her clothes.

“Will you sing that song again?” Keelah asked.

“Yes.”

And Amata did.

You are my sunshine
My only sunshine
You make me happy
When skies are gray
You’ll never know dear
How much I love you
Please don’t take my sunshine away

When Amata concluded the song she asked Keelah a question:
“Now will you sing a song for me?”

“Which song?”

“Happy Birthday.”

“…”

And Keelah did.

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_Their First Fight - Sixteen Years Old_

Keelah flicked the light on in the hallway. The teenager began unzipping her vault jumpsuit as she made her way to her bedroom. She needed to change her clothes before her father saw her.

Keelah jumped nearly a foot when she saw someone sitting on her bed.

“Amata! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” she exclaimed.

“Did you think I was a radroach?” Amata responded dryly.

Keelah rolled her eyes and continued unzipping her vault suit. But she angled her body away from her friend; burrowed into her closet as she surreptitiously tried to wiggle her way out of one pair of coveralls and into another.

Amata wasn’t fooled. “Turn around Keelah,” she commanded.

“But I’m naked.”

“You have underclothes on. Besides, I’ve seen you in less. Now turn around.”

Keelah stepped out of the closet. She was down to her bra and panties, but the teenager held her balled-up jumpsuit in front of her body. She gripped the tangle of clothes as if they were a lifeline.

But Keelah wasn’t trying to shield her uncovered body from Amata’s gaze. She was trying to hide her jumpsuit.

Amata saw through the deception. Even though it was rolled into a ball, the Overseer’s daughter could see the tears in the blue fabric; could discern that there was more than a fair amount of blood that had stained the material a deep purple.

When Amata spoke, her tone was reproachful. “You’ve been fighting. _Again._”

“It wasn’t my fault this time.”

“It’s _never_ your fault Keelah.”

There was no use in hiding it anymore. Keelah tossed her ruined jumpsuit into the trash bin. Began riffling through her closet for another one.

Amata rose from the bed. Crossed over to her best friend’s side and stood there, glaring, as she watched Keelah pull on another outfit.
“You promised your father that you’d stop all this nonsense.” Keelah grunted. Pulled her zipper high until it touched her neck. “You promised me.”

“What am I supposed to do? Let Butch and his Tunnel Idiots terrorize everybody? Sometimes those jerks need a good smack. And lucky for them I have two hands.”

“Oh yeah? Well they have six hands between them, and you always come out of these scrapes worse than they do.”

It was an understatement. Now that she was standing closer to her friend, Amata could see the bruises forming against Keelah’s face. The teenager had a busted lip; the beginnings of a black eye. And was that a cut on her cheek?!

“Did Butch pull a switchblade on you?!” Amata snarled. Her voice bellowing in her rage.

Keelah put a hand against the bloody line that bisected her cheek. “It was Wally. And don’t worry about it. That turd’s going to have to pee sitting down for at least a week.” And she winked at Amata. Used her tongue to collect some of the blood that covered her bottom lip.

“This isn’t funny Keelah.”

A handkerchief appeared in Amata’s hand (Keelah didn’t know where Amata kept those things) and Amata tried her best to clean Keelah’s face; removing blood that was already drying. She pressed gentle fingertips against skin that was purpling.

“You know, I happen to like your face,” Amata told Keelah, cupping her best friend’s cheeks as a way to emphasize her point. “It’s a shame you keep letting the Tunnel Snakes pummel it.”

Keelah twisted away from the grasp. Quickly put some distance between herself and Amata. Sometimes her and Amata’s exchanges got to be a little too…touchy. And Keelah nearly forgot herself. Nearly leaned forward to whisper an important secret into Amata’s ear. Or do something else that involved her lips.

Keelah flopped down on her bed. Rubbed the back of her neck moodily and hoped that her bruises hid the blush blanketing her skin.

“It’s not that I want to fight those jerks all the time, it’s just…God! They’re awful. Last week they wrote some pretty nasty things about Christine Kendall in the boys’ bathroom.”

“So you decided to pay them back by spray painting their…likenesses…on the walls in Brotch’s classroom?”

“Well, Freddy helped with that. But you have to admit… that tunnel worm mural was pretty clever. Butch and his crew like to sexually harass people so much. See how they like it.”

“It was immature.”

“Well, I’m sixteen, aren’t I?”

“That’s not the point. The vault doesn’t need you to play the role of big bad protector Keelah. We have security officers who can do that. And an Overseer.”

Keelah rolled her eyes. “Yeah right.”

Amata’s mouth flattened into a disapproving line. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Nothing.”

Amata walked forward until she was standing directly in front of Keelah. The teenager stared down at her friend. “Speak your mind ‘Kee.’

Keelah sucked her teeth; choosing her words carefully. “You ever wonder why the Tunnel Snakes never get more than a slap on the wrist? How is it that Butch and his cronies can bully an entire classroom of people, every day, and all they get is an extra work detail? Or after-school detention? Yet when I retaliate against those fucks, I spend a weekend sitting in jail and have to endure two full hours of the Overseer yelling at me.”

“It’s not jail. It’s a holding area. And my father wouldn’t be so severe with you if you didn’t insist on debating him when he’s levying out punishments.”

“I don’t debate him. I defend myself. I’m allowed to defend myself, right? Even when it’s the Overseer?”

“And that’s what you do Keelah. All the time. You defend yourself. You use obscene drawings and coarse language. You use your fists and your BB gun to defend yourself against the Tunnel Snakes and my father and anyone else who doesn’t curtsy when you walk by!”

Amata’s voice had risen. The young woman practically trembled with anger; some other emotion.

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. “You’re saying I’m the problem?”

“What I’m saying is that your temper...your propensity to fight...takes bad situations and makes them worse.” Amata shifted uncomfortably. Crossed her arms over her chest. “You need to learn to control yourself Keelah. You need to grow up.”

Keelah’s eyes nearly went black in her anger. The teenager rose to her feet. Stood toe to toe with her best friend and glared. “I should be more like you, huh? Just let those freaks say whatever the hell they want to me and pretend I don’t hear it? I should bow and scrape for the Overseer and hope that one day he acknowledges my servility and...I don’t know...pay attention to me for once? Hug me? Remember my fucking birthday?”

She’d gone too far. Keelah knew it the moment Amata’s eyes watered. Keelah immediately felt a responding wet fill her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Keelah whispered. Her hand fluttering uselessly at her side as she felt a sick feeling overcome her body.

“I’m so stupid!” She berated herself.

Amata stepped away from her. Put her hands against Keelah’s desk and leaned; needing the support of the wooden table. Needing to feel something solid beneath her hands.

Amata cleared her throat. Spoke in a voice that was nowhere near as firm as it had been just moments ago. “If you continue to fight the Tunnel Snakes...If you continue to challenge my father and undermine his authority...” Amata’s voice trembled and she stopped speaking for a second. “He’s going to forbid me from associating with you. And I don’t want that.” Amata lifted her head. Stared at Keelah with wide, wounded eyes. “Because...what would I do without my best friend?”

Keelah’s face fell and the teenager hastened to Amata’s side.

They apologized to each other with tears. Tears and hugs that lasted an indeterminable amount of
time.

And when the reconciliation was over—when all that remained was the softness that was ever present between them—both girls had to change their jumpsuits. They’d dampened the blue fabric with tears; and the blood from Keelah’s injuries had transferred to Amata’s clothing.

They stood there, in bare feet, and helped each other pull on clean outfits. Amata’s hands lingered against Keelah’s shoulders. Keelah pressed the pads of her fingers against the freckles on Amata’s face.

There was something building between them—something new; softer; deeper—but it would take them years to examine it further. And by that time, Keelah would be a vault outcast.

**That Same Night**

“Your feet are cold.”

“So? My feet are always cold.”

“I know that. Why are your feet *always* cold?”

“I dunk them in ice each night before bed…Geez! How am I supposed to know?” Keelah asked.

“Keep those popsicles to yourself, will you? I’m not trying to catch pneumonia.” Keelah wiggled her toes along Amata’s ankles. “Stop!” Amata shrieked. But she giggled too. Pressed closer when she should have been pulling away if the frigidity really bothered her *that* much.

“How about a compromise?” Keelah interlocked their legs so that the two girls were still touching, but now her feet were behind Amata, pressed into the bed sheets. “Better?”

“Much.”

Amata shifted until her head was balanced on Keelah’s shoulder. The Overseer’s daughter sighed contentedly. Curled her arm around Keelah’s waist and inhaled the scent of soap and vanilla.

“Your hair smells like sugar cookies,” Amata commented.

“I washed it. The blood, you know?”

Amata sighed. Toyed with one of Keelah’s braids. The teenager’s hair was still damp from her shower. And even though Amata couldn’t see the lengthy tresses in the darkened bedroom, she could visualize its sheen; the thick texture.

“What were you and the Tunnel Snakes fighting about anyway?” Amata asked her.

“Oh…” Keelah squirmed uncomfortably. Seemed almost hesitant to answer. “Paul Hannon asked me out.”

“Paul Hannon Junior?”

“Of course Paul Hannon Junior. You don’t think his dad would ask me out do you?”
Amata swatted Keelah on her arm. Then hissed when Keelah retaliated by running her cold feet along the back of her thighs.

“Paul Junior asked you out?” Amata repeated disbelievingly. “You beat him up like every other day!”

“Eh…I focus most of my punches on Butch and Wally. Paul’s mostly harmless. He’s actually pretty nice when you get him alone.”

Amata stiffened in Keelah’s arms. “Does that mean you’ve gotten him alone before?”

“We’ve talked a time or two. He’s really smart. Knows a lot about electronics. We’re thinking about building a miniature robot. Hiding it in the reactor room.”

“So you’ve been to the reactor room with him?”

“Yeah.” Keelah was beginning to feel sleepy. She yawned. Used her best friend’s chest as a pillow. She was halfway to sleep when she realized that Amata had stopped talking. The Overseer’s daughter played with Keelah’s hair—her chest rising and falling steadily; a moving pillow—but the silence was different somehow. Strained.

Keelah lifted her head until she could see Amata’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Who said anything’s wrong?”

“Are you still mad at me for what I said earlier? About your dad? I’m so sorry Amata.”

“I know you are. That’s not it.” Amata sighed again. And she pressed against Keelah’s shoulders until the teenager put her head back down; resumed her snuggle against Amata’s chest and side. “It’s just…I know what people do down in the reactor room.”

“Yeah? Well me and you nap down there so just what are you getting at?”

Amata closed her eyes. Counted to ten. “So Paul Junior asked you out?”

“Yes.” Keelah toyed with the hem of Amata’s nightgown. Then pulled her bruised lip into her
mouth and sucked on the tender flesh. “It doesn’t matter. I was going to turn him down anyway. Paul’s smart and all, but he’s not my type.”

“Oh?” Amata’s hand tightened in Keelah’s hair.

“Well… a nice Tunnel Snake is still a Tunnel Snake, right? I don’t date bullies.”

“I see.”

Amata’s hand traveled to the back of Keelah’s neck. She kneaded the skin there. Both teenagers sighed at the contact.

“Does this mean you won’t be going to the reactor room with Paul again?” Amata asked.

“We just talked. And fiddled around with scrap metal.”

“Does this mean you won’t be going to the reactor room with him again?” Amata repeated.

Keelah rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

“Good.”

It was quiet save their breathing. Both teenagers lost in their thoughts.

“Do you mind if I sleep here tonight?” Amata asked.

Keelah touched her friend’s hand. Curled her fingers until their palms were touching.

“Amata, you never have to ask that question.”

Amata smiled. “Good.”
Chapter Summary

Keelah gets some surprising information regarding Anne Palmer and the lost scouting party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 26 – Killing Me Softly

“When I really have to be naked for this?”

“I can’t very well give you a check-up when you have on armor.”

Keelah squirmed uncomfortably against the metal gurney. “But it’s cold.”

“You have a towel on.”

“This scrap of fabric is nowhere near long enough to be called a towel.”

“Stop complaining.”

“Could you at least turn the heat up a couple degrees?”

“Keelah, I’ve seen you take a sledgehammer to the face. You didn’t whine as much.”

“T’m not whining…” Keelah grumbled.

But the comment did come out a bit pouty and Red hesitated at the woman’s uncharacteristic sulking.

The doctor sat her clipboard on the table. Put her hands on her hips and studied her grumpy friend. “What’s wrong Keelah?” she asked.

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“You’ve been snippy all morning.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“And I practically had to drag you into the clinic to do this check-up.”

“I have some medical training, you know? And I’m quite capable of taking care of myself. I don’t need to strip down to my underwear and let you poke me with cold, metal objects.”

“I haven’t poked you with anything.”

“Yet.”
Red was beginning to feel exasperated. “Keelah, I just want to check out your back okay? You’ve been favoring your right side for weeks, and I want to make sure there’s no serious damage. Will you give me five minutes to look you over? My goodness!”

The irritability was catching.

“Fine!” Keelah snapped.

And the wastelander pressed her face back into the table. Bit back any more unwarranted comments as Red resumed her examination; using her hands to press into the tendons of Keelah’s back, side, and hip.

“Does this hurt?” Red touched a spot above Keelah’s hip bone.

“Shit! Yes.” Keelah nearly fell off the table. Just managed to hold on to the metal tabletop with clenched fingers.

Red made a note to her chart. Tapped the pencil against the clipboard as she stared thoughtfully at Keelah.

“I think you may have a dislocated joint in your hip.”

Keelah raised her head from the table; eyed Red confusedly. “I have a broken hip?”

“No, not that serious. But I’ll need to put you on a treatment of Med-X. Do some manipulations on your hip. Pop a few things into place.”

“That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun.”

“It won’t be.” Red put the clipboard down. Adjusted the towel around Keelah’s hips so that she could better see the injured area. “This should only take a second.”

And when she pressed down against Keelah’s hip bone, the wastelander actually did feel a pop.

The only reason Keelah didn’t scream to the high heavens was because Reilly was in the next room sleeping. And because Keelah had bitten so savagely into her own lip that the resulting blood made producing sound impossible.

Keelah lay flat against the cold surface of the operating table. Tried to catch her breath as the pain in her hip and back slowly receded.

“I’ll need to do that at least two times a week until your hip joint realigns.” And Red smoothed the inflamed area with her hands as if the gentle motion would offset the pain and accelerate its healing.

“Can I cover my ass now?” Keelah asked, still breathless with pain.

“Go for it. I’ll have that Med-X shot waiting for you when you’re done.”

Keelah moved gingerly from the table; limped over to the armor lying atop a chair and began to slowly pull the leather material on.

Red turned slightly to give the woman some privacy. Then began to prepare the syringe of liquid that would dull some of Keelah’s pain.

“Keelah, can I ask you something?”
Keelah grunted. Her mouth had filled with blood from where she bit into her lip and the wastelander spat into the wastebasket; struggling for a few seconds to pull her pants over her smarting hip.

“Is there something between you and Amata?” Red asked.

Keelah’s hands stilled at the question; her armor hanging haphazardly across her body. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Red shrugged. “Well…Amata talks about you a lot. Very kindly. And I know the two of you are old friends…”

Keelah finished affixing her armor. All of a sudden it seemed very important that she be fully clothed for this conversation.

“I happen to like Amata very much,” Red continued. “So much in fact that I’d like a deeper relationship with her. But… I want to make sure she’s not already spoken for.”

Keelah wanted to spit again. What would come out of her mouth when she spat, she didn’t know. But the wastelander swallowed back the bile. Bounced a few times on her heels, testing her hip, before addressing Red.

“Amata speaks for herself,” Keelah told the doctor.

“I know that. It’s just…you’ve done a lot for me. And for the Big Towners and Lamplighters. I consider you a friend. A good one. I would never want to do anything to jeopardize our relationship.”

And Keelah could tell that Red meant it. The doctor stared at her with sincere eyes. And a bowed posture. As if she was worried that Keelah would snap at her or make a scene.

Keelah relaxed her features. Reminded herself that Red had done a lot for her too. And that she also considered the doctor to be one of her good friends.

“Amata and I are old friends,” she told the doctor. “But that’s where it stops.”

And Keelah smiled a little bit. To convince Red (and herself) that the statement was true.


But Keelah collected her weapons. Headed for the clinic door.

“That’s okay. The pain is manageable.”

A confused look crossed Red’s face as Keelah fled the room.

The doctor wasn’t altogether sure which pain Keelah was referring to.

But neither was Keelah.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  .

Keelah stopped at the cafeteria for coffee. She was headed to Rivet City in a bit, to speak with Victoria Watts about the Fisher of Men. She could use a little pick-me-up before undertaking the long trip.
There was no one in the cafeteria besides Pepper Gomez so Keelah had her pick of seats. The wastelander accepted her cup of coffee from the cook than claimed a barstool near the front door.

Keelah let the hot beverage cool a little bit while she scrolled through her Pip-Boy. Re-familiarized herself with the To-Do list that grown even more substantial during the past few weeks.

*Shit.* She’d forgotten about the Mirelurk Queen she’d promised to investigate for Moira. She’d get around to it eventually. When her hip could accommodate her crawling through enclosed spaces.

Keelah looked up from her Pip-Boy when someone settled onto the barstool next to her.

Her scowl was immediate. Feral. And the wastelander nearly growled at her unwelcome guest.

“Good morning,” Alphonse Almodovar drawled. His tone as oily and condescending as usual.

“There are a dozen other seats available.”

“Yes, but I wanted to sit next to you.” The former Overseer turned to Pepper. Requested coffee. Black. Then he returned his attention to Keelah. “You must be pleased. You got all of your little wasteland beggars a new place to call home.”

“I’m thrilled.”

“As you should be.” The Overseer took the coffee Pepper handed him. Took a delicate sip before grinning at Keelah. “I’m sure it makes you feel less like an outcast. Having people of similar…pedigree…in the vault with you.”

“Fuck off.”

Alphonse chuckled. “What language! I can see why Amata is so taken with you. You’re quite the charmer.”

Keelah drank her coffee too fast. Let the hot liquid scorch the back of her throat.

“I must warn you,” Alphonse continued. “I won’t take kindly to you hurting my daughter again.”

Keelah’s head snapped up. She glared at Alphonse with smoldering eyes. “Again? I’ve never hurt Amata.”

“Oh, please. She was a mess after you left the vault. *Both* times. I was almost afraid that she would follow you out into that godforsaken desert. Thank goodness cooler heads prevailed.”

It was a revelation to Keelah. That Amata had considered braving the wastes for her. “You talked her out of it, huh?” Keelah asked the man.

The Overseer shrugged. “She’s my daughter. I want her to be safe.”

“I can tell,” Keelah said sarcastically. “A great job you did, by the way, keeping her safe from Stevie Mack.”

The former Overseer’s eyes flashed with sudden anger. “Officer Mack was a fool. And he overstepped his bounds. I never gave him permission to strike my daughter. He was only supposed to frighten Amata. Compel her to tell us where you were. He lost control of himself, the dumb oaf.” Alphonse took another sip of his coffee. Smiled down into his cup. “He paid for his insubordination though.”
“No thanks to you. I was the one who kicked Stevie’s ass.”

Alphonse laughed then. And the sound was like glass breaking. Discordant. “Please. So what, you knocked him on his hindquarters?” He leaned closer to Keelah; grinned conspiratorially. “I took care of Stevie in a more fitting manner. Who do you think gave Andy the clearance to perform surgery on Stevie?”

A cryptic comment followed by a wink.

The robot had performed a painful surgery on Stevie—torn out his throat—when the security officer only had a mild cough.

Keelah blanched. “You’re sick.”

“Now, now. Let’s not engage in something so childish as name-calling. I simply protect the people I care about. As do you. And it’s not like you can judge me Catherine. I’d be willing to bet that your body count far outnumbers mine.”

“Don’t call me Catherine.”

Alphonse only smirked; pushed his coffee away. “Enough of this unseemly chatter. Let’s have a real drink shall we? Something a bit more robust?” He waved Pepper over. Turned to Keelah with a smile. “You seem like someone who appreciates bourbon.”

“Whisky,” Keelah answered.

“Even better. Pepper—whiskey please? And we’ll take the bottle.”

When the cook returned with the bottle of amber liquid and two glasses, Alphonse gestured Keelah to a back booth in the cafeteria. Keelah hesitated only a second before joining the former leader. She slid into the seat across from Alphonse; watched as he poured her a full glass of alcohol. Passed it over.

Keelah drank the whiskey slowly. Let the full-bodied drink warm her belly.

Alphonse sipped from his own glass. Seemed to be enjoying the cool beverage as much as Keelah.

“I have something to ask you,” Keelah said.

Alphonse seemed surprised by the address. He raised one gray-flecked eyebrow and nodded his head. “Go on.”

“What do you know about the old Overseer? The one before you?”

The question startled Alphonse. He set his glass on the table. Drew long fingers along the glass’ edge as he considered the question.

“The old Overseer? Why the sudden interest?”

“I’m a history buff.”

Alphonse grinned. His mouth like one long ghastly zipper. So many teeth.

It was clear he didn't believe that Keelah’s inquiry was purely academic. “What do you want to know?” he asked.
“Anything. What was he like? What kind of leader was he?” She shrugged. Affecting a casual tone.

“The Overseer was a good man. Well-liked. His name was Elijah Walker. A fitting name since he was so obsessed with the outside. He thought the vault should swing wide our doors and embrace the wasteland.”

Keelah’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected that bit of information.

“The vault used to have a scouting party. Did you know that?” Alphonse didn’t wait for Keelah to answer his question. He smirked at her. As if he knew already that Keelah had read his private journals all those years ago. “Elijah organized the expedition. Wanted the scouts to go outside and see if the wasteland was habitable. He was an ambitious man but foolish. He should have known the risks of opening the vault door.”

As Alphonse spoke, Keelah turned her attention to the self-esteem poster on the wall. Stared moodily at the cheery cartoon character that continued to mock her with his cheerfulness.

“I was a young man then,” Alphonse continued. “An assistant to the Overseer. I tried to talk Elijah out of the expedition. Why risk the lives of our scouts? Anne and Marshall? Robin and Lewis? They had families. Children.” He shook his head slowly as if it still pained him to think about the lost 101ers. “Opening the vault door imperiled us all. But Elijah wouldn’t listen. He said that the vault wasn’t meant to be closed permanently. That the 101ers had to eventually transition to the outside. He sent the scouting party into the wasteland. He sent them to their deaths.”

Keelah’s gaze returned to Alphonse’s. The man stared back at her with spell-binding eyes.

He exhaled. “They didn’t die. Not at first. The expedition made two successful trips to the wasteland and back. But the third time…? They never returned.”

Alphonse picked up his glass as if he were going to take another drink of liquor. But then he put it back on the table.

“Elijah wasn’t the same after that. He waited a while. Took vigil at the vault door. Thinking that Anne and the others would return. But when months passed and they didn’t come back, he closed the vault door. Sealed us shut again.”

He took a drink then. Nearly draining his glass.

“Whatever happened to Overseer Elijah?” Keelah asked him.

“He never got over the scouts’ disappearance. It wore on him. The guilt. Eighteen years after the scouting party disappeared, he got the foolish notion to go out and look for them. Couldn’t bear it a second longer, thinking they were out there waiting for rescue. It was insanity. But, again, he wouldn’t listen when I tried to talk him out of it. The Overseer went out into the wasteland. On his own. He never came back.” Alphonse’s hands clenched around his empty glass. “In his absence, I became Overseer.”

“How convenient.”

Alphonse’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t be so suspicious. I would never harm Overseer Elijah. I respected him. I loved him. He was my father-in-law after all.”

“What?!”

“Yes. The Overseer was Amata’s grandfather. Her mother’s father.” Alphonse’s eyes dimmed and
he sighed heavily. “It was a tough time for my family. Elijah left. Died some horrible death in the wasteland probably. My wife died not even a year later. And Amata was so young. All of a sudden I had no family to speak of. Just my sweet baby girl.”

Keelah exhaled. Suddenly understanding. “Is that why you’ve always been so opposed to the vault being open? Because of what happened to the scouting party? And to your father-in-law?”

Alphonse stared at Keelah with downcast eyes. “The wasteland has taken a lot from me,” he murmured. “I couldn’t allow it to take anything else. So I campaigned to keep the vault closed. And, yes, I was a bit harsh in my convictions, but I was only doing it in the best interests of the vault. You can imagine how I felt when Amata expressed interest in going out to look for you.”

He poured himself another glass of whiskey. Topped of Keelah’s glass. “I know everyone in this vault thinks I’m a monster. And maybe that’s fair criticism. But there are worse things outside the vault door. You know that.”

He raised his glass to Keelah. Toasting what? Monsters? Death? Lost 101ers?

Keelah lifted her glass of whiskey to her lips. Drank thirstily. Her mind racing with this new information.

“Does Amata know any of this?” she asked him.

“The older 101ers thought it best to keep such...unfortunate history from the younger 101ers. But I told Amata as much as I dared. That her grandfather was a good man. And that he passed not too long before her mother. I told her that he died from natural causes, of course.”

Keelah could only imagine how those final moments must have been for Overseer Elijah. Out in the wasteland, alone, searching for his lost expedition party. The Overseer had probably succumbed to the very same pestilence that had claimed Anne and the rest of the scouting party.

“Has your curiosity been satisfied?” Alphonse asked Keelah.

“Yes. I’m actually surprised you told me that much.”

Alphonse eyed her; his gaze intense. “You’re not as fragile as everyone else here is. I figure you can stomach a little truth-telling.”

And the two of them sat there quietly for a few minutes. Drinking their alcohol; thinking about the wasteland; all the lives it had claimed.

Amata interrupted their quiet contemplation.

The Overseer had come into the cafeteria with a message for Pepper Gomez, but when she spied her father and Keelah sharing a booth, the young woman marched over to their table. Cleared her throat loudly as she glared daggers at her father.

“I need to speak to you,” she said sharply. As her eyes took in the bottle of whiskey; the half-filled glasses.

“Sure thing,” Keelah said, rising from her seat.

“No. I need to speak to my father.”

And Amata didn’t even wait for Alphonse’s assent. The Overseer spun on her heels and stomped out
of the cafeteria. She waited for her father in the hallway.

Alphonse smiled when he drifted into his daughter’s orbit. Amata was clearly agitated and the frown she wore was so severe that it put lines on her face.

“Did you come to share lunch with me?” Alphonse asked playfully.

Amata didn’t bother with pleasantries. “Stay away from Keelah,” she hissed.

“Stay away?” Alphonse raised his hands; confusion painting his features. “Can I help it if the girl enjoys my company?”

“I’m serious Dad. I know you. You despise Keelah. The only reason you’d solicit her company is if you had some trick up your sleeve.”

Alphonse put his hands behind his back; stiffened his spine. “Why must I always be the bad guy? I admit that I never cared much for Catherine. She spent far too much time talking back to authority figures. And she seemed hell-bent on corrupting you…” Amata’s glare intensified. “But I’ve warmed to her over the years. Developed what I would describe as a…judicious respect.”

“Just a couple of weeks ago you were calling her wasteland trash.”

He shrugged. “I said I respect her. Liking her is something altogether different.”

“Just stay away from her. You have a pretty good life in the vault. You didn’t get prosecuted for the crimes you committed during the rebellion. You have personal living quarters. A hefty stipend. But if you continue to interfere with my work… If you menace Keelah in any way, I’ll see to it that the next person excommunicated from this vault will be you.”

The threat surprised even Alphonse. The former leader raised an eyebrow; chuckled amusedly as he took in his daughter’s mottled features; her clenched fists. “Such passion Amata! Such loyalty to your friend. I could never dissuade you from her, could I?” And he laughed again. Always patronizing. Even with his own daughter. “Unbridled emotion weakens a person Amata. I thought I taught you that years ago. But you’ll learn.”

And he let his own warning linger in the air between them. Still smiling. Before walking away.

Amata had just deep-breathed herself back in control when Keelah stepped into the hallway. The wastelander looked concernedly at her friend.

“Everything okay?” Keelah asked.

Amata swallowed. Made sure her voice worked properly before speaking. “Yes. I actually need to speak with you. Will you follow me to my office?”

Keelah nodded.

The two women made their way down the hallway. Side by side. Yet, somehow, still apart.

Amata flipped through a stack of papers on her desk. The Overseer obviously had a lot of work demanding her attention and her eyes flickered to the clock on her way before returning to her paperwork; then to Keelah.

“The Lamplighters and Big Towners begin their work details tomorrow. I wanted to go through the
assignments with you, just in case you had any questions or concerns.”

“Wow. You got that sorted fast.”

Amata gave a tired smile. “I sort of made it a priority. Some of the Lamplighters are very…energetic. I thought it best that we give them something to expend that energy on.”

Keelah chuckled. She could only imagine the many things that Zipp, Sammy and Sticky had gotten into the past few days they’d been in the vault.

“The youngest ones won’t have chores, of course. We just want them to focus on school. Unfortunately, we still don’t have a teacher. Brotch is pretty committed to remaining chaplain. And, well, counseling really suits him so I’d hate to ask him to switch careers again.”

“What about Joseph? He was the teacher at Little Lamplight.”

“I asked. But he wants to be a student this time around rather than a teacher and I can’t fault him for that. We’ll just have to run the school by committee until we find a permanent replacement.” Amata began to read from her list. “As for the older ones, Éclair’s been assigned to the kitchen with Pepper. Pepper’s actually pretty excited about having an experienced assistant. Lucy’s interning with Red, naturally. MacCready and Princess will be interning with the guards. Hannon’s overseeing their training. Squirrel’s the new tech intern.” Amata looked up from her report. “Stanley loves him. Squirrel has a good mind for electronics. He has the water purifier working better than ever.”

“Yeah. I’ve seen the kid deactivate slave collars. He’s smart.”

Amata continued reading. “Penny’s the new Pip-Boy programmer. Timebomb was placed in the inventory.”

“That’s a good fit for him. He likes to organize things.”

“Shorty’s working with Derrick with the Little League team.”

“I meant to ask Derrick about that. He mentioned to me once that the Vault-Tec All-stars have a perfect record, but I’ve been thinking about it…how does the vault even have a Little League team when there haven’t been any kids for a long while?”

“Several teenagers continued playing. Just to keep the team going. And Derrick convinced a few of our veteran Little Leaguers to come out of retirement.”

“Like who?”

“You remember Mo’ Harrison?”

“Slo’ Mo’? He’s eighty-five years old!”

“He’s also the all-time hits leader.”

Keelah nearly doubled over in laughter. Amata joined her.

“I’ll have to be sure to attend a game or two while I’m still in the vault,” Keelah sputtered.

“Next one’s this Friday. Pepper’s making popcorn. I can save you a seat.” Amata smiled at Keelah. Long and slow. Then she remembered their impasse. The Overseer wrenched her eyes away.

“Moving on…Kimba and Joseph are working in the library. Bittercup is our new hair stylist.”

Amata’s mouth twitched as she said Bittercup’s name but the Overseer managed to keep her face and
tone neutral. “Everyone else was divided between laundry and maintenance.”

“Well…we decided to do something different with Sticky. He has such unique…talents.” Keelah chuckled knowingly. “Starting tomorrow, Vault 101 will have its first ever theatre department. Sticky and Knock Knock are going to oversee it.”

“Wow. Theatre? That’s a terrific idea.”

“I agree. Stage plays will give 101ers something else to do on the weekends. We can only watch black-and-white movies so many times before we go a bit batty.”

“True.”

“That leaves us with Sammy.”

Amata’s tone put Keelah on alert. “What about Sammy?”

“He’s a bit of a handful Keelah. Three times now we’ve had to pull him out of the ventilation shafts. And just last night Officer Wolfe found him tinkering with the garbage burner.”

Keelah sucked her teeth. “Damn it, Sammy…” She gave Amata an apologetic look. “He’s not a troublemaker, I promise. He’s just adventurous.”

“I gathered as much. He told me that he used to be on the scavenge team for Little Lamplight. And that he’s accustomed to being outdoors.”

“Yeah. He, Squirrel and Penny spent a lot of time foraging in the wastes. But then Sammy was made cook and he was stuck indoors all of the time. He’s probably burning off the excess energy.”

“I can sympathize Keelah. But we can’t allow Sammy such free reign of the vault. It poses a security risk.”

“Oh my God…you’re going to kick him out?”

Amata’s eyes widened. “Of course not! Calm yourself Kee.”

Keelah felt her face flame in embarrassment. Talk about jumping to conclusions!

Amata folded her hands on her desk. So prim. “I think it’s best if Sammy is placed in a job more suited for his interests. One where he has appropriate supervision…”

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. She could anticipate where this was going. “Me? You want Sammy to intern with me?”

“You. And Susie. I thought Sammy could be a good fit with the caravan once it’s up and running.”

“I don’t know…Caravanning is dangerous work.”

“So is scavenging. But Sammy managed to do that with two other kids.”

“He got abducted by slavers.”

“But with you and Susie, he’ll have someone with more experience watching out for him.”
Keelah shook her head. “It’s a bad idea.”

“I already spoke with Susie. She’s open to it.”

“No, Amata.”

“And it’s not like the caravan will be going out every day. It’ll probably make one to two runs a week.”

“No!” Amata flinched at the sharp tone. She watched as Keelah ran trembling fingers over her face. “Sorry. It’s just…I already have one person’s death on my conscious. No way am I endangering someone else.”

Dusty.

Amata rose from her chair. Perched on the edge of her desk as she stared down at Keelah. “Hey…” she touched Keelah’s shoulder. “No one blames you for what happened. So stop blaming yourself.”

Keelah exhaled heavily. “Sammy’s just a kid. I don’t want to take him back outside.”

“Just think about it, okay? I can’t see him settling comfortably in any of the other jobs. And I don’t want to be fielding complaints from 101ers who wonder why the garbage burner is running at night. I certainly don’t want him accidentally breaking the air filtration system or something else.”

Keelah nodded slowly. “I’ll think about it.”

Amata returned to her seat. But she kept her eyes on Keelah. The young leader still looked concerned. She worried with the stapler on her desk. “If you ever need to talk about what happened with Dusty. Or anything really…” Amata shuffled her papers. Filled her office with the sound of shifting paper. “You and I never really had a chance to catch up. I don’t even know what all has transpired in your life these past four years…”

Amata trailed off. She could only hope that she didn’t sound as…needful as she felt.

“Catching up would be nice,” Keelah agreed. The wastelander seemed apprehensive by the shift in conversation as well. “I haven’t even had a chance to ask you how you like being Overseer.”

Amata’s eyes widened; and she ducked her head, chuckling softly. “You know…you’re the first person to ask me that?” She straightened; stared at Keelah with soft eyes. “Everyone assumes that this is a dream job for me. Replacing my father. Being Overseer. No one ever stopped to ask what I wanted. Except you.”

“That’s ‘cause I know what your dream job is.”

Amata smiled. Her eyes lighting up. “You do?”

“Come on Amata. You used to make me practice my penmanship. And you checked my homework for spelling errors all the time.” Keelah grinned. “You’d make a great teacher. An English teacher most likely.”

Amata blushed. Ducked her head again. “I certainly wouldn’t mind doing that. I’ve always enjoyed writing.”

And they both recalled the love poems tucked discreetly beneath Keelah’s pillow.

Keelah cleared her throat. “It’s not too late ‘Mata. You just said the school needs a teacher.”
“I know. But being Overseer keeps me busy enough.” Amata smoothed hair back from her face and avoided Keelah’s gaze. “But it’s nice of you to say that I’d be good at it.”

“You’d be excellent.”

Amata looked up. Caught Keelah’s eyes. They stared for long moments. And perhaps one of them would have spoken—made some type of confession—but Keelah broke eye contact. Rose unsteadily to her feet.

“I’m off to Rivet City. I may be gone through the night.”

“Éclair and Squirrel’s birthday party is tomorrow night. Will you be back in time?”

“I should be. I’ll try my hardest.”

“Good.”

Amata walked Keelah to the door. The Overseer fiddled with the yellow bracelet she’d been wearing for more than twenty years.

“Travel safely,” Amata told Keelah.

“See you tomorrow.”

Then Keelah was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Fugees song.
Many Happy Returns

Chapter Summary

Keelah continues investigating the Fisher of Men. And she and Amata have an important conversation.

Chapter Notes

Many Happy Returns is another way of saying Happy Birthday. The chapter title is also a reference to a Xena episode where Xena gives Gabrielle a poem for her birthday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 27 – Many Happy Returns

The Arlington Library was positioned between Vault 101 and Rivet City, so Keelah decided to stop by and return her (long overdue) library books.

She stepped inside the dim building and immediately removed her heavy goggles. It was a vast change; moving from the blinding sunlight of the wasteland into the murkiness of the library. It took Keelah a few seconds to get her eyes to work properly.

She carried her library books to the counter and waited patiently for Scribe Yearling to notice her.

The brunette librarian was hard at work cataloguing a ginormous stack of books, and it took the archivist a full five minutes to look up and notice Keelah.

“How long have you been standing there?” Scribe Yearling asked, smiling happily.

“Long enough to know that you talk to yourself when you’re sorting.”

Scribe Yearling came from behind the counter and gave Keelah a quick embrace. “I’d hug you properly but the Brotherhood frowns upon public displays of affection.”

“Must be why Sarah Lyons socked me that time I tried to hold her hand during a skirmish.”

Yearling laughed at the joke. “Sarah would do more than sock you if you tried that.” The librarian took the books from Keelah. “These for me?”

“Yep. Turning them in only fourteen days past due.”

“You know you don’t have a time limit Keelah.”
Scribe Yearling returned to her post.

Keelah leaned against the counter. Watched as the librarian completed the appropriate intake form.

“How’ve you been?” Keelah asked her.

“Eh…so-so. Much improved since our little vacation, but I’m beginning to think that a career change is in order.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I like being a librarian. I adore it actually. But this archive is in the middle of nowhere and we get no patrons. Most everyone who walks through the front door thinks we’re a trading post. They come in expecting to find food and water and are disappointed when we all we have to offer them are books. And even if they did want to read something, it’s not like the Brotherhood will let anyone check a book out. You know…conserving knowledge and all that. Patrons are disallowed from leaving the premises with even a pamphlet.” She lowered her voice. “Everyone but you, that is.” Yearling sighed. “I just…” She looked over her shoulders, making sure none of the Brotherhood soldiers could hear her. “I’m more conscious than ever that I don’t belong here. But I’m not sure how to quit when the Brotherhood doesn’t really accept resignations.”

“Maybe you can talk to Elder Lyons. See if he’ll move you to another location.”

“I’d probably end up defending some outpost in the desert. So I suppose I should leave well enough alone.” Yearling slid Keelah’s books into the appropriate pile. “Enough with the gloom and doom. How are things with you?”

“Things are fine. Real fine.”

Yearling raised an eyebrow at the dry tone. “You’re telling me the truth?”

“Nothing but.”

But Keelah and Yearling had learned quite a bit about each other during their excursion to TenPenny Tower, so both women could recognize how miserable the other was.

Keelah decided to switch the topic to something more upbeat. “The Lamplighters moved into the vault this week. They’re transitioning well.”

“That’s great news. How’s Penny?”

“Doing well. Ecstatic now that she’s reunited with her brother and friends. She asks about you all the time.”

Yearling’s face broke into a smile. “That’s sweet. Tell her I said hello. And I have those picture books I promised her. They’re in a covered box near the front door. Try to be discreet when you leave with them.”

“An entire box of books? Yolanda, I didn’t bring a brahmin with me this time.”

Scribe Yearling smiled at the use of her first name. “You’re strong Keelah. And they’re children’s books. Real thin. They should fit in your pack easily.”

Keelah frowned but nodded in agreement anyway. “Fine. But I’m going to check out a few books for myself too.”
“Have at it.”

Scribe Yearling went back to her sorting.

Keelah meandered around the quiet library.

Yearling was right. It was a bit strange to be the lone patron in the sprawling library. The Brotherhood had recovered so many books from the wasteland and had restored the library to pre-war form. But the only wastelanders who frequented the space were Brotherhood soldiers and the scavengers who sold them wares. It almost seemed a waste of resources.

Keelah moved from the poetry section to fantasy. Spent a few moments kneeling on the dusty floor, thumbing through the thick tomes. She nearly shrieked when she happened upon a particular collection of books.

“What the…?!”

Keelah carried two books over to Scribe Yearling and practically hopped up and down as she addressed the studious librarian.

“You have to let me take these books!” she exclaimed.

Yearling eyed the two novels curiously; reading the titles and taking note of Keelah’s flushed face. “Sure. I’ll sign them out to you. Bring them back whenever.”

“No, I mean you have to let me have them. Permanently.”

“Keelah, I can’t do that. I’m not even supposed to let you check them out.”

“But these books are special. And the chances of me running across another copy are slim. You have to let me keep them. Please?” Scribe Yearling looked conflicted. The librarian bit into her lip as she considered Keelah’s request. “How about this? I have an entire set of encyclopedia at home. I’ll swap you that set for these books. Thirty-one books in exchange for two. I’m missing the first part of the J-series, but how many words begin with J anyway?”


“Yolanda.”

“Fine. You can have them.” Yearling glanced at the books again, memorizing their titles so that she could erase them from Brotherhood records.

“What’s so special about these books?” she asked Keelah.

“I’m attending a birthday party tomorrow and these books are going to make the perfect birthday gift.”

Keelah smiled broadly as she tucked the novels into her satchel. “I’ll bring the encyclopedias on my next visit. I’ll really need a brahmin then.” The wastelander removed a box of hard candies she’d hidden at the bottom of her bag. “Almost forgot these,” she told Yearling, sliding the sweet treats to her friend.

“My favorite. Thank you.”

Keelah winked. “I’ll see you soon. Thanks again.”
She swept her bag over her shoulder. Made her way to the front door.

“Don’t forget the scrap metal near the front door,” Scribe Yearling called out. Gesturing not too subtly at the box of covered books.

“Oh yeah.” Keelah grimaced as she stared at the heavy box of books that she would somehow have to fit into her bag.

But the thought of the two paperbacks in her inventory heartened her. She tottered the heavy box out of the library. She couldn’t wait to get back to the vault.

By the time Keelah made it to Rivet City, she was dragging her supply bag. One of the shoulder straps had broken as she crossed the bridge near Jefferson Memorial; and she’d resorted to dragging the heavy pack since her energy was near depleted and her hip was still giving her troubles.

She was a sweaty, irritable mess by the time she made it to Rivet City. She dropped her satchel near one of the market stalls to reclaim later; then immediately made her way to Gary’s Galley for a drink.

She would find Victoria Watts later. Keelah knew that if she didn’t get a cold drink and fast, she would pass out from exhaustion.

She was on her second bottle of Nuka Cola when she got a visitor. James Hargrave wandered over to the table where Keelah was sitting and plopped into the chair beside her.

“I need a word with you,” the eleven-year old said. His eyes as bitter as ever; cold and gray like a winter storm.

“Want a Nuka Cola?” Keelah asked him. But James shook his head. Leaned forward in his seat as if he were about to share an important secret with Keelah.

“It’s about my dad,” James told her. “I think I know where he is.”

“James, we’ve been over this. I taught you how to use a gun. I even gave your mom a railway rifle to give to you when you turn sixteen. But I’m not taking you out into the wasteland.”

“My mom sold that gun for booze.” Keelah frowned and her hand clenched around her soda bottle. “And why can’t you take me outside? I know how to defend myself now.”

“Shooting bottles on the upper deck of the ship is a whole lot different than shooting at an actual person James. You’re too young for the wasteland. I’ll escort you when you’re older.”

“That’s bullshit! There are plenty of kids who do just fine outside.”

Keelah knew that. Hell, look at how long the Lamplighters had managed to fend for themselves. And she could understand James’s desire to find his father. She really could. But Keelah couldn’t, in good conscious, introduce the boy to the dangers outside. Especially when she knew his father was already dead.

James continued with his plea. “My dad always liked boats, you see? It’s why he moved us to Rivet City in the first place. So that he could live in this ship. But he wanted to see a boat that actually moved, so he left. My mom and I just didn’t know where. I was talking to Brian and he said that when he was younger, he and his dad lived in this place in downtown DC that had a dock nearby. The dock had actual riverboats that came to it and everything.”
Keelah stared back at James. Her face impassive.

“Don’t you get it?” James entreated. “My dad probably heard about those boats and went to visit. That’s probably where he is right now!”

“But James, your father has been gone for years.” She said it as delicately as she could.

“He probably got a job with the crew or something. Some job that keeps him out to sea for long periods of time. He’s probably a sailor. Maybe even a captain.”

It saddened Keelah to see how committed the boy was to his theory. James’s face had lit up at the prospect of having a father who was an accomplished mariner.

“I’m sorry James. I can’t help you,” she told him remorsefully. “Maybe when you’re older, I’ll…”

She’d what? Tell him the truth about this father? Take him on a wild goose chase to find a sailor who didn’t exist?

Keelah forestalled any words she would have given by taking another drink of her cola.

James slammed his fist down on the table. “You and Butch are just alike. You pretend to be my friend, but you’re not really.”

“I am your friend James.”

“If you were my friend, you’d help me.” And he glared at Keelah before stomping away; muttering beneath his breath about “no count friends.”

Keelah sighed. Angry with herself for being too gutless to tell the boy the truth. She tossed her Nuka Cola bottle into the trash bin then made her way to the second floor of Rivet City.

Victoria Watts usually held residence on the upper floor. The Railroad abolitionist would sit quietly in a corner near the pool tables, watching the busy marketplace below.

Victoria was right where Keelah expected. Walking back and forth near the second floor railing; moving her fingers erratically as if she were counting.

Keelah approached the gray-haired woman. Held a hand up in greeting. “Victoria, do you have a minute to talk?”

Victoria turned to Keelah; her coal-black eyes already narrowed with suspicion. “What’s this about? You know I don’t like conversing with people unless it involves travelers.”

*Travelers.* The word the Railroad used to describe runaway synthetics and escaped slaves.

“It’s not about travelers,” Keelah told the woman. “But it is somewhat related. There’s a group out there abducting people. Turning ’em into slaves or god knows what else. I was hoping you’d know something about them.”

Victoria still looked guarded. Her weathered face drawn with worry lines and the exhaustion that came along with being a full-time abolitionist. She motioned Keelah over to a quiet area. Took a seat in the darkened corner and nodded for Keelah to do the same.

“Talk quickly,” Victoria told her, when Keelah had taken her seat. “The walls have eyes. It’s hard sometimes to distinguish friends from enemies.”
Keelah nodded in understanding. “You ever hear talk of group called the Fisher of Men?”

Victoria pursed her lips. Considered the question for a moment. “Not that I can recall. But I’ve encountered so many in my travels. They slavers?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. What I do know is that they take people. Have been doing so for years. Then they send ransom notes demanding large sums of money they know can’t be paid.”

“Hmm. Sounds like an operation one of the travelers told me about some years ago. She’d managed to escape this group—real depraved types—that would take people just for the hell of it. They tortured their captives. Slapped slave collars on them and made them run. See how far they could get before the collars exploded. Made others sit on mines for days at a time. Until they got so exhausted that they fell over and blew themselves up. The traveler said that the slavers called it…riding the rocket.”

“Riding the rocket?” Keelah’s eyes widened. Remembering.

“Yes. This traveler who escaped…She was one of the ones who was made to run with a slave collar. But she knew something about explosives and was able to disable her collar. Her family wasn’t so lucky. Her parents and sister’s collars detonated before she could get to them.”

Keelah nearly vomited. It was wretched. Purely wretched what these Fisher of Men did to people. “I met a water beggar a couple of days ago, Ben Canning, who told me that he rode a rocket. He was babbling. Almost hysterical. I thought he was out of his mind…”

_Had Ben Canning been abducted by the Fisher of Men? And managed, somehow, to escape?_

“Did the traveler tell you anything else about her captors?” Keelah asked.

“Only that the group had been massacred not long after she escaped. I’m actually surprised to hear you say they’re active again.”

“Massacred? What do you mean?”

“Well, this traveler eventually made her way back to the base. She got herself a gun and was planning to rescue anybody she could. But when she got to the hideout, the entire place was wrecked. All the slavers had been killed. And the slaves were gone. I guess there was some type of slave rebellion or something. Either way, these Fisher of Men as you call them, were completely wiped out. But that was more than six years ago. I guess they’ve regrouped.”

Keelah went over the details in her mind. Talking to Victoria had only deepened this mystery not solved it.

“Any way I can talk to this traveler?” Keelah asked her.

“She’s in the wind. And even if she wasn’t, the Railroad doesn’t disclose the identities or locations of our people.”

“What about this hideout? Any idea where it could be?”

“No. But the traveler said the base was large. The slavers had a lot of people in cages. Sitting on mines.” Victoria’s face contorted; distressed. “Can you imagine?”

Keelah didn’t want to. But she was sure she would dream about it later. Explosions and mutilated bodies.
The wastelander rose to her feet. “Thank you for talking with me Victoria.”

Victoria extended a hand for Keelah to shake. “I’m actually glad you bought this to my attention. If these monsters are active again, I need to alert my people.”

Keelah nodded. Took her leave of the woman.

A quick glance over her shoulder revealed that Victoria was pacing the room again; counting wildly on her fingers. What was the woman keeping track of? The time? Dates? The number of people imprisoned in cages somewhere awaiting rescue?

“Ben Canning,” Keelah mumbled to herself as she trotted down the stairs.

She could only hope that the adventurer was still outside of Megaton.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Keelah made her way down the Rivet City ramp. Headed back into the wasteland after the brief stopover in the ship-shaped city. She moved slowly with a supply sack made even heavier by the supplies she’d purchased from Gary’s Galley. But she’d eased her burden somewhat by tying the oversized bag to her back with nylon rope. She was sure she looked ridiculous. Like some sort of gun-toting Santa Clause. But the wastelander paid her appearance no mind. She needed to get to Megaton. Had a day’s walk ahead.

She ran into Butch as she made her turn around Jefferson Memorial. The former 101er was leading one of the Aqua Pura caravans, and he was deeply sun-tanned; his hair wind-blown.

When Butch hugged her in greeting, Keelah felt his perspiration meet her skin. She could only marvel at how much their relationship had changed over the years.

To go from bitter enemies to friends who hugged hello?

It had taken some getting used to. But Keelah returned the embrace. Patted Butch on his back before pulling away.

Butch directed the Aqua Pura caravan to finish the last mile without him; then turned his attention to Keelah.

He grinned; clearly happy to see her. “I was thinking I was going to have to track you down in Megaton. You haven’t been this way in a while.”

“I’ve been keeping busy. This and that, you know? Still running a few errands for the vault.”

“How’s everyone?”

“Good. Same old.”

“My mother?”

“I haven’t seen her much Butch. But I’m headed back there. I can give her a message for you.”

“No, that’s okay.” He ran a hand across his head. Mussed his hair in a way he wouldn’t have when he lived in the vault.

“How’s caravan life treating you?” she asked him.
“The pay is good. And I get to travel all over. Even got to see this statue of one of those old presidents. It was cool.”

They were both sweating. And Butch’s caravan was a now a speck in the distance.

“I have to get going,” Keelah said. Hiking the pack up higher on her back. One of the books poked her in the side and Keelah winced.

“Hold on a minute. I have a favor to ask you.”

Keelah very nearly rolled her eyes. “I must have a ‘Help Wanted’ sign on my forehead. Except instead of a period at the end, there’s a question mark.”

Butch laughed at the quip. “Come on. Help a guy out.”

“What’s the favor Butch?”

“Well…you know me and Trinnie are…together now, right?”

“Butch, why are you using air quotes?”

The 101er flushed; kicked clumsily at a mound of dirt near his foot. “Trinnie hates the term boyfriend and girlfriend. And she said if I refer to us as a couple, she’d sock me. But she okayed the word ‘together’. Said it sounded neutral and non-specific.”

Perhaps it was mean, but Keelah couldn’t help snorting into her palm. “I swear, Trinnie is something else,” she said amusedly. The Rivet City barfly was foul-mouthed and odd and clearly liked to quibble over semantics.

“She is something,” Butch agreed. But this time the red of Butch’s face had to do with the blush stealing over his skin. And the 101er seemed preoccupied with toeing the ground; relocating more dirt.

“You love her, don’t you?” Keelah asked gently. But she already knew the answer. Could see it in Butch’s eyes.

“I want to do something special for Trinnie. That’s the favor.”

“Just don’t ask me to hunt down aunt queen pheromones.”

“What? No. Nothing like that.” He swallowed deeply. “You know about Trinnie’s brother right? How he was taken by slavers after they’d left Little Lamplight?”

“Trinnie told you about that?”

“Yeah.”

Keelah was surprised to hear that. Butch and Trinnie’s…togethering…must have been serious indeed. The tattooed woman was notoriously tightlipped about her past.

“Trinnie remembers the slavers saying they were taking their captives to some factory up north. I’ve been asking around when I’m out with the caravan and there’s this place called Pittsburg. I think it could be the place the slavers took Trinnie’s brother.”

“Oh, Butch…”
“I asked for a week’s leave from the caravan. Next week, Trinnie and I are headed to Pittsburg to see if we can spring her brother. I was hoping you would come with us.”

“Butch, it’s been years since Trinnie’s brother was taken. He might not even be in Pittsburg anymore.” She released a heavy breath. “He might not even be alive.”

“But he might be. And if there’s even a remote chance that he’s still alive, I’m willing to make the trip.”

“Well…I’m not. I’m sorry Butch. But I can’t do it.”

Butch’s face fell. “But you’re like…a wasteland hero and everything. I thought this type of thing was right up your alley.”

“It’s not. And I’m no hero. I’m just a woman with a gun…who struggles to say no to people.”

“Until now.”

“I already have a shit ton of things I have to do! Can’t you recruit someone else?”

“Trinnie doesn’t trust anyone else. And I’ve seen you in action. We could really use your skill with a mission this dangerous.”

“It’s going to take more than skill to bust a slave out of the Pitt.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“Yes.”

“All the more reason you should come with us.”

“Actually, it’s even more reason why I shouldn’t go.” She averted her eyes. Studied the ribbon of orange that canvased the sky. “Someone else asked me to help the slaves in the Pitt. I failed. I didn’t just fail. I quit. Walked out on all those people at the very last minute.” She turned to Butch; disconsolate. “You don’t even know what you’re walking into Butch. The Pitt has dozens of guards. Spread out, on every level of the city. You can’t even get to the front gate without having to pass over a bridge filled with mines and explosives. And even if you do make it inside, they have too many guns, too many eyes. They’ll tear you and Trinnie apart in seconds.”

“You made it out alive.”

Keelah’s mouth twitched. How could she explain it? The tacit agreement she’d made with Ashur, the raider boss? There was a reason the raiders had let her walk out of the city unscathed.

Ashur had smiled at her as he spoke of his plans for the beleaguered city.

_Keelah, we have a chance of curing the disease that’s been ravaging the Pitt since the bombs dropped. We can actually grow like a real city. No more bringing in slaves. No more forced labor. Things can get better. But we need time to develop the cure. Until we have a treatment that works, this is the way things have to be._

Meaning slavery. Meaning kidnapped wastelanders working themselves to death in the steel mill.

Keelah hadn’t sided with Ashur; hadn’t even shared his misguided philosophy. But she’d walked away from the Pitt because she couldn’t bring herself to kidnap a child. Her inaction had led to consequences that she wasn’t yet ready to face.
The guilt was potent. Even now. Keelah could barely look at Butch. Could barely keep her hands still.

“You shouldn’t go,” she whispered in Butch’s direction. “The Pitt raiders will kill you. Or worse.”

“What’s worth than death?”

Working from sunup to sundown in the scorching mill. Having your skin rot away, from the heat of the ammo press, disease. But Keelah didn’t say any of that.

“Don’t go Butch,” she said simply.

Butch made a soft sound. Disappointment? Pity?

Keelah didn’t bother to guess. She had enough things to worry about. Didn’t have time for Butch’s exhalations or his disappointed eyes.

Damn him—damn everyone—for always expecting her to be the cheerful champion.

Not today.

No fucking way.

But then it hit Keelah. Suddenly…

A revelation so forceful that it momentarily stole her breath.

Had she succeeded with the slave rebellion all those years ago…Had she continued with her original mission and helped the Pitt slaves overthrow Ashur…Trinnie’s brother would be free right now. So would all the other slaves languishing in Ashur’s hellish steel mill.

The guilt liquefied. Pooled in Keelah’s stomach. Molten lava.

“I can’t make you any promises,” she told Butch. Her eyes fixed on the horizon. “I have a hundred things going on right now. And I’m out a companion. I only have Dogmeat these days. But if I find the time… and that’s a big if…I’ll meet you back in Rivet City next week.”

Butch smiled and went to hug her again. But Keelah stepped away from the 101er; waved him off. She felt too raw emotionally. Crumbly.

“You realize we may not make it out of there?” she told him. “Three of us? Thirty of them?”

“I know.” Butch rubbed at his sunburned skin; so red; peeling.

He took a step closer to Keelah; but respected her enough not to touch her. “Thank you,” he said softly.

Keelah grunted. Hoisted her pack up her back once more. “I have a long walk ahead of me Butch. Take care.”

“Let me walk with you a bit. Help you carry your bag.” And he untied Keelah’s supply sack. Maneuvered the heavy bag to his back.

“No. You’ve already been gone too long. The Brotherhood officers will think you abandoned your route.”
“Just a coupla hours. And I’ll run back to Rivet City. Make up some of the time.”

He grinned at Keelah. His eyes piercing in the fading light; sparkling with an emotion Keelah couldn’t place.

“Fine,” she conceded. “But only for a few miles.”

He winked at her. And they resumed their march across the wasteland.

They spent the time discussing James Hargrave. The boy’s ambition to find his father. Even Butch agreed that it wasn’t a good idea to bring the eleven-year old into the desert. But, similar to Keelah, Butch couldn’t fathom what the alternative was.

Keelah made it to Megaton around nightfall. She had just enough time to find Ben Canning before she’d have to return to the vault for Squirrel and Éclair’s party.

But Ben wasn’t outside the walled city. Keelah looked for the adventurer in Megaton’s common house but didn’t see the man amongst the dozens of slumbering bodies; didn’t find him any of the bathroom stalls nor hunched over on one of the many tattered couches.

She went searching in Moriarity’s bar. Figured the adventurer may have sought out a drink stronger than water.

The saloon was packed at this time of night. Thirsty residents looking to chase away their blues and doldrums. Keelah navigated her way to the bar. Gave Gob a quick hello.

“Hey Gob, you see a drifter come in here today? Wearing black armor? A bandana?”

Gob turned the knob up on the radio. Added even more sound to the raucous saloon. “You know I’m not allowed to answer questions, kid. Take any inquiries you have to Moriarity.”

Keelah frowned. Moriarity charged for even the smallest bit of information. And Keelah didn’t like bar owner. Not since he’d made sport of her quest to find her father four years ago.

“Never mind Gob.”

She went to find Nova. The redhead was usually a good source of information. And, unlike Gob, Nova didn’t mind defying Moriarity. She actually took a fair amount of pleasure in pissing off her surly employer.

Keelah found the woman in question sitting in the back room, curling her hair with a hot rag.

Nova smiled when she saw Keelah. “Long time no see hun. What brings you to our neck of the woods?”

There were no chairs in the room. Just a large bed that got plenty of use. Keelah shifted her eyes; leaned back against the wall.


“I think I saw a fella that looks like that.” Nova began applying lipstick to her mouth. Stared at her reflection in a jagged piece of glass that served as her mirror. “He was loafing outside of the Church of Atom. Think he went in there to pray or something. You can always tell the desperate ones. They’ll look anywhere for salvation.” She smacked her lips together. Satisfied with her appearance.
“Thanks Nova.”

Keelah pushed off the wall. Turned to leave the room.

“Hold on sweet thing.”

Keelah turned around. “Yeah?”

“You like chess, precious? I’m always looking for a good game but everyone around here just wants to drink or fuck. I’m bored to tears. Need me a good opponent.”

Keelah couldn’t help the smile that stretched across her face. “I’m decent enough at chess. But I can’t play you right now. Have to go find this guy.”

Nova smiled prettily. “Maybe next time?”

“Sure.”

Keelah hesitated outside the door again.

“Hey Nova?”

“Hmm?”

The redhead was rubbing oil into her skin. Something sweet-smelling that tickled Keelah’s nose.

“Why do you still work in this dump? For that asshole Moriarity?”

“Well, love, I’m in to Moriarity big. Can’t exactly waltz out of here until I pay off my debts.” Nova looked up from her ministrations; saw the look on Keelah’s face. “Don’t feel sad for me, hun. I’ll be free and clear in no time. I’m ‘bout close already. But, you know, instead of looking all hangdog, you could actually help me out some. Put a little money on my books. I have an hour free right now. And there are clean sheets on the bed.”

Keelah’s stomach dropped. “How much?” she asked hoarsely.

Nova actually looked shocked that Keelah was considering her offer.

“Two hundred caps for the hour. An additional fifty if you want me to pretend like I enjoy it.”

“No. How much do you owe Moriarity?”

Nova waved her hand at Keelah. Dismissing her. “I may be a lot of things darling, but I’m no one’s charity case. Keep your pity and your caps.”

Keelah felt the urge to apologize. She hadn’t meant to, but she’d offended Nova.

The wastelander murmured an apology then headed for the door.

Nova called out to her. “I’ll be waiting for that chess game.”

And the redhead smiled warmly. Nova was absolutely stunning. With or without the make-up, the dolled hair.

Keelah nodded at the sweet-tempered woman; smiled back.

Then she pushed her way past the swaying patrons. Moved on to the Church of Atom to find Ben
The distressed adventurer was indeed in the ramshackle Church of Atom. Keelah found him on one of the back pews, napping.

She touched his shoulder. Startling him awake.

“Whoa!” Ben sputtered, lashing out with his arms. Keelah just barely avoided a punch to the face.

“It’s me!” she calmed him. “The water woman?” She waved her hand in front of his face until his vision cleared.

“Oh. Thought you were someone else.” He slumped against the wooden seat; lowered his head until his chin touched his chest.

“Who’d you think I was?” Keelah asked him; sensing an opening. She sat in the space beside Ben. Waited patiently as he ordered his thoughts.

“They’re not going to get me again. But maybe they will.” He hiccupped. Appeared to be inebriated even though Keelah knew it was depression that had impaired him so severely.

“I rode a rocket once,” he said. Mumbling into his leather breastplate. “I survived it. But now I’m beginning to think I shouldn’t have. It’s not fair to the others.”

“That place you were…The place they took you…to ride the rocket. Do you remember where it was?” Keelah asked gently.

Ben Canning looked at her. A slow slide of his head that allowed Keelah only partial eye contact.

“You don’t want to go there. You go in, you don’t come out. Only me. I stayed still for ten whole days. I was the only one who got to leave.” His eyes clouded over; vacant pools of gold. “It’s not fair to the others.”

Keelah turned her Pip-Boy on. Bought up her map of the wasteland.

She positioned the device in Ben’s line of sight. “Will you point to where the hideout was Ben? Will you show me?”

Ben Canning stared blearily at the green ovals and squares that represented wasteland locations. He closed his eyes. Opened them again.

“It was a dark place,” he muttered. “So many screams. And explosions. All day…explosions.”

“Show me where it is Ben. Please.”

“I just want to go home,” he stuttered.

But then he pointed to a spot on the map. Some place far out west. Past the Dunwich Building in an area Keelah had never explored. A place that wasn’t even recorded on her map.

“You can’t miss it,” Ben said softly. “You’ll hear the screams.”

Then he slumped forward again; back into sleep or some other form of unconsciousness.

Keelah slipped a fistful of caps into the incapacitated man’s pocket. Then she left him be.
The vault cafeteria was festive. Streamers hanging from the walls and ceiling. The Jukebox blaring. People dancing.

Keelah made her way into the crowded lunchroom and could only goggle at how much Amata and Pepper had transformed the space.

It was like a piñata had burst open and spilled out good cheer and confectionary sugar. There were so many cakes and cookies and sweetrolls. Not to mention multi-colored fizzy drinks and savory-smelling foods with toothpicks in them.

The kids were playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. The teenagers were dancing and gabbing. Even the 101ers seemed buoyed by the joyous occasion. Beatrice was doing intricate spins in her homemade wheelchair. And Officer Taylor, the resident grouch, was smiling as he sipped on a beverage that looked suspiciously like alcohol.

Freddie brushed by Keelah. “Some party, huh?” he shouted. As he danced his way over to a group of Big Towners. The skinny 101er had a slice of cake in each hand and he chewed on both pieces in rhythm with the pulsating music.

Vault 101 always made a big deal out of birthday parties. But this was excessive. As if they’d tried to fit all of the Lamplighters and Big Towners birthdays into one event.

Keelah made her way to the counter; waved at the jubilant partygoers; shouted ‘Happy Birthday’ to Éclair and Squirrel.

“Fancy some cake?” Pepper asked her. Pointing at the multitudinous options that were available.

“Maybe later. Here. Take this.” And Keelah handed the cook a large tin of frothy liquid.

“What’s this?”

“Ice cream.”

“It doesn’t look like ice cream.” And the chef shook the tin back and forth, making the pink liquid bubble and splash.

“It melted. I had to carry it all the way from Rivet City. But you can stick it in the freezer. Maybe make popsicles out of it.”

Pepper carried the ice cream to the kitchen and Keelah perched on one of the vacant barstools.

Damn, she was tired. She hadn’t rested all during her round-trip to Rivet City and looked forward to crashing in a soft bed. But she needed to spend at least a few minutes at the party. Be supportive and whatnot.

Plus she had gifts to give away.

She’d already dropped the stack of picture books off at the library. But the other two books were still in her satchel.

“You want to dance?” Bittercup asked her; sidling over to Keelah just as the Jukebox switched to a slower song.

“I’m bushed Bittercup,” Keelah declined. Besides, she’d already given too many people the wrong
idea about her and Bittercup. Slow-dancing would really make people think that she and Bittercup were a couple.

Bittercup pouted but didn’t look too upset. “I start my new job tomorrow. Did you know that?”

“Yes, I heard.”

“I want you to be my first customer. Come by in the morning, will you? I’ll give you a shampoo and deep condition.” And she fondled Keelah’s locs. Ran her fingers through the coarse hair from root to tip.

Keelah glanced across the room; noticed Amata watching her. The Overseer was standing in a corner with Red; holding her own piece of cake; a glass of punch.

Keelah and Amata’s eyes met; then Amata looked away.

Keelah wiggled away from Bittercup. “One sec Bittercup.”

Then she crossed the room to Amata.

The closer she got, the easier it was for Keelah to tell how much Red fancied Amata. The compact doctor practically glowed when she looked at Amata, and she’d angled her body towards the Overseer in a way that wasn’t entirely friendly. And why were her hands hovering near Amata’s hips?

Keelah swallowed a lump in her throat. Barged into the women’s conversation.

“Great job with the party,” Keelah complimented Amata.

“Pepper and Ms. Palmer did most of the work, but thank you.” Amata’s eyes moved rapidly over Keelah’s. Searching for something in their depths.

Red smiled broadly at Keelah. “How’d the trip go? Was Victoria any help?”

“She helped a lot actually. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Great,” Red answered. “Want some cake?”

“No thanks.” Keelah eyes hadn’t left Amata, and the Overseer flushed from the steady attention. “Can I speak to you in private Amata?”

Amata blinked in surprise. “Sure.”

The Overseer smiled apologetically at Red. Handed the doctor her food and drink. “I’ll be right back,” she assured Red. Before shooting a quizzical glance at Keelah and striding out of the cafeteria.

Keelah followed closely behind.

Two sets of eyes watched the women leave the room. Bittercup and Red.

Both spurned women decided to distract themselves with the party.

Bittercup convinced Flash to join her on the dance floor.

Red stood in the corner; ate Amata’s cake.
Amata led Keelah down to the reactor room. Their childhood hideout. The site of so many pleasant memories.

Amata flicked on the secondary lights; sent a stream of soft light cascading across the metal floor.

“How’d you know I wanted to come down here?” Keelah asked Amata.

“I didn’t. I just hoped.”

_Hoped what?_ Keelah almost asked.

But she wandered off instead; to the area behind the stacked metal canisters. Keelah peered down at the small hideaway that was still comfortably intact.

Heavy blankets and throw pillows; sugary snacks and Nuka Colas. Keelah smiled softly at Amata. “I’m surprised no one has discovered this place and claimed it for themselves.”

Amata returned the smile. Her eyes heavy-lidded and soft. Probably sleepy. “I’m sure Sammy will eventually.”

“Yeah.”

The Overseer leaned against the wall. Folded her arms across her chest. She watched quietly as Keelah explored a room she’d been in hundreds of times before.

Keelah stopped in front of a large piece of wood. The memorial that Butch had carved for all of the deceased 101ers. “You moved this down here?” she asked Amata.

“We wanted to give people a bit of privacy when they visited the memorial. Some of the 101ers have a hard time when they see it…remembering everything that happened during the rebellion.”

Keelah nodded. Pressed a fingertip to Jonas’ name, Paul Junior’s, her own.

“What’d you want to talk about?” Amata asked. Drawing Keelah’s attention from the wall; the past. Back to the present; to the meeting she had requested.

Keelah turned towards her; fidgeting a little. Then she made her way to Amata. Leaned back against the wall herself.

The wastelander stared up at the ceiling. Hurt her eyes against the yellow light. Then she tilted her head towards Amata. Said softly: “Happy Birthday.”

Amata’s entire body jolted; a paroxysm induced by shock. “You remembered,” the Overseer whispered. Her eyes damp already; overcome with feeling.

“Of course.” Keelah struggled to contain her own emotion. Her mouth trembling as she fumbled in her supply pack. “I got you a present.”

Within seconds she was pressing the two worn novels into Amata’s hands. Keelah watched anxiously as Amata read the titles; the author.

“Is this…?” Amata asked. Her voice made breathless in her wonder.

Keelah nodded. “I didn’t even know it was a series. But that’s volume two and that’s three.”
“Our favorite book…”

“Yeah.”

“Keelah.” Amata hugged the books to her chest. “This is…” Then she was hugging Keelah. Clutching the wastelander tightly. “Every year,” she murmured into Keelah’s functioning ear. “Every year, you’re the best thing about my birthday.”

Keelah cried a little bit at the words. The wastelander pressed her face against Amata’s neck, tried to stem the tide against soft skin; lose them somehow.

But of course Amata knew. She knew. She held Keelah even tighter.

“Would you like me to read them?” Amata asked. Another whisper.

And when Keelah nodded, Amata took the wastelander by the hand. Led her to the fort of blankets. Pulled Keelah into their secret world.

. . . . . . . . . .

Amata read for a full hour.

Along the way, Keelah’s head transitioned to Amata’s shoulder. And Amata’s hand drifted into Keelah’s hair.

It was like it had been many times before. Better even. Because they’d both been missing the contact desperately. Now, a palm against skin was a revelation. And an inhalation of breath was a song.

Amata stopped reading when Keelah’s eyes fluttered closed.

“You’re falling asleep,” she told Keelah. Stroking the dreadlocks away from Keelah’s face; brushing a thumb across an eyebrow.

“I’m resting my eyes.”

Amata chuckled. Closed the novel and sat it on the blanket beside them. “Come here,” she instructed. Tugging on Keelah’s shoulders until the wastelander’s head was in her lap.

Keelah thought about resisting—because what exactly were they getting themselves into with all this staring? All this touching? But when Amata resumed the soft stroking of her hair; and Keelah felt the warmth of Amata’s belly against her cheek, the wastelander gave in. Closed her eyes against the sensation. Fumbled blindly for Amata’s free hand. Caught it; clasped it.

It was a tender moment. Replete with feeling. And Amata didn’t want to ruin it. She didn’t. But the woman simply had to know.

“Keelah…?” she asked softly. Her voice hoarse with emotion. The Overseer waited until Keelah’s eyes flickered open. Locked on hers. Sparkling brown. “Be straightforward with me. Will you and I eventually…? Will we…?” Amata licked her lips. Painfully nervous.

Amata had spent a lifetime feeling excluded; discarded; cast aside. She’d felt unlovable for so, so many years. It wasn’t easy, inviting more rejection.

But she braved it. Spoke plainly. “I’ve loved you since I was eight years old,” she told Keelah. Her hazel-flecked eyes intense; nakedly honest. “The feelings just won’t go away.” She rubbed a thumb across Keelah’s lip. Smiled softly when Keelah’s mouth trembled at the contact. “I want to be with
you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Do you still want to be with me?”

Keelah’s face contorted. And the wastelander’s heart raced; a painful thrum against her ribcage.

There was a war waging inside of her. Feeling versus memory. Devotion versus resentment.

She loved Amata but didn’t trust her. Couldn’t get past the closing vault door; the command to leave; the awful, awful splintering of her broken heart.

“I can’t Amata. I just can’t.”

Keelah choked it out. Removed her head from Amata’s lap; removed her body; created distance where moments before there had been none. “It was so easy for you…to set me aside. I can’t get over that.”

The look that came over Amata’s face at Keelah’s words—a terrible caving in of her features—was so anguished that Keelah had to look away; had to study the metal flooring rather than view the devastation that was happening next to her.

Amata used her very best politician voice. Cleared her throat of residual emotion. “You’ve said as much. Again and again. I suppose I should believe you.”

The vault leader rose to her feet. Brushed dirt off of her uniform.

Keelah followed suit. Had to use the wall for support when her hip protested the sudden movement.

Amata wouldn’t look at her. The Overseer used the time to compose herself; batted tears from her lashes; stared at the round targets that Keelah used to shoot when she was ten years old.

“I won’t bother you with this anymore,” Amata said; still staring at the targets. “I hope you forgive my persistence. But I needed to be certain.”

Amata’s voice was so expressionless that Keelah ached from it.

Amata turned to Keelah. Walked over. Pressed a soft kiss against Keelah’s cheek. “Thank you for remembering my birthday. You know how much that means to me.”

A flash of memory for both of them. Eight-year old Amata sobbing in a corner. Keelah singing an off-pitch rendition of Happy Birthday.

“I should return to the party,” Amata said cheerlessly. Making sure her body didn’t brush against Keelah’s as she moved to the stairway.

And anywhere from the first step to the final one, Keelah could have stopped her. She could have called Amata’s name. Retracted those fateful words.

But the hurt won out. The anger. The resentment.

Keelah let Amata walk away.

And that was how Amata began dating Red.

Chapter End Notes
There are many happy returns in this chapter (besides the birthdays). The return of Scribe Yearling and Butch. Also Keelah and Amata's return to their little hideout.

Was able to sneak in a bit of Love and Basketball and Meshell Ndegeocello at the end there.
Between Angels and Insects

Chapter Summary

Keelah discovers the Fisher of Men base. And a startling revelation hits too close to home.

Chapter Notes

I hope this chapter is up to snuff. I really struggled with it for some reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 28 – Between Angels and Insects

Baby Monica was precocious. Even at one month old, the cherub-faced infant was active; constantly kicking her feet and giggling. Always reaching with her diminutive fingers; trying to hold on to her rattler or clasp the nose of whichever doting adult was holding her.

Currently she had a firm grip on one of the buttons on Keelah’s chest plate. The baby clutched clumsily at the metal and mumbled sounds that sounded like a bunch of ‘ns’ running together.

“She’s getting bigger,” Keelah told Christine Kendall; leaning back in her chair as she tightened her grip on Baby Monica; rocked the infant back and forth as if her arms were a swing.

“We worried because she was so underweight,” Christine commented. The new mother tidied up her bedroom; put away cloth diapers and toys. “But she has quite the appetite. And she’s got Derrick’s frame.”

“Gonna have a little slugger on your hands, huh?” Keelah asked cheerfully. And Baby Monica answered her question when she batted the wastelander on the nose; her fist so soft that the blow felt like a kiss. Keelah chuckled. Turned her attention to Christine. “How have you been feeling?”

“I want to sleep. Like all the time. But that root you gave me took care of all the other aches and pains.” And she flopped down onto her bed. Grinned at the image Keelah and Baby Monica made, sitting in the chair; both equally fascinated with the other.

“I have a Teddy Bear for Monica. I forgot to bring it. But next time.”

“You don’t have to do that Keelah. She has so many toys already. Most of which she can’t even play with it.”

And it was true. Christine’s room was overstocked with toy cars and rocking horses, stuffed animals and baby dollies. Clearly the entire vault had committed to spoiling the new baby.
“Just one Teddy Bear,” Keelah persisted. “Maybe two. So it can have a friend.”

Christine giggled. Reached for her baby. “Give her to me. It’s lunch time. And my tiny tot gets grumpy if she has to wait.”

Keelah smiled; handed the baby over.

Christine loosened the top of her jumpsuit, bought Baby Monica to her breast.

“Going to the Little League game this Friday?” Christine asked Keelah. “Derrick is excited to have so many new players. Should be a good match.”

“Depends on if I’m here. I have a few errands to run outside the vault.”

Christine smiled down at her baby; brushed back wisp-soft hair as she bought Baby Monica closer. “I’m so glad you moved back into the vault,” she said to Keelah.

“I haven’t moved in exactly…”

There was a knock at the door. Then it slid open. Amata stepped into the room carrying a large bundle of fabric.

“I bought fresh diapers from the laundry,” the Overseer announced to Christine.

Amata startled when she saw Keelah, but the vault leader smiled through the discomfort. Avoided Keelah’s gaze as she carried the diapers to a nearby dresser. Began folding them inside.

“Amata, you’re the Overseer. You have more important things to do than bring me laundry.”

“I’m not just the Overseer, Christine. I’m also Monica’s godmother. And I take that job seriously.”

Amata didn’t look at Monica’s other godmother; just made her way to Christine’s side and grasped the baby’s chubby hand. She cooed at the infant, her eyes twinkling.

“I should go,” Keelah said suddenly. “See you later Christine. I’ll bring the teddy bears then.”

Keelah was halfway down the hall when she heard footsteps behind her. She wasn’t too surprised when Amata touched her elbow. Asked her to stop.

“What is it?” Keelah asked.

And the wastelander didn’t mean for the question to come out so shrill. She really didn’t. But the caustic tone made Amata flinch. The Overseer folded her arms behind her back.

“Susie told me that you and she are headed out today for some assignment?”

“Yeah. I’m looking into the disappearance of a friend. I have a tip that’s taking me out west.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that about your friend. I didn’t know…”

Keelah waved away the consolations. “While I’m out, I’m also going to lay some of the groundwork for the vault caravan.”

“Really? But I thought you said it might take a few weeks to get things started?”

“I know. But if I’m going to add Sammy to the caravan, I need to jumpstart things before he climbs
into any more ventilation shafts. Besides, I have an idea for the caravan that could make things a bit less dangerous for everyone involved.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, there’s an abandoned town not too far from here. Springvale. No real occupants outside of this church of Holy Lighters and the occasional raider. But the town gets a lot of foot traffic from people heading back and forth from Megaton. I thought, instead of running a caravan, maybe we could set up a store in Springvale. Like a pop up shop. Operate a couple times of week, selling wares to passersbys.”

Amata nodded, considering the proposal. “With a store, you wouldn’t have to travel long distances across the wasteland. Or worry about getting ambushed on the road...”

“Exactly. We’d still need a brahmin to move supplies from the vault to Springvale. But Megaton’s right over the hill. I can rent a brahmin easy. Plus, Springvale has a ton of empty buildings. We can stash our inventory in one of the vacant houses. That way we don’t have to carry anything back to the vault.”

“It’s a terrific idea Keelah.” Amata gave a faint smile. “You’re turning into a regular businesswoman.”

“Eh...don’t applaud me yet. There are still a ton of details we need to slog through.”

“Well, what do you need from me? How can I help get the ball rolling?”

“You can begin going through the vault inventory. Sort out the things you want to sell. Maybe get a Big Towner to help you. They’re familiar with the wasteland. They can tell you which items will make good merchandise.”

“That’s good advice. I’ll ask Red to help.”

Keelah’s mouth twisted.

Red. Of course.

And the wastelander couldn’t help the grimace that stole over her face.

_Fucking Red._

Keelah was aware that Amata and the doctor had begun dating. Susie had broken the news to her this morning over breakfast. The blonde vaulter had glared daggers at Keelah as she spilled the beans; demonstrably angry with Keelah as if Amata and Red’s burgeoning romance was somehow Keelah’s fault.

But perhaps it was Keelah’s fault. She had declined Amata’s advances after all. Had said in no uncertain terms: _I don’t want to be with you._

_Idiot_, Keelah criticized herself. Pinching the tender skin of her wrist between unsteady fingers.

She’d turned Amata down. But that decision hadn’t been malicious. Keelah hadn’t even intended for it to be permanent. She just needed time to figure some things out; to work through the hurt and resentment that had soured her and Amata’s relationship.

Foolishly she’d thought that Amata would wait for her to work through her issues. But the Overseer
had clearly decided that she’d waited for Keelah long enough.

And now she was with Red. Not even a day after she’d cradled Keelah in her arms.

*I want to be with you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.*

Keelah tried her best to keep her features neutral as she carried on a conversation with a woman she desperately wanted to be away from.

Amata continued to speak to Keelah as if the woman were one of her employees.

“We’ll get started in the store room immediately,” the Overseer said; her tone professional and polite. “I’ll prepare an inventory list.”

“Great. I’ll update you on Springvale when I get back.”

Keelah continued down the hall.

“One second.” Amata maneuvered her way in front of Keelah. Seemed to hesitate before asking, “About your hip…?”

“What about it?”

“Well…it’s been bought to my attention that it’s a pretty significant injury.”

“Bought to your attention…?” Keelah felt the first stirrings of anger. An aggravating itch at the back of her throat.

“Do you really think you should be traveling while in such a compromised state? You just got back from Rivet City. Haven’t even had a full day’s rest.”

“I can manage. Besides, it’s only a bruise.”

“I wouldn’t call a dislocated joint a bruise.”

Keelah huffed in anger. “Red really doesn’t place much stock in doctor-patient confidentiality, does she?”

“She only told me out of concern for you.”

“She had no right!”

“I’m Overseer. It’s important that I be apprised of *everything* that goes on in the vault. Including the health status of the residents.”

“But I’m *not* a resident. So I would really appreciate it if you and Red kept my medical information out of your late night chats, mmm-kay?”

The comment served its purpose. Amata was incensed. The Overseer took a step forward, uncharacteristically combative. Her index finger pointed at Keelah’s chest. “So long as you’re in this vault, you are *my* responsibility. And as Overseer, I recommend you take some time before heading back outside.”

Keelah’s lip curled in irritation. “Recommendation noted.”

The wastelander turned away.
“Stubborn.” Amata muttered it under her breath but Keelah heard.

The wastelander turned around. Raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“You’re stubborn.” This time at a higher volume. Barb-wired. Laced with anger. “You always have been. It’s why you spent so much time in the holding cell and the infirmary when we were growing up. You never could take sound advice. Always had to get your way. Even when your obstinacy imperiled your well-being.”

Keelah stalked back over to Amata. If Amata wanted a fight, she was damn well going to give her one!

“I spent so much time in the holding cell and the infirmary because I was taking up for you. You didn’t seem to have a problem with my stubbornness when I was taking a beating in your stead. When I was making sure you could walk to class without some Tunnel Snake jerk propositioning you!”

The comment wounded Amata. Keelah could tell by the way Amata’s lashes came down to hide her eyes.

“I never wanted you to hurt yourself on my behalf Keelah. You know that.” Keelah couldn’t bear the look on Amata’s face. She turned away. But Amata gripped her elbow. “I still don’t. Just take a couple of days off. Go to a Little League practice or something. Spend the day with Monica.”

Amata stared at Keelah. Her request earnest and heartfelt.

“I’m fine,” Keelah argued. Voice low and gritty.

“No, you’re not. And you’ve been injured so many times already.”

Amata had seen the scars. Faded gunshot wounds and ugly-looking lacerations. Puckered burns, a ruined ear. “Your body can only take so much.”

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. Evaluative slits. “You’re concerned about my safety?” Keelah asked her.

“Yes.”

“Worried about me going out into the wasteland?”

“Yes.”

Keelah laughed harshly. Wrenched her arm out of Amata’s clasp. “You don’t see the irony in that?” she sneered.

And her voice was intentionally cruel. Her eyes heated in a way Amata had never seen before.

Keelah took no pleasure in the way Amata stiffened; at how the Overseer’s hands came down to her sides and tremored.

But Keelah was pleased when Amata let her walk away without further interruption.

.................

The walk to Springvale was a quiet one. Keelah kicking at trash and twigs that blew across her path; Susie tinkering with the Pip-Boy on her left arm. The blonde vaulter adjusted the dials, loosened the strap.
“I think it’s time I upgrade my Pip-Boy,” Susie complained. “The strap is so worn that the dang thing keeps falling off my arm. And the stats counter is totally busted. Look at this…” And she put the Pip-Boy in Keelah’s line of sight. “According to my HP monitor, I’m currently dead.”

“Well, you look good, considering.”

“Hardy-har. You’re the electronics guru. Will you give it a once-over when we get back to the vault? How am I supposed to know if I’m irradiated if this thing doesn’t work?”

“You’ll look like a magic marker. And your lunch will make a reappearance.”

Susie turned her attention from her malfunctioning device to her moody friend. She poked Keelah in the side. “Geez, you’re in a bad mood.”

“It’s this damn heat.”

“Yeah, right. You’re pissy because Doctor Pepper stole your woman. You gonna let her get away with that?”

Keelah choked; nearly tripped over her own feet. “What?! First off, Amata’s not my woman, you…you…” Keelah searched for an appropriate insult. “…Neanderthal!” The weak jibe only made Susie laugh. “Secondly, the doc’s name is Red not Pepper. Show some respect.”

“Yes. All due respect to the woman who shanghaied your girlfriend.”

“She didn’t shanghai—”

“And her last name is Pepper. I asked.”

Keelah stopped walking. “That’s her actual last name?”

“Yep.”

“Her name is Red Pepper?”

Susie nodded. A face-splitting grin crossing her face. The blonde was all too aware that she was annoying Keelah. “That’s the woman currently canoodling your true love.”

Keelah chewed her bottom lip. Studied Susie with hostile eyes. “I think I just figured out a way to make your HP monitor accurate.”

“No, now, now…how ‘bout you save all that anger for the love doctor?”

Keelah cursed. Continued walking. “I’m not angry at Red. She’s my friend.”

“Some friend. You bring her and all of her buddies into the vault. Give them someplace safe to live, and she pays you back by going after Amata? With friends like that…”

Keelah cut her eyes at Susie before inching her way down a rocky incline.

The wastelander had to leap a long distance to avoid a deep crevice in the ground. The hole was probably the entrance to a Radscorpion lair. Best to avoid it.

The jump was ill-advised. Keelah’s entire right side began to throb as soon as she’d landed. Her hip practically screamed in agony, and the wastelander took a second to catch her breath; blink back the pain.
“It’s not Red’s fault,” she panted, when Susie caught up to her. The blonde was breathing hard herself. Her face red and blotchy. “It’s not like she knew that I’m in love with Amata.”

It was an unintended admission. Bought on by pain and Keelah’s irritability with her chatty companion.

Keelah felt a blush steal over her cheeks. And the wastelander felt even more like an idiot when she looked up and saw Susie’s Cheshire smile.

The blonde had been aggravating Keelah on purpose; needling her until she admitted out loud her feelings for Amata.

“I hate you,” Keelah told Susie petulantly. Another juvenile comeback.

Susie slung an arm around Keelah’s waist. Squeezed softly.

“I love you too,” Susie rejoined; unbothered by Keelah’s bad mood.

Keelah allowed the embrace for another second. Tried to focus on the hug instead of the painful spasms in her side. When the pain ratcheted down to a tolerable level, the wastelander led Susie through the crumbled town of Springvale.

“This way,” she said.

. . . . . . .

Keelah knocked on the door of the small ranch house. Four knocks total. One short. Three long.

The door opened after a protracted pause. And Keelah and Susie found themselves staring down the barrel of a revolver.

“Silver, it’s me,” Keelah told the holder of the gun. And the wastelander held her hands up, wiggling her fingers. No weapons.

Springvale’s lone homeowner shifted the gun to Susie. “I don’t know her,” the silver-haired woman husked. And she glared at Susie with slitted eyes as light as her hair.

“She’s with me,” Keelah told Silver. “Not a threat.”

Silver lowered her gun; gestured the two women into the house. “Be quick about it,” she barked. Before slamming the door closed. Re-securing a series of locks that took up half her front door.

Susie turned baffled eyes on Keelah, but the wastelander motioned the vaulter to remain quiet.

Satisfied that her house was secure, Silver turned back to her guests. She kept hold of her revolver but clicked the safety on; pointed the gun towards the floor.

“Have a seat,” she told Keelah and Susie. Doing her best impression of a hostess, showing both women to her “chairs”: a detached toilet and an overturned crock pot.

Keelah took the toilet; Susie the pot.

Susie surveyed the sitting room as surreptitiously as she could. A stained mattress pressed into a corner. A china cabinet absent its wooden doors. A small table covered with dirty dishes and rotting food. On more than one surface: empty syringes of the drug, Psycho.
Silver took a seat at the table. Began picking disinterestedly at whatever gray-looking food she had on her plate. “I hope you came by to tell me that bastard Moriarty is dead,” she said to Keelah.

“No. Sorry to disappoint.”

The silver-haired woman frowned. She detested Moriarty. Had run away from his employ years ago. Seldom did she leave her hideout; too afraid that she’d encounter Moriarty in the wasteland. Or run into one of his henchmen.

Silver had been a shut-in for years. Keelah wasn’t even sure how the woman kept herself fed.

“I came by because I have a proposition for you,” Keelah told her.

“Last time someone said that to me, I ended up beneath a raider boss. And there were six more of his men waiting their turn.”

Silver bit into a greasy blob of meat. Eyed Keelah suspiciously.

Susie shifted uncomfortably in her seat; Keelah bit into her bottom lip.

Silver wasn’t the only one who hated Moriarty. Keelah despised the man too. The saloon owner trafficked in misery. Pimped Nova. Enslaved Gob. Did god-knows-what to Silver. Keelah would have reverse pick-pocketed a grenade into Moriarty’s pants years ago if she’d thought she could get away with it.

“This is something different,” Keelah assured Silver. “I’m thinking about starting up a store in Springvale. Something small that we’ll run only a few times a week. Probably use that gas station down the street as our location. But I need a place to stash our supplies each night. That’s where you come in.”

“You want to use my house as your storeroom?”

“You’ll be doing more than that. You’ll be sort of like our inventory specialist. Keep track of what comes in and out. Let us know when supplies are low. Do a little bookkeeping. Stuff like that.”

“Sounds like something that’ll take more smarts than I have.”

“Come on Silver…you fucked over Moriarty and got away with it. You have to be pretty damn smart to pull something like that off.”

“And what makes you think I won’t do the same to you?”

Silver’s eyes were steel; impenetrable. She was a woman who’d learned to camouflage her emotions. A trick of the trade.

Keelah shrugged. “You trusted me not to rat you out to Moriarty. I’m willing to trust you with this. What do you say?”

Silver didn’t respond until she’d finished chewing her food. She used tobacco-stained hands to wipe
her mouth; transferred grease from one part of her body to another.

“I’ll do it,” she finally said.

Keelah rose to her feet. “Good. I’ll be in touch when we’re ready to get things started.”

She walked over to Silver. Keelah would have shaken the woman’s hand to solidify their agreement, but she knew Silver wouldn’t welcome the touch. Keelah stared down at the table. Eyed the spent needles of Psycho.

“That won’t be a problem will it?” she asked Silver.

“Purely recreational.” The woman’s eyes were emotionless. “Besides, I have something else to keep me busy now, don’t I?”

Keelah nodded. Headed for the front door. Susie at her heels.

“Hey now,” Silver called out. Keelah turned around. “You don’t still work for Moriarty, do you?”

“No. It was only the one job. Finding you.”

It seemed like such a long time ago. Moriarty smirking at Keelah from across the bar; refusing to tell her where her father was until she found the “stupid whore” who had run off with his caps.

“That’s good you quit him,” Silver said. “Moriarty’s an evil bastard. That’s why I ran.”

Keelah shuddered. Hoped that Silver couldn’t see. She could only imagine what Silver had experienced during her employ with Moriarty.

The gray-haired woman couldn’t have been much older than Keelah—twenty-four years old; twenty-five maybe—yet she looked absolutely haggard. Liked she’d lost the pieces of herself that were vital to living.

“I tried to get Nova to come with me,” Silver continued. “But she didn’t want to leave Gob. She’s sweet like that.”

“She’s still sweet,” Keelah commented softly.

“Yes? That’s good.” And Silver’s hand moved from her revolver to the empty syringes; back to the revolver. There were so many ways for a person to kill herself in the wasteland; a dizzying amount of options. “I hope she holds on to it. I hope he doesn’t take that too…”

And the woman trailed off. Because, really, she wasn’t even talking to Keelah.

Keelah moved to the front door. Unfastened the many locks. Pushed away brass chains.

She stepped out into the wasteland. Heard the door slam closed behind her.

Then she and Susie turned west.

The two women crouched in the dense brush; sprigs and vines stinging their skin. They stared down at the sprawling building that constituted the Fisher of Men compound.

It had taken them two days to make it to this far-flung area of the wasteland. The Fisher of Men had
probably selected the location because of its inaccessibility.

Keelah and Susie had had to swim the final stretch. More than two miles, choking on irradiated water. Stopping constantly to inject Rad-Away and fight off Mirelurks.

The building was cocooned by a river on one side; mountains on the other. It was the perfect location for a dungeon.

No one would be able to hear the screams. And the base looked damn near impossible to escape.

Keelah peered down the scope of her sniper rifle. It was a wise decision, bringing the long gun instead of her assault rifle. She could see into the compound; the multitudinous buildings; the wired fence.

But she’d been watching for a full hour. Hadn’t seen a single sign of life.

“Still no movement,” she told Susie. Lowering the gun. Wiping sweat from her brow.

“You sure this is the right place?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t it feel wrong to you? It’s like you can feel that some foul shit went on here.”

Susie nodded in agreement; a muscle working in her jaw. “I think we should have brought more people. God knows how many of those Fisher Men are in there.”

“Only one way to find out.”

Keelah strapped the rifle to her back. Pulled her dreadlocks back; affixed her googles to her face.

“We move quietly,” she told Susie. “Stay on the perimeter and watch for snipers. We look for an entry point and then wait until dark to breach. I bought enough explosives with me to blow this base to the high heavens, but we have to get Agatha out first. And any other people they have trapped in there. You ready?”

Susie nodded. This was a hell of a mission she’d volunteered for. Much more difficult than escorting a group of teenagers across the desert. Or shooting at bloatflies.

Keelah sensed the blonde’s unease. Put a hand against her shoulder and squeezed. “You’ll be fine Suze. When we find the captives, you get them to a safe distance. I’ll take care of the rest. Now let’s move.”

They eased their way down the craggy path; slipping and sliding on roots and rocks; stopping when their rustling became too loud; moving again.

Keelah led Susie along the perimeter of the fence; staying low. The wastelander found a break in the rusted wire; moved in.

Quickly. Quickly.

. . . .


Keelah and Susie searched the building from top to bottom.
No captives.
No slavers.

Just an ever-present gloom. The smell of death.

When they stepped back outside, it was nighttime. The moon cutting a path across the sky.

“This was the place,” Keelah said. Her chest heavy with disappointment. “This was their hideout. But this building’s been empty for years. Not even a footprint save ours.”

Susie closed her eyes and sighed wearily. She was trying hard to forget what she’d just witnessed. She’d never seen anything like it. The skeletons. The blood. There were enough corpses inside to fill a graveyard.

Susie kept her eyes closed when she addressed Keelah. “That Victoria woman said that the Fisher of Men were wiped out right? That there was a slave rebellion of some sort and all the slavers were killed?”

“Yeah. She said they were massacred about six years or so ago.”

“That explains why this base is empty. The Fisher of Men are dead. And have been for years.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. Sheriff Simms said there have been abductions recently. And Agatha was taken not even two weeks ago.”

“But it could have been anyone who took Agatha. A raider. One of those Pitt slavers you were telling me about. But it’s not the Fisher of Men.” Susie gestured at the deserted compound. “This is all that’s left of them.”

Susie sighed. Took in deep lungfuls of air and tried to displace the smell of rotted flesh.

Keelah shook her head; perplexed. “None of this makes sense...”

The wastelander wracked her brain; turned and glared at the empty building. There were so many busted windows and mortar holes that it looked like hundreds of eyes staring back.

“We have to look for your friend somewhere else,” Susie said. And she touched the back of Keelah’s hand. *Let’s go.*

“Wait for me up the path.”

“What?” Confusion in her blue eyes.

“I’m going to blow the building.”

“Keelah, what does it matter? The Fisher of Men are gone.”

“It’s wrong. Leaving this building standing is wrong.” She began to pull explosives from her bag. Heavy duty plastic wrapped with yellow wires. “Get a safe distance.”

Then she was back inside the building. Setting charges. Room to room.

Countless people had suffered inside this compound. Pitiable deaths. Riding the rocket.

So many bones and cages that Keelah couldn’t count them. How many people packed together?
Afraid to move? To blink? To breath?

She would blow the entire building to hell.

A retributive inferno. It was almost symbolic.

It was as she was passing back through the gate—*Hurry! I only have a minute*—that she saw the knife lying in the dirt. A combat dagger. Smooth handle. Red.

A square-shaped tip where the blade had broken.

Keelah lost twenty seconds staring at the knife before she remembered. She scooped the weapon up; sprinted down the path.

The building exploded behind her. Loud. Smoke. Boom.

She found Susie waiting for her beside the brush, kneeling. The blonde jumped to her feet when she saw Keelah. Smiled in relief. Hugged her tight.

“Where to now?” Susie asked tiredly. “The vault?”

Keelah clenched her hand around the knife. Studied the handle. So distinctive.

“We’re going to Megaton,” she said.

And when she looked at Susie, the blonde flinched at the fire in the other woman’s eyes.

. . . . . . . . . . . .

Keelah stabbed her front door.

She was achy and tired and had been walking for four days straight. So when she saw the Holy Water pamphlet flapping against her door, she stabbed the leaflet. Again and again.

It took Susie calling her name loudly and incessantly for Keelah to come back to herself; to arrest her violent action.

Susie gaped at her friend. “I’ve heard of paper cuts, but geez.”

The attempt at humor didn’t brighten Keelah’s mood.

The wastelander kicked down her front door.

“Don’t you have a key?!” Susie exclaimed, racing into the house behind her.

But Keelah paid the woman no mind. The wastelander flew up the stairs. Kicked at another door until it cracked opened.

Charon’s.

The mercenary was sitting in a chair beside the window. Abnormally still. Quiet. As if he had been waiting for Keelah all this time.

Keelah growled when she saw him. She stood in the entryway, next to the ruins of the bedroom door, and glowered at Charon.

The anger she felt was so potent that she felt sick from it. *Sick.*
It took everything for her not to scream. For her not to sink her fingers into Charon’s skin and bellow with rage.

“I thought I fired you Charon,” she told the merc. Her voice a gravelled rough.

“You did.”

He was calm. Always calm. But Keelah was a tempest. And it upset her even more that Charon could be so staid when she felt like she was falling apart.

Keelah heard footsteps behind her. Susie.

The blonde inched into the room. Stared confusedly between Keelah and Charon. Fire and ice.

“You weren’t going to tell me?” Keelah asked Charon.

“Tell you what?”

“Stop the act Charon! I know you were there. It’s why you abandoned the escort mission.”

Keelah tossed the knife at him. The knife she’d found on the Fisher of Men compound. A red-handled dagger with a blunted edge.

“You dropped something,” she told him.

Charon caught the knife. *His.*

He’d broken the blade two years ago. When he’d used the knife to break down the door at the purifier and reclaim Keelah’s limp body.

Charon stared at the knife curiously before slipping it into his right boot. “I’d thought I’d lost it in the river.”

He still hadn’t explained himself. Keelah’s hands clenched into his fists and the woman literally trembled with rage.

“Are you one of them?” Keelah asked him. Her voice so rough that her question came out slurred.

“Are you a Fisher of Men?”

Charon shook his head. “That’s not what they call themselves.”

“So you *do* know them?”

“Yes.”

“And you were at the compound?”

“Yes.”

Keelah was overwrought. She screamed. And, oh, it felt good to shriek at the top of lungs.

“Tell me Charon! Now! Why the fuck were you at the Fisher of Men base?!”

And when he didn’t answer quickly enough, Keelah advanced on him. Got right into Charon’s face and snarled: “Did you have anything to do with Agatha’s disappearance?”

Charon blinked up at her. Not hostile. Not even moving. He’d been conditioned by his contract.

Even making eye contact was forbidden. But he and Keelah had been friends for four years. And during that time, Charon had relaxed some of his inhibitions.

He stared back at Keelah with olive eyes. And, really, Charon’s eyes were the most beautiful part of him. The only part of his body unscathed by war and radiation. The only part of himself that he allowed to exhibit emotion.

The mercenary stared at Keelah in such a way, that the woman stepped back. She felt her anger ratchet down; be replaced by crippling disappointment.

“Just tell me Charon,” she asked softly.

All of the fight gone out of her.

For Keelah was faced with the very real possibility that her best friend was the monster she’d been chasing all along.

They’d transitioned to the living room.

Keelah needed to sit and drink.

And Susie needed room to pace. ‘Cause, really, she’d never seen that look on Keelah’s face before. Stricken yet somehow predatory. It was a disturbing sight to see.

Susie shot worried glances at her friend as she tried ineffectually to right Keelah’s broken front door.

Charon stood by the window; his arms folded. And when Keelah had calmed her nerves with her second glass of whiskey, the mercenary began to speak:

“I was contracted to someone else before Ahzrukhal. An evil man who took people for sport. He had a…taste for violence. Turned his bloodthirst into an enterprise. He and his men would kidnap people by the dozens. Put bomb collars on them. Make them hold grenades. Sit on mines.”

“Riding the rocket,” Keelah murmured.

“Yes. Explosives would go off in people’s hands. Take off a limb. Put a hole in their stomachs. It would take them forever to die. And my boss…he would watch. He enjoyed the suffering as much as the explosions.”

Charon’s words pressed against Keelah’s ear. Made her shudder. The liquor wasn’t enough. There wasn’t anything powerful enough to distract from the horror Charon recounted.

“How were you involved Charon?”

The most important question.

“It was my job to guard the gate. If anyone escaped…If they somehow got their collars off or outsmarted the mines…and they ran for the exit…It was my job to stop them.”

“And did you?” A pointed question. A troubled stare.

“I didn’t have to. No one ever escaped.”
But Ben Canning had. And so had Victoria’s traveler.

“Tell me the truth, Charon,” Keelah said tiredly.

The mercenary straightened; put his hand against his shotgun as if the weapon provided some semblance of comfort.

“I had to abide by my contract. And my contract stipulated that I shoot anyone who tried to escape. So I did.”

Keelah saw through the holed explanation. Felt a glimmer of hope. “But you didn’t kill them?”

“I aimed for their shoulders. Their arms. That way they could still run. My employer was not pleased with my ineptitude. He punished me…” Charon’s eyes dimmed. “Then he sold my contract to Ahzrukhal.”

“Your contract was sold to Ahzrukhal six years ago?”

“Yes.”

And suddenly it all came together. “It was you who killed the Fisher of Men…”

Victoria had thought there’d been a slave rebellion. And that the slaves had massacred the Fisher of Men. But it had been Charon. Killing his former employers just as he’d killed Ahzrukhal.

“They were evil. And I was no longer contracted to them.”

Keelah refilled her glass. “How many people Charon? How many forced into that building?”

“Hundreds.”

An “Oh God!” from Susie.

And all Keelah could see were bones.

“Why the ransom notes?” Keelah asked.

“Easy caps. They never released anyone.”

Keelah leaned forward; reached into the storage bin she kept beneath her coffee table.

She removed two syringes of Med-X. She needed the chems for her hip. But also because the combination of drug and alcohol would produce a coma-like sleep. And she didn’t want to dream tonight. She didn’t want these images following her into unconsciousness.

She hissed when the glass tip pierced her skin; squeezed the droplet until it was empty. Did it again.

“Why’d you go back to the base Charon?” She needed to finish the interrogation before the drug-induced fog took her. “Why’d you abandon the escort and go back to the compound when you knew the slavers were already dead?”

“That night in the Brass Lantern, when we were planning the trip to Big Town…I overheard your conversation with Leo Stahl. He said there had been more kidnappings. I had to be sure that there was no one at the base. So I went back.”

“You thought the Fisher of Men had returned.”
“That’s not their name.”

“What is it then?”

Keelah couldn’t tell if it was a smile or smirk on Charon’s face. But the mercenary seemed amused that Keelah was so fixated on a moniker. “They don't have a name. They don’t need a name. They just are.”

“Do you think it’s them who are abducting people? That they’ve somehow managed to reorganize?”

“I don’t know.”

Keelah felt sluggish. She sank back into her chair and worked through everything she’d learned in the past few hours.

“The base was empty. You saw that. There was absolutely no trace of the Fisher of Men… or whatever they fuck they call themselves…You killed them all six years ago…Yet the abductions are still happening….”

She couldn’t piece it together. It was important that she did. For Agatha’s sake.

Keelah cast bleary eyes at Charon. “You should have told me Charon. Instead of going off on your own.”

“It didn’t concern you.”

“The hell it didn’t! Those fuckers took Agatha.”

That bit of information surprised the merc. “Did you get a ransom note?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“If this is the same group, they would send grunts to collect the ransom. We could have followed them back to their hideout. Clearly they’re operating out of a new location.”

Keelah shook her head. “Well, I never got a ransom note. And that compound was our last good lead. I have no idea where to go from here.”


The blonde passed the paper to Keelah. It was the leaflet that Keelah had vandalized just minutes ago. The one she’d thought was a Holy Water pamphlet.

Keelah took the paper with trembling fingers. Read the bold print:

20,000 caps for the old woman. Drop the money at the relay tower near Marigold Station. The second dumpster. You tell anyone and she dies.

Fuck!

Charon took the paper from Keelah’s hands. Read the message through narrowed eyes.

“It’s them,” he concluded. His tone funereal enough to make Keelah’s stomach drop. “Somehow, some way, they’ve reorganized.” He turned grave eyes on Keelah. Shook the crumpled ransom note. “This is nothing but a money grab. Your friend’s already dead.”
Keelah’s temper flared back to life.

“I don’t accept that Charon.”

Then she marched up the stairs.

She had caps to count.

Chapter End Notes

q - You were so distraught over Keelah being an idiot about Amata that I made her refer to herself as such.

Chapter title a reference to a Papa Roach song.
Welcome to the Cruel World

Chapter Summary

The search for Agatha reaches its conclusion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 29 – Welcome to the Cruel World

The trio stood around Keelah’s bedroom; each of them feeling on edge. Strained and exhausted by the night’s revelations.

Charon and Susie stared quietly at the mound of caps that Keelah had stacked into a pile on her desk.

“So you’re going to pay them?” Charon asked. Folding his arms across his chest as he leaned against the only undamaged door in the house.

“What choice do I have?”

Keelah’s tone was sharp, and Charon blinked at the unrestrained hostility. It was clear that Keelah was still pissed that the mercenary had kept her in the dark about the Fisher of Men.

Charon exhaled quietly as Keelah began to sweep the caps into a cloth bag.

“We drop the money at the relay station. Then follow the slavers back to their hideout. Agatha should be there,” Keelah said.

“It won’t be that easy,” Charon rebutted.

Keelah narrowed her eyes at him. “Following them was your idea.”

“I know. And it’s the only option you have, really. But these aren’t your run-of-the-mill slavers. Everything they do is calculated. It’s why they’ve managed to stay undetected for so long. They’ll send someone to collect the caps. Someone else will be watching us. They won’t even approach the relay station until we’ve cleared the area. By the time we double back to the drop point, they’ll be long gone.”

“But we can follow their tracks right?” Susie asked hopefully. “Maybe take Dogmeat with us and see if he can’t pick up their trail?”

Keelah shook her head. “It wouldn’t work. There’s a reason they asked us to drop the caps in a dumpster. Plus, wastelanders frequent relay stations to pick up broadcasts. There’ll be a shit ton of human scents.”

Susie held up the crumpled ransom note. “We can use the ransom note. The slavers’ scent is on it.”
“So is yours.” Charon countered. “And mine and Keelah’s.” He turned to Keelah. “I told you before. Your friend is dead. These slavers are just trying to collect a little money off your sentimentality.”

There was that predatory look again. “You expect me to do nothing?”

“No, but—”

Keelah didn’t even wait for Charon to finish. She stalked towards him until they were standing toe-to-toe. “Maybe if you’d told me about these fuckers a little earlier Charon, I’d have found Agatha by now.”

“Even if I’d told you about the compound, you still wouldn’t know where Agatha is. That compound was a dead end for both of us.”

Keelah pushed past Charon; her elbow digging momentarily into his side. The wastelander began to stuff her travel bag with fresh supplies: canned food, medicine.

“Agatha’s a tough old bird,” she grumbled. Taking her irritation out on the supplies; flinging them into the bag; squeezing water bottles until they bulged. “She survived in the wasteland for more than twenty years on her own. Even after her husband died, she stayed on the radio dedicating records to travelers. She’s a survivor. Taught herself how to shoot a gun. Fought off mole rats and feral dogs. Set traps for food.”

A syringe of Med-X burst in the wastelander’s hands, slicing her palm; and both Charon and Susie looked concerned by Keelah’s frenzy.

Keelah rubbed the blood against her pants legs; didn’t even bother to cover the wound. “These fuckers aren’t going to get away with kidnapping my friend and god-knows-how many other daughters and sons and mothers…” She trailed off. Her voice catching on the words.

‘Cause she could only imagine how the families must have felt: waiting for their spouse or children to come home when that person had already died a gruesome death in some steel cage somewhere.

Keelah added a final item to her sack (Anne Palmer’s Pip-Boy because she’d forgotten to return it to Old Lady Palmer). Then she cinched the bag tight.

“We don’t need Dogmeat,” she declared. “I know how to track these fuckers.” She turned to Susie. “We sleep here a couple of hours then go back to the vault for some additional equipment. We’ll head to the relay station after that.” Keelah seemed to realize that she’d been acting out of control and she gentled her voice. “You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want. You’ve already traveled a long stretch and I expect some pretty intense fighting with these slavers.”

Susie didn’t hesitate. “I’m with you all the way.”

And Keelah smiled. Her first smile, it seemed, in days.

“I’m coming with you too.”

*Charon.*

And there went Keelah’s smile. The wastelander whirled around; scowled at the mercenary. “You’re still fired Charon.”

“I know. I’m coming as a friend.”
The comment took the air out of the room. ’Cause it was the first time the merc had ever admitted such a thing. And he said it confidently. Not with his usual aloofness.

Keelah and Charon both knew that their relationship extended beyond employer/employee; and that the feelings that existed between them were softer and deeper than either of them had ever anticipated. But there had always been a tacit agreement between them to never verbalize their rapport. To never examine why Charon got so angry when Keelah drank herself to sickness; or why Keelah gave the mercenary living quarters, tried persistently to return to him his contract.

Both of them considered the other to be their best friend. But they were too stubborn to admit it. World-weary and repressed to the point that they couldn’t communicate basic feelings.

So even though Charon said, “I’m coming as a friend,” he said it crossly. With his jaw jutted. The words came out defiant rather than supportive.

And of course Keelah took offense. Her mouth twisting immediately, poised for attack. “I don’t need you on this,” she told Charon.

“Too bad. I’m coming.”

Susie edged between the two friends; nipped the supply bag from Keelah’s hands. “I’ll just take this downstairs. If you need me, I’ll be on the couch.”

And the blonde scampered away, hoping against hope that she and the robot Wadsworth would be able to break up any fight that occurred.

Keelah was sick of looking at Charon’s face (at his eyes really, ‘cause why in the hell did they have to be so emotive?).

She elbowed past the mercenary again (this time, the elbow was intentional) and flopped down on her bed.

If Charon wanted to talk, he could talk to himself. She was getting some sleep. At least a couple of hours.

But one final statement before her head hit the pillow: “You’re not coming.”

And maybe it was childish, but she covered her ear. The one that still worked. Burrowed into her sheets and blanket. Tried to blot out all sound. Ignore. Ignore. ‘Cause fuck Charon.

But Charon only moved closer. Sat in the chair beside the bed and spoke to the back that had been presented to him.

“I didn’t abandon you,” Charon told her. His voice unsteady for maybe the first time in his life.

Because Charon dealt in facts not emotions. And he never saw much use in words when actions were more honest, accurate.

This was new to him. Communicating.

“I left the escort, but I always intended to come back,” he told Keelah.

“Because you’re contracted to me.”

_Why was she even answering him? Or listening to him?_ Keelah pulled the blanket around herself, covered her head. Charon was just like everyone else. Her father. Amata. He’d kept secrets from her.
Had found it too damn easy to dismiss her, walk away.

Keelah blamed the drugs and alcohol for her sudden weepiness. Made a mental note that next time she mixed chems and booze she would ingest less. Or more. She was still too lucid for this shit.

But Charon knew why the wastelander had turned away from him; why she’d curled into herself and covered every part of body that his words could touch. He’d been alone a long time himself. Had had employers and masters for more than one hundred years. He hadn’t had a genuine friendship since his sister Caroline. He knew how much it hurt to have trust—so tentatively given—violated.

But maybe it was simpler than this.

“I’m sorry,” he ventured. Waiting patiently for a response.

There was a sound. Muffled by the heavy blanket. Indistinct but muttered sharply enough to indicate that it was an expletive.

And Charon thought about walking away. Because he was stubborn like that.

And Keelah thought about telling him to fuck off, because she was even more stubborn.

But the mercenary simply moved his chair a respectable distance away. Sat in the corner quietly.

And Keelah pulled the blanket from her face; stared up at the ceiling.

Keelah knew that Charon would sleep in the chair, so she tossed him a pillow.

And it was the sound of the mercenary’s steady breathing that finally put her to sleep.

They left for Megaton three hours later, without Dogmeat. Keelah’s pup was good in a firefight; quick; and vicious when need be; but the wastelander expected to encounter a lot of explosives in her foray with these bomb-happy slavers; she didn’t want her canine companion accidentally stepping on a mine or being targeted by grenadiers.

It was still early evening when the trio entered the vault. The Lamplighters’ fairy lights twinkled brightly as they passed through the tunnel; casting soft light on the traveler’s pinched faces, their bowed shoulders.

The tension between Keelah and Charon had abated somewhat, but it had been replaced with the disquiet of facing the unknown. How many slavers would they encounter at this new base? How many captives? And would the three of them be walking into a scene as bloody and grim as the one at the deserted compound?

The three travelers stopped in the vault entryway.

“I’ll head on to the clinic to get what we need,” Keelah told Charon and Susie. “Go get dinner or whatever else you need. Meet me back here in twenty minutes.”

“Should I see if Brick or Donovan want to accompany us?” Susie asked Keelah. “We could probably use the extra firepower.”

“No. If another ranger got hurt, it would undo Reilly. The three of us will have to make due.”

And Keelah left Susie and Charon to their own devices; made a beeline for the clinic; smiling tightly
The person she wanted to see, Reilly, was seated in her usual seat next to Butcher. Keelah was surprised to see the orange-haired woman wearing a vault 101 jumpsuit. Reilly shrugged embarrassedly when she saw Keelah’s facial expression. “I look a bit ridiculous, don’t I?” she asked, tugging awkwardly at the tight-fitting outfit.

“No. It’s just…I’ve never seen you out of your ranger armor.”

“Your friend Amata convinced me to change. She said my uniform needed a good washing. And, I must admit, it feels nice to wear something soft.” Reilly gave a faint smile. “You know…for a bureaucrat, Amata certainly doesn’t mind getting her hands dirty. I think she’s washing my armor personally.”

Keelah felt a sudden lump in her throat. “She’s nice like that.” Her gaze flicked to Butcher. “How’s the big man doing?”

“No change. But he’s breathing steadily and there’s more color in his cheeks. See?”

Keelah couldn’t see much difference in the fallen ranger. Butcher was ashen; his lips nearly blue. But she nodded anyway. For Reilly’s benefit.

“Bumble come by today?” Keelah asked.

“Yes. She brings me lunch every day. Won’t leave until I eat it.”

The ranger smiled in a way that made Keelah’s heart hurt.

There is good in this wasteland, Keelah told herself. Reilly’s smile a reminder. People who are kind. Towns that welcome strangers.

She’d seen bones. Too many to count. Skulls with star-shaped holes in them.

But there is good in this wasteland.

“Reilly, I need to ask you a favor.”

The ranger turned from her perusal of Butcher; fixed Keelah with worried eyes. “What is it?”

“I need to borrow Butcher’s geomapper. More specifically, his tracking chip.”

“Why?”

“I have to pay a ransom to get a friend back from slavers. I want to hide the tracking chip amongst the caps. Follow the money to the slave base.”

The rangers’ custom-made geomappers recorded map data and helped the squad keep track of new and old locations. The tiny tracking chip affixed to the geomapper helped the rangers keep track of each other. The tracking chip was an important gadget. Had been essential, on more than one occasion, to finding a lost or injured ranger. And there were only five in existence.

It was a big deal, asking Reilly to borrow Butcher’s.

Reilly hesitated for only a second before saying, “Of course.”
Reilly’s hands went to Butcher’s elbow. Began untightening the screws that would remove Bucher’s geomapper from his body.

“I’ll bring it back,” Keelah promised.

“I know you will.”

Within seconds Reilly had removed the dime-sized tracker. And it was perfect really. Because it would blend in well with the caps.

Reilly handed the tracker over. “It’s important that that gets back to me,” she told Keelah. “But it’s more important that you do.” She smiled up at Keelah; her green eyes impossibly soft. “Do you need additional support on your mission?”

“No, I have it covered.” And Keelah squeezed the woman’s hand. A thank you.

“Check and see if your geomapper is picking up Butcher’s signal.”

Keelah flicked her geomapper on. Got strong signals from all four ranger trackers. “It works.”

“Good.”

Keelah thanked her friend again before tucking the tracker in her pocket. Then she headed for the clinic door.

Red stopped Keelah as she was crossing the threshold. “Hey.”

Red seemed hesitant. Nervous even. And the smile she gave Keelah didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Hey.”

They were terrible at this. Couldn’t even summon small talk.

Red tried first. “I haven’t seen you in a few days…”

“I’ve been outside. Had an assignment.”

“Oh right. The Fisher of Men.”

“Yep.”

“You making progress?”

“Yeah. I’m actually in the middle of it right now, so…”

“Of course! Of course. I don’t want to keep you.” Keelah nodded. Turned to leave. “Um…” Keelah turned back around. “I should probably check your hip before you go. You need compressions at least twice a week.”

“Already taken care of.”

“Oh?”

“There’s a doctor in Megaton. I had him fix me up earlier today.”

Doc Church’s diagnosis had been the same as Red’s. Dislocated hip joint. Painful but treatable. The Megaton doctor had known how to treat Keelah’s injury but his bedside manner left a lot to be
desired. When Keelah had screeched during the doctor’s less than gentle manipulations of her injured side, the cantankerous surgeon had threatened to charge her double for hurting his ears.

““The Megaton doc will be treating me henceforth,” Keelah said; her eyes fixed on a spot above Red’s shoulder.

“I see.”

And it almost seemed like Red’s feelings were hurt. The doctor’s hands clenched on her clipboard; and she, too, struggled to meet Keelah’s gaze.

“I’d feel more comfortable if I were treating you,” she finally said.

“I wouldn’t.”

And there it was. Out in the open. Keelah’s tone wasn’t harsh but the meaning behind her words was clear.

Red look at her then. “What’s happening between us Keelah?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You won’t even look at me.”

Keelah forced herself to look at Red. And the doctor was stunned by the hurt she saw in the woman’s eyes.

“Is this about Amata? Because, you said—”

“I don’t have time to chat Red. I have a friend to find. And a ransom to deliver.”

“Right. Right. Do you need any Stimpacks or Med-X?”

“No.”

“Okay. Well…when you get back…if you have time, I’d appreciate it if you could look at my computer. I’ve been having some trouble with it lately. I heard that you’re good with that kind of thing.”

“The vault technicians can help with that. Try Stanley. Or Squirrel.”

“It’s not a hardware issue. I’ve been trying to update patient files, but I’m not familiar with the system your father used. I was hoping you could walk me through some things.”

And Red looked so afraid to ask. As if she was certain that Keelah would say no.

It pained Keelah. To see how much their friendship had deteriorated. She and Red had been fast friends. Ever since the Germantown Police Station. And now…

“I’ll look at it when I get back,” she told the doctor.

“Thanks.”

Another awkward pause before Keelah shuffled out of the door.

“Be careful!” Red called out.
Keelah heard her; and quickened her pace.

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Keelah, Charon, and Susie huddled around a small fire. Warmed their hands as best they could with the faint heat.

“So you dropped the caps?” Charon asked Keelah.

“Yeah. Put them in the second dumpster like the ransom note said.”

“See anyone milling about?” asked Susie.

“No. Did the two of you seen anyone?”

“No. No one’s been this way at all.”

Keelah had gone to deliver the ransom to the relay station on her own; leaving Charon and Susie two miles back at a train station. If the drop point was indeed being watched by the slavers, Keelah wanted them to think she was on her own.

Falling back two miles would also give the slavers the illusion that Keelah had left the area and that they were free to claim the ransom.

Keelah and her two companions knelt around the camp fire, their eyes trained on Keelah’s geomapper. It had been hours and Butcher’s tracker hadn’t moved.

“This could take days,” Keelah said to no in particular. “It’s not like the slavers put a delivery date on the note.”

Charon grunted. Susie added a twig to the fire; blew on the purple flames until they cackled and spat.

All was quiet in the train yard save the soft hiss of dying flame. It was eerie. The open cars, the rusted tracks. A setting designed for exodus so permanently still.

Keelah stared at the rusted signs that surrounded them. Passenger directives. Advertisements for food. So many letters missing or faded that the original words were no longer discernible.

But someone had scrawled over one advertisement. In black letters: **SOON**

Keelah had no idea what the message meant, but it chilled her.

She concentrated on the geomapper once more. Studied the green dot. Waited.

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Her geomapper pinged at four in the morning. Keelah jolted from her doze; shook Susie awake.

The ransom was moving.

Charon returned from his patrol of the perimeter to find Keelah and Susie packing their gear hurriedly.

“We need to move out,” Keelah commanded, and the three of them made haste.
They walked for hours. Towards the river. Past Arlington Cemetery. They weren’t too far from Wilhelm’s Wharf where Grandma Sparkle’s sons had been taken.

For a moment, Keelah thought the hideout would be in the Anchorage Memorial. It was a sizeable enough building and isolated enough to invite raiders.

But when the trio followed the signal over a small hill and into a gulley, they saw the actual slaver base.

It was a junkyard. Sprawling. So much metal and wire that the sun sparkled off the steel; stung their eyes.

There were hundreds of cars stacked in rows, forming rusted walls. Faint coloring of the vehicles: reds and yellows, eggshell whites.

There were more cars than Keelah had ever seen in one place. And there was the smell of tires burning. Toxic and thick.

“Why would they situate a base here?” Susie asked.

The trio knelt in the dirt. Stared down into the junkyard.

“They’re pyromaniacs,” Keelah answered. “This is like a playground for them.”

And the debris underscored her claim.

They were car parts scattered all over. Blackened and ruined. Doors twisted into violent shapes; trunks open with indistinguishable items burning inside.

The junkyard gave the slavers the opportunity to explode people and automobiles.

Keelah couldn’t help staring at the burning car trunk. *Maybe they burned both at the same time.*

“What’s the plan?” Charon asked her.

Keelah studied the area. The base wasn’t made up of much. Just a single building and the walls of cars. Keelah could see a few people wandering around below. The faint orange glow of cigarettes. An occasional laugh or curse.

There could be a handful of people in the base. Or a hundred. It was hard to tell.

“We can’t go in guns blazing,” Keelah stated. “We don’t know where the captives are. And all it takes is for us to hit one of those fuel tanks and this whole place goes up, taking us with it.”

Her eyes searched for entry points and she made a quick decision. “Susie, there’s a watchtower near the front of the park. See there? Make your way to the tower and see if you can’t get inside. When the fighting starts, you perch there and take out anyone who looks to be a threat. Charon, you go down the middle between those walls of cars and hit the front door. Controlled fire. Short bursts. Like when we hit the Jefferson Memorial. I’ll go around back and look for the captives. There’s only one building in this yard. I’m willing to bet the captives are stashed there. I’ll disable any collars and mines they have affixed to them. Try to shepherd them away from the firefight.”

Charon extended his hand to Keelah, his palm facing up. There were six or so round pellets in his hand. A tiny charge on each end.

“What are those?” Keelah asked.
“Smoke bombs. I made them up last night. These slavers like explosives so much. Use these when you get inside. Try to smoke them out.”

“They’ll run right towards you,” Keelah cautioned.

“That’s what I’m hoping.” And he grinned.

Keelah answered with a faint smile of her own before pocketing the small explosives.

Then she exchanged guns with Susie; swapping her sniper rifle for the assault gun.

The wastelander breathed deeply through her nose. Girding herself, planning ahead.

A final message before they went their separate ways:

“No mercy.”

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The fighting was minimal.

Charon mowed through the slavers milling around outside. The slavers barely had time to stub out their cigarettes before their bodies exploded with shrapnel.

Susie picked them off from above; patient shots that killed instantly.

By the time Keelah broke in through the back door and found the holding pen, the slavers who’d been inside the building had already run outside to investigate; had run right into a hail of bullets.

Keelah didn’t even have to use the smoke bombs.

Although she wanted to use them when she saw the holding cell. When she found the pen of slaves. Anything to blot out the sight.

There weren’t bones this time. The bodies were still too fresh. Just pieces of people scattered around the cell. A torso with no limbs. A pile of organs, still wet. And a head balanced on a metal stake; the eyes closed like sleeping.

Keelah vomited; splashed a milky-white substance against the floor as she fell to her knees, violently sick.

The nausea was costing her time. She could hear footsteps above her; people shouting and fleeing. The sound of gunfire; cries of pain.

But she couldn’t seem to summon the energy. She’d seen so many depraved things in the wasteland. It was as if she’d reached her breaking point.

She retched again and it was like a fire in her belly. Cleaving.

It was a rustle at left that refocused her. Keelah scrambled for her weapon; pointed the gun at the source of the sound.

A croak of a voice. “Help me. Please.”

She rose shakily to her feet. Approached the far side of the room. A darkened corner.
There was a cage there. Waist high. A boy, no older than fifteen staring up at her.

Besides the dirt, he looked to be okay. And Keelah was glad for that.

But when he shifted to place his fingers against the cage, Keelah could see his infirmity.

He was missing an arm.

Just a boy.

He had hair the color of ripened wheat; eyes that were too big for his face. And loose flesh where his left arm should have been; the blood spattering wildly as he leaned towards Keelah; staining the jumper that he wore; red against brown. So much red.

“Help me,” he repeated. His voice barely there.

Keelah put her weapon away. Knelt in front of the holding pen.

She studied the cage for trip wires. “Do they have this rigged in any way?” she asked the boy.

“They did.” It hurt him to speak. His eyes fluttered with pain. “That’s how I hurt myself.”

Keelah picked the lock on the cage. Carefully. Just in case.

Once open, she pulled the teenager out as gently as possible. Dragged him out the back door to the ground outside; perched him up against the wall; jabbed him with three Stimpacks.

She did her best to bind his arm with cloth from her bag. Wrapped him from his shoulder to his waist until the blood stopped seeping through.

She needed to go back inside. Look for any other survivors. But the boy was so pale. And he was losing consciousness. When his head lolled to the side, Keelah patted him on his cheeks.

“Hey. Hey! Stay with me.”

The boy managed to open his eyes.

“What’s your name kid?” she asked him.

“Law- Lawrence.” The word a breathy exhale.

Keelah knew she couldn’t question him too much. The kid was running on fumes. “Lawrence, I need to know. Was there an old woman here? A woman named Agatha?”

The boy’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. He was going into shock.

Keelah gave him a dose of Med-X. Held his head between her hands. “Lawrence, listen to me. Was there an old woman in there with you?”

The boy could barely open his mouth. “Old. Young. All kinds.”

“Where’d they take the old woman?”

Lawrence coughed and there was blood on his lips. So red that Keelah couldn’t help staring at it.

“Where’d they take the old woman?” she asked again.
“They made her run,” Lawrence whispered. “They thought it would be funny. Making an old woman run with a bomb.” His eyes closed. “My dad’s probably worried about me. I was supposed to be home hours ago.” And he coughed again. More blood, staining his teeth.

Keelah propped the injured teenager against the wall. Couldn’t help brushing the damp hair out of his eyes.

“I’m going to take you to your dad, kid.” She told him as she fed him another Stimpack. “Just hold on a bit longer.”

Then she reentered the building.

Three floors. That’s how tall the building was.

Three floors. Twenty-two slavers. And one survivor.

The fighting had been minimal.

The slavers had been unprepared for an attack. They launched grenades that killed their own people. And all who ran outside found Charon and Susie waiting.

Keelah searched the building—no other survivors—then ventured outside through the front door. She found Charon and Susie standing before two bound men. One was bleeding from his leg; the other from a wound to his stomach.

Keelah made her way to Charon’s side. “These are all who are left?”

“Yeah,” Charon replied. “How many on the inside?”

“All dead. One captive alive.”

“Agatha?” Susie asked hopefully.

“No.”

Keelah stared down at the bound men. Typical raider attire. Spiked leather and metal chains. Hair shaved into sharp angles.

Keelah didn’t know why, but she expected something…different with these slavers. Some type of sophistication that would explain their long tenure.

But slavers were slavers were slavers, she supposed.

“Found these two sorting through your caps,” Charon said. Kicking one of the men in the chest. “Figured they would know something…different with these slavers. Some type of sophistication that would explain their long tenure.

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Keelah glared down at the men. Trying to determine which one was weakest and most likely to talk. She turned her attention to the man with the stomach wound. He kept staring down at his injury and blubbering as if he was horrified by his own blood.

Keelah’s lip curled. The idiot had probably never been injured before. Couldn’t even tell that he only had a surface wound. Non-lethal.

She knelt down so that she could stare the man in his eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little
blood. As much bloodletting as you and your crew have been doing.”

The man stared at her with wild eyes. “I didn’t have nothing to do with it. I swear! I only collect the ransoms.”

“Shut up Egg.” The other raider. His eyes an angry line as he glowered at Keelah and her companions. He bared his teeth at Charon. None too pleased with the kick he’d received moments ago.

Keelah focused on the whimpering man. “Egg, huh? So tell me Egg, are there any more of you in the wasteland? Or is this the entire outfit?” Egg’s eyes flicked to the other raider. Questioning. “No, look at me Egg.” Keelah gripped his chin, pulled his face ‘round. “Answer the question.” Her eyes glinting, her voice dangerous.

“This is all of us,” he answered meekly.

*Good. They would make sure the Fisher of Men were completely decimated this time.*

“How many slaves did you have in this building?”

“Slaves?” Egg asked confusedly.

“Yes.”

“We don’t call them slaves,” the other raider interrupted. “We call them *pets*. We like to play with our pets. Make them run. And play dead.”

He laughed uproariously. Charon kicked the man again. This time in his face. Broke the raider’s nose. But the assault only made the raider laugh harder; the blood from his nose running into his mouth.

“How many people?” Keelah asked Egg.

“We don’t keep track. Enough to fill the cages. And when we run out, we get more.”

Keelah stood back to her feet. Needing distance from the vile man.

Egg stammered an explanation. “But I don’t…*play* like the others. I just collect the caps. I’m the bookkeeper!”

Keelah spit on the ground. Tried to stave off another bout of vomiting.

“Who’s in charge here?” Charon asked the raider with the broken nose.

When the raider didn’t respond, Charon raised his foot again.

The broken-nosed raider relented. “The boss is that guy over there. The blonde put a bullet in his head. So he won’t be able to answer any of your questions.”

Susie blanched when the raider winked at her, made a smacking sound with his mouth.

Keelah stepped into the raider’s line of sight. “You put a ransom note on my door concerning an old woman. Where is she?”

“Oh, she belongs to you?”
“Where is she?”

“What’s it worth to ya?” The raider leered at Susie. “Give me five minutes with killer over there and maybe I’ll tell ya.”

In one swift motion, Keelah had the knife she kept in her boot pressed to the raider’s throat. “Don’t fuck with me,” she sneered. “I know a thing or two about explosives myself. I’ll put a frag grenade down your pants. Have you shitting gunpowder. And I’ll dope you up on Buffout first so that you can feel every second of it.”

And the raider could tell she meant it. Keelah didn’t even bother to restrain herself from pressing the knife into his throat. Already a ribbon of red had appeared around his neck.

“The old woman is in the car,” he said. Speaking softly so as not to disturb the knife against his throat.

“Which car?” Keelah hissed.

“Yellow sedan. Halfway down the lane. We made her run with a slave collar. But she got tired. Didn’t even make it far enough to trigger the bomb. So we made her get into the car.”

Keelah pushed the man away from her. Stumbled backward before righting herself. She ran between the rows of cars until she found the yellow vehicle.


Nothing. Just a cloud of dust and a steep odor of mustiness that was decades old.

Keelah leaned over the driver’s seat; contorted her frame until she could see into the back. No Agatha. Just dark upon dark.

She fumbled around. Her hand searching. “Agatha?”

She exited the driver’s side. Pulled open the back door and began searching again.

Charon had made his way down the lane. His shotgun in his hand. Behind him, Susie had the sniper rifle trained on the two raiders.

“She’s not here!” Keelah explained to Charon. “That fucker lied to me! He said she was in the car!” And she maneuvered around Charon, ready to smack the raider into telling the truth.

Charon put a hand out to stop her. “I think he meant the trunk, Keelah.”

“No.”

Charon’s eyes were sympathetic as he reached for the trunk. He banged on it. Once. Twice. Before the hatch flew open.

A mound of gray hair. That was all Keelah could distinguish. Gray hair and a body burned beyond recognition.

Keelah wailed so loudly that Susie dropped her gun. The raider with the broken nose saw his opportunity and flung his body towards Susie.

He had just managed to sink his teeth into Susie’s neck when Charon put a bullet in his back. And when Susie had moved herself out of harm’s way—her hand massaging her bruised throat—Charon
fired more rounds. Excessive.

Charon swung the shotgun on the other raider, Egg.

Egg cowered; blubbered: “I’m just a bookkeeper, I promise!”

“And you’re certain there aren’t more of you?” Charon asked. “Anywhere in the wasteland?”

“Just me. And I’m not like them, I swear!” The man began to sob. “It was just an easy way for me to make caps.”

“This was easy for you? Brutalizing people? Making them run for their lives?”

“I’m a bookkeeper.”

And he stared between Charon and Susie, beseeching.

“Go tend to Keelah,” Charon told Susie, his eyes never leaving the raider’s tear-streaked face.

And by the time the blonde vaulter reached Keelah’s side; and put a supportive arm around her friend and helped her to her feet, Charon’s gun had sounded again.

. . . . .

Keelah was numb. Completely hollowed out.

She gave directions woodenly.

*Susie, retrieve Butcher’s tracker please.*

And the caps?

*I don’t care.*

. . .

*Charon, can you... Agatha should be buried. And I can’t...*

I’ll take care of it.

. . .

Keelah walked away before she had to see it again. The body.

She sidestepped the raider corpses; didn’t look down; didn’t feel.

She made her way to the back of the building. To Lawrence. *Someone* needed to survive this. They would take the kid back to his dad.

But when she knelt down to rouse the teenager, her hand found a cold brow. Hands that were loose and clammy. Eyes closed permanently.

Three stories.

Twenty-two slavers.

No survivors.
It was the second grave Keelah had seen in a month.

A mound of dirt. No headstone for Agatha.

They’d searched the building and the grounds but hadn’t been able to find Agatha’s Stradivarius. It seemed wrong somehow, to leave the woman behind with no music.

Keelah stood at the graveside; turned on her Pip-Boy; hunted for music.

A pre-war song was playing on GNR. Something mournful and slow.

\textit{Into each life some rain must fall}

\textit{But too much is falling in mine}

Keelah let the tune play. Closed her eyes and thought about the kindhearted old woman who went out of her way to dedicate sweet music to her friends.

What was it that Agatha used to say?

\textit{I’d like to play this next piece of music for my new friend Keelah. You bought me what I had been searching for for years, and I’ll never forget that. Enjoy the music, love.}

Keelah’s eyes filled with a wet she didn’t bother to hide.

She would never again see Agatha.

She would never again hear Agatha’s station.

Her friend had gone missing, and she’d found her too late.

\textbf{. . . . .}

“At least we know they’re all dead,” Charon murmured, as they walked out of the car park. It was the mercenary’s way of giving a benediction. A way to close the chapter on the “Fisher of Men.”

Keelah took one last look at the hideout; at the mound of freshly turned dirt.

“They were all dead last time,” she reminded Charon; before leading her companions into the wasteland.

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

I was on the fence about whether or not Agatha should be found alive. I really, really liked her character when I played FO3 and her radio station was my favorite. :(

The song Keelah plays for Agatha's eulogy is a song played on Galaxy News Radio. It's the Inkblotts with Ella Fitzgerald, "Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall."

Chapter title inspired by Ben Harper Song.
Chapter Summary

A reconciliation of sorts. And a kiss.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title inspired by Joan Armatrading song. Which perfectly encapsulates the tension of the current love triangle.

Make me lie, when I don’t want to
And make someone else some kind of an unknowin’ fool
You make me stare, when I should not
Are you so strong or is all the weakness in me?

Why do you come here and pretend to be just passing by?
When I need to see you
I need to hold you tightly

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 30 – The Weakness in Me

Susie patted Keelah on the arm; then proceeded into the vault.

The air was cool—a piercing night wind—and Keelah shivered inside her leather armor; breathed out tufts of white.

Charon studied the woman quietly. Keelah hadn’t spoken at all during their walk back to Vault 101. She’d stared straight ahead, her face tight with emotion; with her hands clenched around her sniper rifle as if she needed something solid to hold on to.

Even now Keelah stared off into space; her spine stiffened; her eyes at half-mast. The wastelander looked liable to fall apart at any moment, and Charon was uncertain as to what—if anything—he could do to prevent it.

“Should I go back to Underworld?” he asked her. Still unclear as to whether they were companions again; housemates.

Keelah exhaled softly. Turned to him with tired eyes. “Go to Megaton Charon. That’s your home too.”

The concession surprised Charon. She’d been so angry with him before. Now she just seemed
deflated. The mercenary felt a trembling in his belly that was discomfiting. *Keelah wouldn’t do anything rash would she? She reminded him so much of his sister Caroline. She wouldn’t…?*

“And my contract?” he asked. Wanting to prolong the conversation.

He still had the scrap of paper. Folded neatly into the pocket of his armor. A tiny square of parchment that decided his freedom.

“That your contract is yours,” Keelah told him. Her eyes piercing as she repeated a common refrain. “If you stay with me, it’s because you choose to do so.”

The wastelander was too exhausted for another emotional exchange, so she turned away. Opened the wooden door that would take her into Vault 101.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. A squeeze. A touch that was searing in its unfamiliarity.

“If you need me…”

Charon left the offer open.

Keelah patted his hand; newly distressed; then disappeared into the tunnel.

. . . . . . . . .

Amata saved the file on her computer; closed it; then powered down her terminal. She’d just completed her weekly management report (a four hour project) and there was still a stack of paperwork awaiting her attention.

Her eyes flicked to the clock on her wall.

**10:57 PM.**

She’d be lucky if she got to bed before midnight.

Being Overseer was satisfying work (Not *fulfilling*. But there were days she enjoyed her job). Still, her schedule was grueling. There was always something else to do. Another document to sign; a dispute to settle; some operational emergency that required her attention.

The young leader took a sip of lukewarm coffee; turned her attention to the documents on her desk.

Another budget worksheet.

There was a knock on her office door; then Susie Mack entered.

The blonde was disheveled; her hair sticking up all over the place after its release from her recon helmet. And the blonde’s posture was bowed as if she was heavily burdened or too tired to even stand up straight.

Amata’s brow wrinkled in concern. “Back already?” she asked her friend. Nodding for Susie to have a seat as she reached into the cooler below her desk to produce a cold drink for the blonde.

Susie accepted the bottle of water with a murmured thank you; then sank into the hardback visitor’s chair.

“I’m wiped,” Susie said; too tired to even open her drink. “But I figured you’d want a report on our trip.”
“Actually, I don’t.” Amata fumbled with the paperwork, needing something to do with her hands. “This latest excursion was a personal one for Keelah. If she wants me to know about it, I’m sure she’ll tell me herself.”

Actually, Amata was certain that Keelah wouldn’t tell her about the expedition, but the Overseer didn’t want to solicit information from Susie; didn’t want a repeat of her last interaction with Keelah—a shouting match in a public space because Keelah thought Amata was nosing into her personal affairs.

Susie seemed surprised by Amata’s disinterest. “Well, you may want to talk to her about it. A good friend of hers died.”

Amata’s head snapped up. The file fell from her hands. “The friend she was looking for?”

“Yeah. We found the body yesterday. Keelah did.”

Amata’s face fell. Her breathing shallowed.

Susie didn’t elaborate further. The blonde was trying to block the images before they took root in her mind.

A twisted body. Smoke-filled hair.

She’d helped Charon bury Agatha. Had dug a grave while Charon wrapped the body in cloth. Susie had seen what the Fisher of Men had done to the old woman. She still couldn’t quite believe it. Fire and asphyxiation. Such abject cruelty.

“Where is Keelah now?” Amata asked. Her voice breathless in her concern. The Overseer had already risen from her seat.

“She’s still outside with Charon, but she’ll be in soon.”


“You’re welcome.”

Susie rose from her seat. The blonde wobbled, off balance. Had to catch herself against the chair.

“Are you okay?” Amata asked. Rushing around the desk to place a hand against Susie’s back.

“I’m fine,” Susie lied. “Just…bed time, I think.”

But she smiled in a way that wasn’t convincing at all. And Amata couldn’t help but notice the deep bruise on the woman’s neck—a clear imprint of teeth.

“Suze…” Amata began; her hand moving towards Susie’s throat. But the blonde twisted away. Backed towards the door.

“Just check on Keelah, okay?” Her blue eyes hypnotically forlorn. “She’s in a bad way.”

“Susie…”

But the blonde bolted from the office.

And as she sped down the hallway, putting distance between herself and her friend, Susie’s hand curled around her throat. Touching the bow-shaped bruise. Remembering.
Keelah didn’t know where to go. She didn’t have a bedroom in the vault. Not anymore. And it felt wrong, somehow, to take her melancholy down to the reactor room.

But she needed someplace quiet to be. Someplace private where she could decompress.

She found herself in the cafeteria. It was after hours, closed. A single light had been left on, throwing soft shadows against the metal walls. Keelah slid into the very back booth, let her face fall into her hands and sobbed brokenly.

She was losing it. She could feel it. A disintegration of herself that seemed irreversible.

She’d thought the worst thing she could experience in the wasteland was Bryan Wilkes clutching his dead father.

But then she’d found James Hargrave’s dad in a rusted refrigerator. She’d seen her own father choke to death, his hands clawing at his throat.

Then Dusty. Now Agatha.

Remains.

People died, became remains.

The wasteland was full of it. Sharp bone and yellowed skulls and bodies rotting away in refrigerators.

She couldn’t see anymore. No longer had the stomach for this type of work.

How many bodies in four years’ time? Too many to count. Too many to un-see.

Keelah caught tears with bloody palms; a cut on her hand she’d never bandaged.

What was the point? Of bandaging wounds, surviving scrapes, when death could not be outlasted? Outmaneuvered? It caught up with them. All of them. Even the people who didn’t deserve it.

Like little old ladies who befriended garden gnomes. Who perfected classical music in the wilderness. Agatha played her violin ceaselessly, thinking her small contribution would help restart the world. Her generosity of spirit had been repaid with the worst type of violence.

Keelah’s head fell against the table. Her sobs echoed off the metal walls until it sounded like a room full of grief.

The smell of overcooked grease; a smiling cartoon vaulter: Keelah’s company as she reburied a friend.

Keelah didn’t hear Bittercup enter the cafeteria. She’d been wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Again and again. Why can’t I stop crying? When she looked up, Bittercup was there. Seated across from her.

“Where’d you come from?” Keelah asked. Her voice a startled yelp; far too hoarse for her liking.

“Just happened to wander by.”
Bittercup smiled softly at Keelah; her eyes sympathetic. Then she took the wastelander’s hand in hers; interlaced their fingers.

“Want to talk about it?” Bittercup asked.

“Thanks but not right now.”

Keelah leaned her head back against the seat cushion. So tired. But she clenched Bittercup’s hand between hers. Thanks for being here.

Bittercup struggled to find some words of consolation; bit into her bottom lip. Her eyes traveled to Keelah’s fingers.

“Did you know that I’m also the resident manicurist?” she asked Keelah; studying Keelah’s dirt-darkened fingernails; the deep calluses on her palm. “I can fix you up real nice.”

Keelah snorted. “Bittercup, I don’t think there’s a spot on my body that can be beautified at this point.”

She’d been shot too many times; stabbed; even caught on fire. At this point, she had more scars than skin.

Can’t manicure that, Keelah thought somberly.

“You don’t need it anyway,” Bittercup said.

And the Big Towner brought Keelah’s hand to her mouth. Placed a gentle kiss against the roughened skin.

Keelah stared back at her. Stunned.

“How’d you know I was back in the vault?” she asked the Big Towner. Suddenly curious.

“I told you. I wandered by.”

Keelah studied the woman. The tousled hair. The night clothes. It looked like Bittercup had been roused from sleep.

“How’d you know Bittercup?” she asked again. An eyebrow raised.

Bittercup huffed. Caught. “The mayor lady woke me.” Keelah’s eyes widened in surprise. “She said you could use a friend right now.”

Keelah felt a lump in her throat. Had to command herself not to cry. Because, damn it, she’d cried enough already. But Amata…

“That was nice of her,” Keelah said; her voice still noticeably raspy.

“It was.” Bittercup’s mouth twisted at the haunted look in her friend’s eyes. “You look worn-out. You should probably call it a night.”

“I will. In a few more minutes.”

“Where have you been sleeping, those nights you stay in the vault?”

“You’re looking at it.”
“In the cafeteria? In this booth?”

“The vinyl is very comfortable.”

Bittercup frowned at Keelah; turned that frown on the plush upholstery on all sides of them. “This booth is certainly more comfortable than the pallets we had in Big Town, but the vault has beds.”

“I know that.”

“And I recently became aware of this thing called thread count…It may be the best thing invented since lip gloss.”

Keelah couldn’t help but laugh. “Bittercup, I’m glad you’re enjoying your new sleeping arrangements, but this booth is more than adequate. I’ve slept in much worse while out on the road.”

Cave floors. Truck beds. She’d even slept in a haunted mansion once. In Point Lookout.

Bittercup pursed her lips. “You could always stay with me. My bed is big enough.”

“It’s twin sized.”

“We’ve slept there before. Quite comfortably if I recall correctly.”

Keelah squirmed in her seat. “Be that as it may…I don’t think Kimba would appreciate me squatting in your bedroom.”

Bittercup seemed to read the woman’s mind. She smiled, squeezed Keelah’s hand. “Only sleeping Keelah.”

“I’m fine,” Keelah declined. Smiling softly at Bittercup to take the sting out of the rejection.

But the smile faded as quickly as it came, and Keelah slumped back against the vinyl seat; tried to keep her emotions under control.

She would have to notify the traveling merchant, Crow, about Agatha’s death. He’d been close to Agatha. Delivered food to her regularly; visited whenever his caravan was in the area.

Shit.

Bittercup sensed Keelah’s distress, and the Big Towner kissed her hand again. It wasn’t a sexual gesture. Not even close. Bittercup was simply trying to communicate her affection; and a myriad of other feelings: sympathy and understanding; tenderness and friendship.

And maybe it was the fatigue or the melancholy; or the sweetness of the unexpected gesture, but Keelah suddenly felt the urge to lean across the table and press a kiss to Bittercup’s lips.

The kiss lingered. Firm and sweet.

Then Keelah pulled away.

“You’re good at that,” Bittercup murmured.

“The tears ruin it a bit, don’t you think?”

Because she’d started crying again. Almost as soon as her lips had touched Bittercup’s.
It unnerved Keelah. How emotional she was being. It was as if something had broken on the inside of her. Like a tap refusing to shut off.

She shot a tentative glance at Bittercup; embarrassed by her all-too-public meltdown.

But the Big Towner only smiled. “The tears didn’t ruin it all.”

And of course Bittercup would be a person who’d enjoy a little sadness with her romance.

Bittercup kept hold of Keelah’s hand. Smiled brightly in a way that was uncommon for her. “I’ll sit up with you a bit. Until you fall asleep,” she promised.

And she did.

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Amata watched the proceedings from her vantage point outside the cafeteria door. It was difficult for her—seeing Keelah and Bittercup kiss; watching them hold hands so tenderly.

The Overseer’s fingers clenched against the fabric of her vault suit. *Oh, Keelah.*

Amata wanted nothing more than to interrupt the intimate encounter; loop her arm around Keelah and stake her claim. That had been her and Keelah’s relationship for so many years—being a confidante; a buttress for the other’s weakness. Now that role belonged to someone else.

It was a hard reality for Amata to accept.

The Overseer swallowed back her disappointment (and the words she would have spoken) then continued on down the hall.

.

*Be careful with that bomb. Or you could lose the one you love.*

Keelah’s head banged against the table; the memory startling her awake. When the wastelander opened her eyes she saw that Bittercup had gone.

A quick glance at her Pip-Boy confirmed that it was morning, and the wastelander groggily pushed her way out of the booth.

*Be careful with that bomb…*

Bloomseer Poplar had warned Keelah about deadly explosions well before she’d encountered the Fisher of Men.

*It was a premonition,* Keelah thought. Bending down briefly to touch her toes.

Sleeping in an upright position had been unwise. She could barely stand up straight. Her entire right side had stiffened with pain, and the wastelander had to overexert herself just to get her body to cooperate. *One step. Another. Keep moving.*

The smell of frying meat greeted her. Brewed coffee. Something sweet. And Pepper Gomez appeared from the kitchen, carrying a tray of fresh muffins.

“Hope you didn’t leave any drool in my booth,” the cook commented dryly. And Éclair followed behind Pepper, laughing, as he began to set out utensils; preparing for the breakfast rush.
“Drool free,” Keelah responded. Waving at Éclair before shuffling out of the cafeteria.

She made her way to the clinic. Returned Butcher’s tracker to Reilly with another thank you. Then hobbled through the clinic to the back, into Red’s office.

She found the doctor in deep conversation with Lucy. The fourteen-year old intern was taking notes while Red sorted medical supplies and dictated instructions.

Keelah paused at the doorway. “Sorry to interrupt. But is this a good time to look at your computer?”

Red’s eyes swept over Keelah, noting the fatigue and disarray. “Sure. Come in.”

The doctor excused Lucy—who smiled pleasantly at Keelah before exiting the office—then pulled a second chair up to her desk.

“Thanks again for helping me out with this,” Red said; her eyes narrowing when Keelah limped over to her desk. “I have a backlog of files I need to get through.”

Keelah sank into the chair beside Red; failed to contain the whimper that left her when her hip contracted.

Red studied her. “Perhaps I should help you first.”

“I’m fine.”

Keelah turned on the computer. Opened the medical files that looked like hieroglyphics to anyone not familiar with the system.

“Stubborn.”

An accusation from her right.

Keelah’s head whipped around. “Pardon?”

“You’re stubborn,” Red repeated.

And Keelah had to question whether Red and Amata discussed more than her ailing hip. Because now both women had slandered her with similar vocabulary.

“You’re calling me stubborn?” Keelah snapped. Deeply offended.

“Yes. And you should know by now that I have a wealth of experience with ornery individuals such as yourself. I was the mayor of Lamplight for goodness sake. Does the name Princess ring a bell? Squirrel? MacCready? I’m not exactly deterred by stubborness.”

The diminutive doctor stood to her feet. Stared down at Keelah with forceful eyes. “Up. And don’t make me repeat myself.”

Thus, Keelah found herself face down on the exam table; her hip joint being manipulated into its rightful place.

Red gave Keelah a peppermint stick when the treatment was concluded. The wastelander stared confusedly at the candy treat; then at Red.

The doctor smiled. “For being so cooperative. I’ll expect you back here in two days for a follow up.”
“I have a doctor in Megaton.”

“When you’re in the vault, I’m your doctor.”

And, again, Keelah was reminded of Amata’s tirade:

*So long as you’re in the vault, you’re my responsibility!*

Keelah grumbled under her breath but didn’t protest the appointment.

Red and Amata called *her* stubborn, but they were bossy! Know-it-alls!

And Keelah took her internal dialogue (and her peppermint candy) back to Red’s office so that she could finish the computer work.

. . . . . . . . . .

Red was a quick study. Keelah was able to explain her father’s sorting system to the doctor fairly quickly. *Drag this here. Add a tab there. Don’t forget to create a duplicate.* And so on.

Patients trickled in and out of the office—delaying the lesson for prolonged intervals—but Red had her bearings after a few hours; was so giddy that she’d been able to master the complicated program that she’d crushed Keelah in an exuberant hug; planted a kiss against her cheek.

Keelah blushed from the affection. Nibbled on the peppermint stick and avoided Red’s eyes.

She’d been a jerk to Red when the sweet-tempered woman hadn’t deserved it. She’d unfairly blamed the doctor for her strained relationship with Amata.

“Thank you again,” Keelah told Red. Nodding in approval as the doctor correctly updated a file, saved it.

“You don’t have to thank me for medical services Keelah. It’s my job.”

“No. For the tip on Victoria Watts. It pointed me in the right direction, and I’m grateful.”

Red turned from the computer. Focused on Keelah. “And did you find your friend?”

“Yes.” Keelah’s eyes flicked away. “But she was already dead.”

“I’m so sorry Keelah.” A hand against her knee. Squeeze.

Keelah patted Red’s hand. Finally looked at her, full-stop. “You’ve lost a lot of friends Red. Between Little Lamplight and Big Town…” She shook her head. Still trying to process all that had happened. “How do you keep going? How do you keep from being overwhelmed by the losses?”

Red made a soft noise. Something painful in her chest that she stamped down. “I focus on the living,” she told Keelah. Her voice strong and sure from years of practice. “Remember the dead but focus on the living. That’s all we can do.”

She and Keelah had survived a horror together. Had escaped a Germanton Police Station that was full of dismembered bodies. Red patted Keelah’s hand. Keelah gripped the doctor’s.

Reconciliation.

Freddie Gomez entered the clinic. Called to Red that he was here for his appointment.
Red extricated her hand from Keelah’s. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“I’m going to write down the instructions for the computer program. That way you can have a reference guide.”

“I’d appreciate that. Thanks.”

And Keelah threw herself into the task; transcribing several pages of notes and tips regarding the filing system. It was her way of apologizing for her moody disposition as of late.

And at the bottom of the last page she scrawled a final word: Sorry.

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And though Keelah was sorry for the way she’d alienated Red recently and been ill-tempered with her, it didn’t make it any easier for the wastelander later that evening when she witnessed Amata enter the clinic.

Keelah had been making a return trip to the doctor’s office to check on Butcher and to invite Reilly to dinner, when she’d spied Amata walking just ahead of her. Amata was balancing two dinner trays in her hand, and Red relieved the Overseer of the trays as soon as she saw her in the doorway.

Keelah observed the exchange from her position down the hall. The Overseer giggled at something Red said and accepted a kiss to her cheek.

Keelah drew even with the clinic door just in time to see the two women disappear into the back office. Then the door closed. A private meal this time around.

Keelah stood there for a bit—numb—until she remembered she her own dinner plans. Then she went and got Reilly.

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After dinner she visited Susie. The blonde had been scarce all day. Keelah hadn’t seen her once since their return to the vault.

She spent an hour wandering around Vault 101 searching for Susie. It was Officer Hannon who finally told the wastelander that he’d seen the blonde slip outside.

Keelah panicked for a moment. ‘Cause why would Susie leave the vault unannounced? And why would she go out into the wasteland of all places? But then Keelah remembered.

She found Susie sitting in her star-gazing spot in the rocky alcove above the vault. Donovan was with her; his arm slung low around Susie’s hips.

There were no stars out tonight. Just more bitter wind and a dustiness of clouds too foreboding to be beautiful.

Keelah fell into the space beside Donovan; smiled warmly at her two friends as she let her legs dangle off the side of the incline. The wastelander dug her fingers into porous earth.

“How are you?” Donovan asked. His silvery eyes a satisfying replacement for stars.

“Good,” Keelah responded, raising a playful eyebrow at Donovan and Susie’s cozy arrangement. “Not as good as you though.”
The ranger blushed and Susie smacked Keelah on her leg.

Despite her playfulness, Susie seemed dispirited. The blonde had curled into Donovan’s side as if she needed the extra support, and she kept her hand on Keelah’s leg; her fingers clenched; as if she were holding on.

Keelah exchanged a worried glance with Donovan. “Susie…?” she ventured.

But just like she’d had done with Amata the night before, Susie brushed Keelah off. “Let’s just enjoy the quiet, hmm?” she asked. Her blues eyes searching for starlight that refused to appear.

In spite of their dusky surroundings, Keelah could see the wound to Susie’s neck; she noticed how the blonde used her free hand to touch the area every now and then. As if, by the next touch, the injury would disappear.

“Do you need first aid?” Keelah asked her.

Susie took her hand from Keelah’s leg; folded both hands into her lap. She leaned away from Donovan. Used her own arms to steady herself.

“It doesn’t hurt,” she murmured. Smiling softly when Donovan touched her knee. The blonde stared into the sky; her expression more somber than Keelah had ever seen. “It’s just…when I saw the reflection of the bite in my Pip-Boy when we were coming back from the car park, it reminded me of my brother Stevie.”

Ah. The security offer who’d suffered a fatal neck injury from the robot, Andy.

“He had a hole in his throat when we found him.” She touched her neck again. “In the same place as this. It made me sad. Remembering it.” The breath she was released was broken; so fragile. “Then I started thinking about my brother Wally. Wondering where he was.” The blonde used trembling fingers to push a lock of hair behind her ears. “Seeing that Fisher of Men base…both of them…I just have to hope that Wally is safe. That wherever he went, wherever he is, he didn’t run into any of those Fisher of Men sickos. Or anyone else who would do him harm.”

Keelah pressed her fingers deeper into the dirt. Dug a small hole in the earth that warmed her fingers.

She’d detested Wally. Had fought Stevie until they were both bloody. But the wastelander understood loss. How much it hurt, not knowing where a loved one was.

“Wally’s always been a tough one,” Keelah murmured. Exchanging a sidelong glance with Susie; an encouraging smile. “We’ll run across him eventually, and you’ll see.”

Susie reached over; touched Keelah’s hand. Thank you.

And when Donovan wrapped his arm back around the blonde, she let him.

They were an odd match. Old Lady Palmer and Robert Joseph MacCready.

Keelah ventured to the east wing of the vault to visit Old Lady Palmer, and she found her wizened friend and the former mayor of Little Lamplight engaged in a fierce game of checkers.

“King me!” Old Lady Palmer crowed. Clapping her hands enthusiastically as she moved her checker piece to the top of the board.
MacCready glared at the old woman, scowling irritably. “You can’t jump that many spaces!” he decreed.

“Can and did. Now stop pouting and crown me like a good sport.”

MacCready did as he was told. Muttering all the while.

“You’re a sore winner,” he complained. Staring moodily at the game board that clearly showed he was close to losing. He took his turn.

Old Lady Palmer laughed long and hard. “Sweetheart, at this age I only have two things I look forward to. Waking up in the morning without an ounce of pain and beating badly at checkers any moppet who dares challenge me.”

And Old Lady Palmer swiftly ended the game with another triple jump.

Keelah could only laugh at how red MacCready’s face got. And how loud Old Lady Palmer cackled as she reset the game board.

Old Lady Palmer and MacCready looked up and noticed Keelah in the doorway.

“Want to play?” Old Lady Palmer asked.

Keelah shook her head. “No, thanks. I don’t think I can handle your trash talk.” She smiled at MacCready. “How’s it going MacCready?”

“Oh...” MacCready responded tersely. The teenager rose from the table and glared at Old Lady Palmer in a way that was clearly feigned. “Rematch tomorrow. Same time.”

“I’ll be here,” Old Lady Palmer said brightly. “Bring snacks. I don’t like to win on an empty stomach.”

And she patted the boy on his back as he left the room.

MacCready kept a stone face as he brushed by Keelah, but the wastelander wasn’t fooled. The teenager had a discernible bounce to his step, and when he made a left down the hall, Keelah could see the smile on his face.

The wastelander raised an eyebrow at Old Lady Palmer. Claimed the seat that MacCready had vacated.

“Still whooping on the youngsters, huh?” Keelah asked with a grin.

Old Lady Palmer had been quite the card shark when Keelah was younger. And the old woman was as skilled at trash talking as she was at playing.

Old Lady Palmer shrugged innocently. “What can I say? He challenged me.” But she winked at Keelah as she began putting away the game pieces. “Robert’s a good kid. A bit churlish at times. And standoffish like nobody’s business. He doesn’t socialize like the other kids. But he’s competitive. And that was my way in.”

Old Lady Palmer eased out of her chair; moved over to her dresser to place the game back on the shelf above. “You know, he actually reminds me of my Jonas,” the old woman commented.

“Really?”
Keelah thought about the mild-mannered medical technician she’d known since she was a baby. As far as she could tell, Jonas’s disposition was nothing like MacCready’s.

“Oh yes. Don’t let the glasses and soft voice fool you. Jonas was a sweetheart when he got older. But when he was growing up... oooh weee... he was an absolute terror. He played pranks on everyone. Got into fights on the regular. He even figured out a way to cheat the GOAT exam. Made it so that everyone was assigned to be clinical test subjects.”

Old Lady Palmer settled onto her bed. Her eyes lighting up as she recalled her grandson. “Terror with a capital T.”

Keelah chuckled. “I bet Overseer Almodovar wasn’t amused by his antics.”

“Well, Elijah Walker was Overseer at that time. And he was a bit more understanding than Alphonse. He knew that Jonas was acting out because his mother was gone.”

Anne Palmer. Right. That was the reason Keelah had visited Old Lady Palmer in the first place.

“Do you remember much about the scouting expedition your daughter led?” she asked Old Lady Palmer.

“You know about that?”

“I did a little digging.”

Old Lady Palmer nodded. “Well... the old Overseer, Elijah, wanted the 101ers to begin to transition outside. He said the bombs had dropped more than 200 years ago and that the world was ready for us again. But most of us weren’t ready for the world. The 101ers didn’t share Elijah’s enthusiasm. We were afraid of what could lie behind that vault door. Monsters and sickness. All manner of things that could get inside the vault and infect us. Elijah wasn’t a bully. He wasn’t going to force anyone to go outside. But he asked for volunteers. My Anne was the first to sign up.” The old woman’s eyes shone. Pride and despondency. “She was always a curious one. Brave. She and three others formed a scouting party. They went outside... into the wasteland. Their risked their lives for the vault. For our future.”

“Were you upset that your daughter volunteered?”

“Oh no. She was excited to do it. And Anne... well... she had a way about her. When she was happy about something, it was hard not to be happy too. I was proud of her. I still am. She wanted a future where her son could play outside.”

Old Lady Palmer was struggling not to cry. It still pained the widow. Even after all these years.

“I have something for you,” Keelah told her. Reaching into her supply sack and removing the Pip-Boy she’d gotten from Moira.

Keelah extended the timeworn device to Old Lady Palmer. “This is Anne’s. I found it in Megaton. A city not too far from here.”

Old Lady Palmer held the Pip-Boy reverently. As if it was made from precious material. “This is Anne’s?” she whispered. Stunned; her hands trembling.

“I figured you’d want a piece of her back.”

“Oh...” And the old woman couldn’t say anymore. She bought the Pip-Boy to her chest. Cradled it
for a few seconds before maneuvering it back in front of her so that she could turn it on.

Old Lady Palmer began to scroll through the device.

“I remember the first time Anne left the vault. She was nervous but so giddy she could barely fasten her radiation suit. I had to zip it up for her. Plop that ridiculous glass helmet on her head.” Old Lady Palmer chuckled; her eyes riveted on the Pip-Boy’s screen. “She could barely fit her hair in the helmet, it was so thick.”

Keelah shook her head at Old Lady Palmer’s words. Confused. “A radiation suit? The scouts wore radiation suits into the wasteland?”

“Yes. I teased them about it. Said they looked like giant bumble bees.” The old woman laughed before turning her attention back to the Pip-Boy. “Oh, there are notes…”

And Old Lady Palmer read aloud: *It’s hard to believe that soon I will be outside of Vault 101. Outdoors in the old world. I hope there are no monsters…*

The old woman’s mouth trembled. She continued in a breathless voice: *I am afraid, but I’ve learned that there are things more powerful than fear. Like love. And family. I take this next step for my sweet baby, A.*

“Yes. She did it for Jonas. Her sweet baby,” Old Lady Palmer murmured.

Keelah sat forward in her chair. Something was wrong here…

“Wait a minute…The scouts wore radiation suits *each* time they left the vault?”

Old Lady Palmer thought about it. Mining her memory for details. “Yes. They went out three times and each time they wore radiation suits. The air wasn’t toxic. They learned that their first time out of the vault. But Overseer Elijah was overly cautious. He instructed them to keep wearing the suits just in case.”

“So they didn’t wear their Vault 101 jumpsuits outside? Not even once?”


But Keelah could only stare at the Pip-Boy. Her eyes wide.

That wasn’t Anne Palmer’s vault jumpsuit in Moira’s supply shop.

Which meant…

“That’s not Anne Palmer’s Pip-Boy,” Keelah declared.

Chapter End Notes

*Plot twist!*

Also, Keelah and Amata are so estranged at this point that, even though both women are featured in this chapter, there is zero interaction between them. :(
Chapter Summary

Hmmm…possibly the LW + Amata you’ve been waiting for. And other developments of course.

Chapter Notes

I had so much fun writing this chapter. I put a lot of thought and time into it. I hope that comes across. Thanks so much to everyone who encouraged me to continue to write at my own pace and to remain true to my vision for the story. Your words provided fuel for this chapter (and kept me from scrapping, in entirety, two future chapters).

Thanks as always for reading and commenting!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 31 – Cavalier

“What did you say dear?” Old Lady Palmer asked Keelah.

“I said, that’s not Anne’s Pip-Boy.”

The old woman stared down at the device in confusion. “But you said…”

“I know…I made a mistake Ms. Palmer. I’m so sorry.”

The old woman clutched the Pip-Boy to her chest; almost possessively. “But the initials…Anne signed the notes ‘A’. And she mentioned Jonas…”

Keelah’s tone was conciliatory when she spoke. “The person who owned that Pip-Boy was wearing a vault jumpsuit. And you said yourself that Anne and the other scouts wore radiation suits into the wasteland.” She sighed heavily. “I’m sorry Ms. Palmer. But that Pip-Boy can’t possibly be Anne’s.”

Old Lady Palmer took one final look at the antiquated machine—ran a finger along the surface as if she were imaging it being worn by her lost daughter.

Then she passed the Pip-Boy back to Keelah. “Here you are.”

“Sorry,” Keelah said again.

“Don’t apologize, dear. You tried to do something nice for me.” The old woman wrapped lean arms around her waist; rocked back and forth a bit. “And in a way, you did. I haven’t talked about my Annie in a long time. It was always too painful…remembering what happened to her and the others. But I talked about her today. I even laughed a little bit.” She smiled; thinking about her daughter,
bedecked in yellow, fulfilling a dream. The old woman tapped her chest. “This old thing…” — meaning her heart— “…can hold more than hurt. I need to remember that.”

And the woman brushed away a tear that had escaped her eye. Sighed softly into bedroom redolent with charged silence.

Old Lady Palmer could see that Keelah felt terrible about her mistake, and the old woman stood; pulled Keelah into a tight hug for a few seconds before letting her go. “Don’t fret dear,” she said. Before nodding at the Pip-Boy in Keelah’s hands. “Any idea who that does belong to?”

“No. But I think I know someone who does.”

The vault mechanic, Stanley, was hard at work teaching Squirrel how to change the compressors in the air filtration system. The senior technician had his head buried in a ventilation shaft while he fiddled with wires, loosened screws. Squirrel kneeled on the floor beside the old man; handing over the appropriate tools when asked; asking questions about this and that.

The two technicians were so engrossed in their task that they didn’t hear Keelah enter the maintenance room.

Keelah cleared her throat to get Stanley’s attention.

The vault technician poked his head out of the ventilation shaft. “Hey there Keelah. Come to lend your old boss a hand with this here wiring?”

Keelah waved hello to Squirrel before shaking her head at Stanley. “Not today Stanley. I have a question to run past you. Concerning this Pip-Boy.”

Stanley staggered to his feet. His age and poor health made the motion difficult for him and Squirrel help him out; placing a hand against the old man’s back.

Once he’d regained his balance, Stanley wiped grease and grime from his hands; nodded a thank you at Squirrel; then took the Pip-Boy from Keelah’s hands.

“You give every vaulter a Pip-Boy when they turn ten years old. I figured you may have some idea who that belongs to,” Keelah told the man.

Stanley studied the bulky device. Turned it over in his hands and peered at the back panel. “I haven’t given out one of these in more’n a decade. It’s an old model. Outdated.”

“Yeah, I know. I thought at first that it could be Anne Palmer’s, but now I’m not so sure.”

Stanley raised a bushy eyebrow. Frowned at Keelah with some surprise. “How do you know about Anne Palmer?”

“I hear things.”

Stanley grunted. “Uh huh.” Then he turned the Pip-Boy on; began to scroll through the menu. “Well, it’s not Anne’s,” he concluded. “Anne and her generation used the 3L series. One of the earliest models. Didn’t even have a health tracker. This here is a Pip-Boy 2000. We didn’t start using it until some years after Anne left the vault.” He handed the Pip-Boy back to Keelah. “I can’t tell you who it belonged to ‘cause the serial number is worn off. But whoever used it would have been younger than Anne. By at least ten years.”
Stanley resumed his sprawl on the ground; got back to work, changing the air filter.

“There’s nothing else you can tell me about this thing?” Keelah asked him.

“Eh…just chunk the damn thing in the Lost and Found. Whoever lost it will come collect it eventually.”

“No, they won’t. I found this Pip-Boy in the Capital Wasteland.”

Stanley pushed his way out of the ventilation shaft. Stared up at Keelah with a quizzical look on his face. “Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

The old man shook his head back and forth. Contemplating. “Must be another vault’s then. There are tons of these old rust buckets spread out in the wasteland.”

“No. This came from 101. Someone sold this Pip-Boy to a merchant in Megaton. And that person was wearing a Vault 101 jumpsuit.”

The old man rubbed his chin; left a black smudge across the bottom half of his face. “I just don’t know who that could be. After Anne and the scouting party disappeared, no one else dared leave the vault.”

“The old Overseer did. Elijah Walker.”

“You know about him too, huh?”

Keelah nodded. “Heard that he went out into the wasteland looking for the scouting party.”

“Yeah. Almost twenty years too late. It ate at him, you know? That Anne and those scouts went out there and got lost. Elijah blamed himself.” The old man shook his head; suddenly morose. He cracked his knuckles nervously. “But that ain’t Elijah’s Pip-Boy either. Overseers get customized Pip-Boys. Various doo-dads and whatnots that I design myself. I’ve only given out three in my lifetime and that ain’t one of them.”

Keelah turned the Pip-Boy over in her hands; scrutinizing it like a puzzle needing to be solved.

If this wasn’t Anne Palmer’s Pip-Boy, and it wasn’t Overseer Elijah’s, then whose was it?

“Someone else left this vault,” Keelah concluded. “After Overseer Elijah.”

Stanley waved his hand. Dismissing her claim. “Impossible. Once Alphonse became Overseer he locked this place up tighter than a can of jam. No one in or out. Until your dad, that is.”

Keelah raised the Pip-Boy. “Explain this then.”

A muscle ticked in the man’s jaw. “Like I said… toss the damn thing in the Lost and Found. And forget about it.”

Stanley went back to his work. Banging loudly against the metal walling and barking instructions at Squirrel.

But Keelah couldn’t forget about it.

The wastelander left the maintenance room with more questions than answers.
She didn’t know why it mattered so much to her, figuring out what happened to Anne Palmer and the scouting team. Determining who owned the Pip-Boy that weighed heavily in her supply sack; weighed heavily on her mind.

But the mystery (two mysteries now it seemed) was too much for her to ignore.

Anne Palmer and the scouting team had gone out into the wasteland and gotten lost. Or fallen ill. Or they’d been overpowered by slavers or ferocious animals. The first puzzle.

But there was a second story here. Whoever had worn this Pip-Boy had left Vault 101 too. They’d left years after Anne Palmer and the scouting team vanished. Perhaps right before Alphonse Almodovar became Overseer and resealed the vault.

Whoever this person was—this mysterious ‘A’—he or she had expected to get back inside Vault 101.

Keelah removed the Pip-Boy from her supply pack. Turned it on and reread that second note:

*I can’t believe he locked the vault door. I survived the trip to Megaton and made it back home only to discover that the password had been changed. I intend to wait by this door in hope that he’ll change his mind and let me back in. I’ll wait forever if I have to. I simply cannot be separated from my precious baby. A.*

Who had locked ‘A’ out of the vault? Overseer Elijah? Or Alphonse? But perhaps ‘A’ had gotten locked out by accident. The Overseer (whichever one) could have assumed that everyone outside was dead, and he’d changed the vault password in an effort to protect vault residents.

*I’m not getting anywhere with this,* Keelah thought moodily. And she shoved the Pip-Boy back into her supply sack. Stomped down the hallway and tried to clear her thoughts of the intersecting mysteries. At least temporarily.

It was as she passed the common room that Keelah remembered she needed a shower. She’d been on the road for days; had so much blood and dirt caked in her hair that her dreadlocks had stiffened from it. She reeked of the outside; dust and sweat.

The wastelander ducked into the public showers and was pleased to find them empty. Her boots were off in seconds. Followed by her armor and socks.

She stepped into the spacious shower and turned the water on as hot as she could stand it. The steady rivulets of warmth cascaded over her. It felt like more than a shower; some deeper sort of cleansing that she desperately needed.

She ducked her head until all she could see were shower tiles; a puddle at her feet.

And when a memory began to inch forth—something unpleasant, still unformed—she tilted her face into the spray of water until it felt like drowning. Piecemeal death.

It was only after she’d dried herself with one of the available bath towels that she realized she didn’t have a change of clothes.

“Shit!”

Her armor was filthy and in need of a good scrubbing itself. She didn’t want to put the combat suit
back on.

But it wasn’t like she had a bedroom she could flee to, to find another set of clothes. And someone could venture into the shower at any moment. Find her standing here half naked.

Keelah bounced from one foot to another; cold. The washroom was getting chillier by the second, and the bath towel she held against her body provided little covering and even less heat.

_Fuck it. I might as well make a run for it. Susie’s bedroom is around the corner. If I’m lucky, the hallway will be empty._

And that’s what Keelah did. She left her armor and supply sack in the bathroom to be collected later, and she streaked to Susie’s living quarters.

She was lucky. The hallway was surprisingly empty. Everyone off to work or whiling away their time in the rec room.

Unfortunately for Keelah, Susie’s bedroom _wasn’t_ so empty.

Amata happened to be visiting Susie; checking up on the blonde after her uncharacteristic behavior the night before.

Keelah burst into Susie’s bedroom—the bath towel flapping around her hips and only barely protecting her modesty—and gave both Susie _and_ Amata a shock.

Susie snorted at the image Keelah made—trying to cover her entire body with a scanty bath towel that refused to cooperate. And Amata’s eyes widened. Appreciatively.

Keelah blushed from head to toe.

And since Keelah was damn near naked—arms and thighs and half of her chest visible—Amata and Susie _saw_ the woman blush from head to toe.

Susie grinned devilishly. The blonde seemed to be in better spirits today. A change in circumstances that Keelah would have appreciated had she not been so mortified by her lack of clothes.

Susie immediately walked to dresser; removed a stack of ration cards from her top drawer; then turned to Keelah. “Am I supposed to throw these before or _after_ you lose the towel?” Susie asked Keelah; winking while she brandished the ration cards as if they were pre-war dollar bills.

“Susie…” Keelah threatened.

“Just one spin,” the blonde answered cheekily.

“Can I get some clothes please?!”

Keelah’s tone managed to be both dangerous and petulant. The wastelander was pissed, but she was more embarrassed. She couldn’t even _look_ at Amata. But she could sense that the Overseer was watching her.

“I thought you didn’t like wearing vault suits?” Susie teased. Clearly enjoying Keelah’s discomfort and wanting to prolong it as long as possible.

“Susie, if you don’t get me something to wear, I swear to everything unholy, I will shove you into a Yao Gui den the very next time we’re on the road.”
But the blonde simply guffawed at the threat. “Damn it! I wish these Pip-Boys had cameras.” Susie’s eyes lit up. “Oh wait! I think my dad has a camera in his office. Hold tight!” And the blonde dashed out of the room, cackling at the top of her lungs. Eager to capture her friend’s indelicate situation for all posterity.

Keelah bared her teeth. “That’s it. She’s Yao Gui chow.”

The wastelander thought about reaching behind her and locking Susie’s bedroom door—effectively locking the blonde out—but she remembered just in time that she needed both hands to keep her towel in place.

She recovered the towel right before it hit her ankles.

Amata cleared her throat. Blushed delicately. Then rose from her seat on the bed. “I’ll get you something to wear,” she said softly; moving to Susie’s closet.

The Overseer rummaged around in the enclosed space. “All she has are jumpsuits and that cocktail dress her mother makes her wear for Founders Day.” Amata said it somewhat apologetically.

“I’d wear a garbage bag at this point,” Keelah murmured. “The jumpsuit please.”

And she accepted the uniform that Amata handed her. Said thank you before backing her ways towards the far corner of the room. The furthest distance she could get from Susie’s bed; from Amata, who’d reclaimed her seat on the twin-sized mattress.

And Keelah shouldn’t have been too surprised that Amata didn’t leave the bedroom. She and Amata had changed in front of each other hundreds of times; had seen each other in various stages of undress; had seen each other naked.

But so much had changed between them over the years. They’d made love. Had touched each other’s bodies experimentally; reverently.

And they’d made war. Had taken their bodies away from each other in more ways than way. A retracted hand. A retracting vault door.

They weren’t lovers anymore. Weren’t best friends. Weren’t much of anything really.

Amata should have given Keelah her privacy. And Keelah should have demanded it.

But both women kept mum.

Keelah dropped her towel to the floor. Dressed hurriedly and sloppily, wincing when the metal zipper snagged against wet skin.

Amata stared at the bedroom wall until Keelah had covered herself; then the Overseer stood and collected the damp towel. Rolled it into a careless ball and tossed it into Susie’s hamper.

The two women were a foot away from each other. Maybe less.

Keelah smelling like soap and fresh water. Amata like the flowery perfume she wore every day.

Heady scents.

Keelah’s dreadlocks were plump with water, frizzy. Tiny droplets of wet fell from the saturated braids, splashing against her collarbone, and Amata watched the cascade with some interest. Tiny bead of moisture against flushed skin; a dampness like sweat only sweeter.
Amata reached out to catch one of droplets. A finger hovering near Keelah’s neck.

Both women braced for the contact.

Keelah, with bated breath; a trembling pulse.

Amata’s eyes fluttering. Afraid to look up and make eye contact.

And just as Amata’s finger made a spiral against Keelah’s collarbone, there was a knock at the bedroom door.

Susie.

“My dad couldn’t find his camera, but I ran into Freddie in the hall and he said he’d try to draw you.”

“I think I have the perfect brown that should match your skin,” Freddie shouted through the door.

Keelah swore beneath her breath. Yao Gui mincemeat!

The wastelander brushed by Amata, meeting her eyes for a split second. Silent communication between them. Longing? Regret?

Keelah wrenched open the bedroom door.

“Darn it, you’re not naked anymore,” Susie complained.

And even Freddie looked a little disappointed. Dropping his sketchbook to his side.

Keelah glared. “Susie, it’s only ‘cause I like you so much that I’m giving you fair warning. I’m going to get you back. I’m going to get you back so hard that your grandchildren will try to make it up to me.”

Susie laughed again. Poked Keelah in her side. “You’re a badass at all times aren’t you Keelah? A veritable soldier. A warrior. Or should I call you…commando?”

Freddie burst into laughter. And even Amata snorted in amusement, though she tried to hide her laughter behind her palm.

And Keelah would have told Susie off—’Cause, damn it, this wasn’t funny! And the vault suit she was wearing was two sizes too small and already chafing!

But as Keelah stared into those expressive blue eyes—her eyes flickering from the teeth-shaped groove on Susie’s neck to that familiar, wily smile—Keelah found she didn’t have any real anger.

Keelah extended a hand towards Susie, palm up.

“What?” the blonde asked. Confused.

“You got a show, now I want my ration cards.”

And all four of them erupted in laughter. The merriment so genuine that their sides ached from it.

Keelah collected her armor and supplies from the bathroom. Dropped the combat suit off at the
laundry to be cleaned; then made her way to the vault’s hair salon.

Bittercup had promised her a shampoo and condition, and Keelah desperately needed the treatment. She could also use a trim since, once again, her hair had grown too long to fit comfortably beneath the bandanas she occasionally wore.

When she entered the salon, she found Bittercup tidying Penny’s hair; twisting the teenager’s hair into spherical knots atop her head.

Penny brightened when she saw Keelah; waved happily from her perch in the barber chair.

“Hiya Penny,” Keelah said; settling comfortably into one of the guest chairs.

“Hey Keelah. I got those books the library lady sent.”

“Scribe Yearling.”

“Yeah. They’re awesome. I’ve been reading them to the younger kids on days we don’t have school.”

Vault 101’s school was still a work in progress since the vault lacked a permanent teacher. Beatrice Armstrong and Officer Gomez alternated teaching courses, with Amata filling in from time to time as needed. But it still amounted to only about three classes a week. And the instruction didn’t last a full day. It was a far cry from the regimented school system Keelah and her peers had matriculated through.

Keelah smiled over at Bittercup. The Big Towner was concentrating intensely on her hair styling; parting the thick curls, knotting them neatly. Keelah had never seen Bittercup exert herself with anything.

“You think you can fit me in next?” Keelah asked her.

“Of course. Read a magazine while you wait.”

But when Keelah reached for one of the periodicals on the table beside her, she saw that it wasn’t a magazine at all. But a copy of Freddie Gomez’s amateur graphic novel.

Keelah chuckled. “I haven’t seen one of these in years.” She noted that the comic was labeled Volume 14. “I guess he’s still churning these out.”

Bittercup nodded. “He’s going to do a spin-off series featuring Lady Mammalade’s sidekick, the Psychic-delic Seahorse.”

“Right…the seahorse who dresses like it’s the 1970s but who can see into the future.”

Keelah flipped to the first page, more amused than interested, and began to catch up on Freddie’s heroic dolphin.

. . . .

Bittercup’s fingers were firm against Keelah’s scalp; expert and soothing.

She’d already shampooped and conditioned the thick hair. Now she smoothed the locs back in neat rows.

“Wil you have dinner with me tonight?” Bittercup asked suddenly. Her hands stilling against
Keelah’s scalp.

“Sure. Is something wrong?”

And Keelah twisted in her chair to get a better look at Bittercup’s face. But the Big Towner stopped her; put hands against Keelah’s shoulders and turned her back around.

“Everything’s fine. I just need to talk to you about something.”

But her voice was solemn, and it immediately put Keelah on edge. The wastelander felt herself stiffen beneath Bittercup’s fingers; even though the massage of her head and neck was meant to help her relax.

. . . . . . .

Keelah was a pessimist. She expected the worse from people. Her dad’s abandonment and the barbarity of the wasteland had conditioned her in such a manner.

So prior to her dinner with Bittercup, Keelah reclaimed her armor from the laundry and put it on. She wanted to feel the familiar leather against her skin; wanted to feel protected behind the heavy fibers and chest plate.

Not that she expected Bittercup to harm her in any way. Of course Bittercup wouldn’t. Donning the armor wasn’t even a fear-based reaction. But Keelah had been feeling so out-of-sorts lately—like she was falling to pieces, slowly and steadily. So bolstering herself with combat armor provided some comfort. Made her feel less fragile somehow. Like the armor would catch her if she suddenly came apart.

She had time to kill before dinner and not much to do besides catch up with the Lamp/Towners.

She chased Sammy out of the reactor room (the Lamplighter had found the hideout like Amata predicted and he’d gorged himself on Sugar Bombs and Nuka Cola). Then she played a spirited game of table tennis with Shorty (she lost).

She’d been pacing the corridor outside of the atrium when she decided to walk to Megaton. It would kill a few hours before her dinner with Bittercup. It would also give her an opportunity to pick Moira’s brain about the mysterious “A.” Keelah could see if the store owner remembered any other details about the 101er.

She invited Brick to tag along so that the ranger could spend some quality time with her girlfriend, Jenny.

And for thirty minutes Keelah had to endure Brick singing love songs about insurmountable distances and forlorn hearts.

*I remember my first love…*

And maybe Keelah sang along a little (because the song was pretty damn catchy). But she didn’t get all misty-eyed like Brick did; falling sway to lyrics that rubbed against her skin like fine glass.

No, Keelah didn’t cry at all. Because…just no!

If there was dampness against her face it was because her hair still had not dried.

The song was touching. Remembering first love and all that. But not *that* touching.
Keelah and Brick made plans to meet by the Megaton gate at six PM. Then Brick marched in a straight line for the Brass Lantern and Keelah headed to the Atomic Supply.

But Moira’s shop was closed.

“Gone away on business,” the mercenary who guarded the store grunted. “Won’t be back for a week at least.”

Keelah nodded at the tight-lipped man before walking away. And since she was within a stone’s throw of Moriarty’s Saloon, she figured she’d stop in. Get a drink. Play a game of chess with Nova.

The tavern didn’t have much of a crowd. Just a handful of Megatowners scattered about, drinking quietly; listening to GNR.

Keelah took a seat at the counter. Was somewhat surprised that Gob wasn’t there, frowning at the customers like he always did and banging on the static-laced radio.

Moriarty was there instead. Wiping down his countertop with a dusty rag as he eyed his few patrons. Every now and then the saloon owner would sneer at one of his customers; remind them that their tabs were due. But his attention quickly moved to Keelah when she settled onto one of the barstools. Moriarty’s nostrils flared and he smiled, slow and easy, at the wastelander.

“Well, if it isn’t the Lone Wanderer,” he drawled in that inflected accent of his. “Did you just get back from helping an old lady cross the street?”

Keelah made a face. She couldn’t stomach even the mention of helping an old woman.

The bar owner grinned unkindly at her reaction. More like a smirk. Pleased that he’d annoyed Keelah.

Their was a mutual antipathy.

Keelah had first met Moriarty when she was eighteen years old. Two days out of the vault with a hole in her stomach the size of a golf ball courtesy of a raider’s shotgun. Moriarty had information about her father’s whereabouts, but the saloon owner had refused to tell Keelah anything until she’d paid him two hundred bottle caps and tracked down his “stupid whore Silver.”

Even after Keelah had earned the money and paid him; after she’d lied and told him Silver was dead, Moriarty had toyed with her; tried to take advantage of her youth and inexperience.

You’re father’s long gone, lass. You should forget about him. He certainly forgot about you, leaving you behind like that. And he’d affected a sympathetic posture as if Keelah would be fooled by his downturned mouth and crestfallen eyes.

You going to tell me where my dad went or not?

He’d laughed.

They don’t breed them patient in your vault, do they?
And when he smiled, there were more gums than teeth. Like two sets of mouths gaping back at her.

But he’d told her where her father had gone. Had advised Keelah to step lightly in the Capital Wastes.

And as Keelah turned towards the saloon door, Moriarty offered additional advice.

*Hey kid! Come back and see me if you don’t find daddy. I’ll help you out. Give you some work. You’re tough enough to guard my front door. Pretty enough to sell some ass. I’ll let you choose which.*

He’d winked at her again. And Keelah had punched him in the face.

It had taken Gob and Nova to separate the two of them. Keelah and Moriarty had been intent on killing each other. His hands around her throat; her fingers digging into his mouth, trying to rip that damned smile off his face!

Even now the animosity remained. Moriarty wiped his counter, smug and satisfied. And Keelah asked for a drink through gritted teeth.

Moriarty poured her the whiskey he knew she preferred; slid it over to her with a hand so scarred by violence that it looked more like a glove; thick and tough.

“Where’s Gob?” Keelah asked; taking that first delicate sip.

“Cleaning the bathroom. Piss and puke. That’s what we get all day long. Guess it comes with the territory.”

And he poured himself a drink—scotch, neat—and leaned against the counter; watching Keelah idly. Sipping comfortably as if he and Keelah were friends sharing a quiet moment.

“Haven’t heard much about you on the radio these days,” Moriarty commented. “You finally decide to retire all that hero nonsense?”

“I’m not a hero,” Keelah answered. Gesturing for another drink. *Had she drank a full glass already?* “And I’ve been busy with other things.”

“Like what?” And the man really did seem interested. His eyes shining expectantly.

“This and that.”

Moriarty laughed. Unoffended by Keelah’s curtness. “I thought you’d returned to your vault or something,” he said. “It’s in this area, right? Somewhere near Minefield?”

He was fishing for information. Keelah knew it and she glared at the oily man. “I’ve met vampires who were less sinister than you.”

Moriarty laughed throatily at the insult. “You flatter me girl.” But then his features sharpened. The man became deadly serious. “You’ve killed a few people. Got yourself a reputation. But don’t forget that you’re still a pup. The wasteland is for wolves, darling. And that ain’t you.” He grinned again. Wicked and knife-edged; and Keelah was reminded of Alphonse Almodovar. Another cunning snake. “Now can I get you anything else?”

Keelah threw a glance around the room. Made sure Nova wasn’t within earshot. “You’re holding a debt for Nova. How much is it?”
“Why? You want yourself a little side piece? Don’t you already have a houseboy? That ghoul of yours who follows you around?”

“He’s no houseboy. He’s my friend.”

Moriarty licked his lips. “I bet. Well…Nova owes me a pretty penny. 20,000 caps and counting.”

“What do you mean counting? I thought she’d already repaid most of her debt.”

“Well, she’s settled a fair amount of it. But I have to tack on room and board. And there’s interest to consider. Plus all those fancy toiletries she needs to keep herself smelling good for her clientele.” He smiled again and Keelah remembered how much she hated the sight. “That plus other miscellany… well…there are a lot of expenditures. Nova’s going to be owing me for a long time.”

“I’ll pay you 20,000 right now.”

She still had the 25,000 caps from the botched ransom. Half her life savings. Nova would be pissed at her for interfering in her personal affairs, but hopefully the sweet-tempered hostess would get over it.

Moriarty took a deep drink of his alcohol. “I always knew you were swimming in money. All that pricey armor you wear. And you walk around carrying two guns when most folks can’t afford one.”

“I don’t buy guns and armor,” Keelah retorted. She scavenged them. Off the bodies of people she bested in battle. It was the way of the wastes.

Moriarty laughed again. Comprehending. “Well, lass, that’s a nice offer you made me. Real nice. But I’m afraid I gotta pass.”

“But I can pay you in full. Today!”

Moriarty poured Keelah another drink. Filled her glass to the brim as if he expected she’d want to drink herself sick after what he intended to tell her.

“You know what keeps people coming through that front door?” He asked Keelah. He blinked at her. Owlishly. Didn’t wait for Keelah to respond. “Cheap booze and a woman who can’t say no, no matter how many times you stick it to her.”

He laughed. A violent chuckle that was ear-splitting.

Moriarty was a vile man and he reveled in it. That hideous smile of his already stretching his face.

“This place would go to shit without Nova’s…distinct talents. She ain’t going nowhere, kid. No matter how many caps you offer me. I own her just as much as I own Gob.”

And he slapped Keelah’s bill on the counter. Whistled a cheery tune as he counted out her change.

. . . . . . .

The rest of Keelah’s time in Megaton was uneventful.

She lost to Nova at chess (the pretty redhead didn’t talk as much trash as Old Lady Palmer but she was super competitive and sneaky good at the board game). Took Dogmeat for a long walk around the city. Then went to check out the damage to her front door (Charon had already repaired it).

She and Brick were back at Vault 101 well before dinner time.
Keelah sat in her favorite booth and waited for Bittercup; fiddling with plastic straws and working backwards through everything she knew about the 101er “A”.

Keelah didn’t know why she was so obsessed with the Pip-Boy and its owner. It was probably a go-nowhere mystery that would lead to countless dead ends and more disappointment. But it was something to focus on besides Agatha and the sobering fact that Amata and Red were probably inching their way towards love.

*The love doctor*, she thought glumly. Recalling the nickname Susie had given Red.

And almost like she’d summoned her, Susie appeared. Sliding into the seat across from Keelah.

“I’m an idiot,” Susie declared without preamble.

“What?”

“I just realized something. All this time I’ve been working like the dickens to get you and Amata back together, and just today, you were in a room alone with her. *Naked*. And I totally got in the way of that.”

“Susie…”

“I mean, you could have put a sock on the door knob or something but still… I should have known better. I can’t believe I interrupted you.”

“Suze…”

“So what I was thinking was…maybe we can do a redo.”

“A *what*?”


“You’re ridiculous!”

“Hey, I’m trying to make a love connection here.”

“I don’t need your love connection.” It looked like Susie was going to say more, but Keelah saw Bittercup enter the cafeteria. “I love you to pieces Susie, but I kind of have dinner plans.”

Susie’s mouth stretched into a thin line as Bittercup drew closer to the table. The blonde raised a disbelieving eyebrow at Keelah. “And to think, you and Amata were considered the smart ones in school.”

Bittercup was at the table. She stood there. Waiting for an empty seat.

“Susie…” Keelah warned.

The blonde scooted her way out of the table. She smiled politely at Bittercup but turned a vicious scowl on Keelah. “Let me know if you change your mind about that shower.”

Then she was gone. Traipsing out of the cafeteria like she hadn’t just made an incendiary comment.
Keelah turned to Bittercup with some trepidation. But the Big Towner only smiled; settled into the seat that Susie had vacated and began to poke at the food that Keelah had already purchased for her.

“These fish cakes are good,” Bittercup said around bites.

“Mmm hmmm.” But Keelah hadn’t even taken a single bite of the food. She was talking just to fill the quiet. She sucked water through her straw; created a grating noise when the bottle proved empty. She smacked her lips. Looked for something to do with her hands. “So what’d you want to talk about Bittercup?”

She didn’t know why she was so nervous. This was Bittercup. And the two of them had always had an easy, comfortable rapport. A certain kismet.

But the last time someone had summoned her for an “important conversation,” she’d been exiled from the vault. Keelah couldn’t shake the feeling that she was about to be sent away again.

Bittercup put her fork down. Wiped her mouth delicately with a paper towel. “I wanted to talk about us,” she admitted.

“Us?”

“Yes. Our relationship.”

Keelah was at a loss. She wasn’t sure what the exact nature of her relationship with Bittercup was. But surely their friendship wasn’t so serious that it required a special conversation?

“I like you,” Bittercup continued. “I like you a lot actually.” And she smiled. A curve of her mouth that traveled all the way to her eyes. Settled there. Soft and glowy. “I’ve been thinking about it and I’ve decided that you are probably my first love.”

Keelah’s head spun. And the wastelander found it hard to breath. “Wha—?” she gasped.

Bittercup smiled at the other woman’s bewilderment. “I’ve been with others, mind you. Flash and I dated for a bit. And I had a thing with Timebomb that was pretty serious. But he never remembered after the coma.” She took a deep breath. Stared off into space. “But it feels different with you. You make me feel warm in places that I didn’t even know had feeling.”

And Keelah’s eyes watered at the words. Because they sounded more beautiful than the songs Brick had been singing earlier.

Bittercup touched Keelah’s hand. Softly. There and gone. “Do you feel the same about me?” she asked Keelah.

Keelah thought about it. Thought about the dour faced woman who hunted through sand for small trinkets to give to her. The young woman whose smiles were as fleeting as her vigor but who was so steadfast in her affections; affirming for years that she was Keelah’s girlfriend. Bittercup, whose melancholy matched Keelah’s perfectly; who’d held her hand and met her eyes in ways that felt like the deepest intimacy.

“I love you Bittercup.” And it was the truth. “But…”

Amata. It always came back to Amata.

“I know.” Bittercup saved her from saying it. Her hand returning to Keelah’s. This time lingering. “And it’s okay. Because it doesn’t change what we have.” The Big Towner smiled in a way Keelah
had never seen before. Like the sun coming out after a storm. “I still love Flash. And Timebomb. Even though he can’t remember me. You are my first love in a lot of ways. But so are they. Flash taught me not to be afraid.” Her mouth trembled. A memory resurfaced. That fateful walk from Little Lamplight to Big Town. “And Timebomb taught me kindness.” The smile returned. “And you…you, Keelah…you taught me how to feel.”

And she kissed Keelah’s hand the way she had the night before. So gentle. “And if you couldn’t tell, I love you too.”

Keelah made a soft sound. An expulsion of air. ‘Cause, damn it, if Bittercup wasn’t some kind of wonderful.

“What happens now?” Keelah asked her. Her voice trembling with unchecked emotion.

“We continue on. As friends.”

“I’d like that.”

Bittercup blushed suddenly. Looked away. “Friend to friend? Freddie Gomez asked me out.”


Bittercup turned back to her. Seemed almost apologetic. “Freddie and I…it’s still early, but we have a certain understanding.”

Keelah rushed to reassure her. “Bittercup, you and Freddie are a match made in heaven. Or…whatever supernatural place…zone…thing…you believe in.”

Bittercup giggled happily and Keelah joined in.

And because this was a beginning as much as it was an ending, it made sense that both women leaned forward. Exchanged a sweet kiss.

Bittercup pulled back first. “I’m going to head out,” she told Keelah. “I have some storyboarding to do with Freddie.”

“Tell him I said hello.”

And when Bittercup walked away, Keelah discovered that she had an appetite. She dug into her dinner tray then. Suddenly starved.

She heard the click of heels against linoleum and figured it was Bittercup returning to the table.

“You decided to finish your fish cakes?” she asked. Not looking up until she’d swallowed a bite of sandwich.

But it wasn’t Bittercup staring down at her. It was Amata.

And the Overseer looked furious.

Amata’s eyes were smoldering and she jabbed a finger in Keelah’s face.

“My office. Now.”

And she stomped away before Keelah could respond.
Keelah shuffled into the Overseer’s office not ten minutes later. Closed the door behind her without being asked.

Even without one word being spoken, the tension was thick. Like another presence in the room. Keelah exhaled softly and even that expulsion of breath seemed too loud; charged somehow.

Amata was staring out of the window; down into the atrium like her father used to. But when Keelah walked further into the room, Amata moved away from window. Approached her desk. The Overseer didn’t sit. She simply slid a hardbound book across the desk towards Keelah.

“What’s that?” Keelah asked.

“Vault 101 Procedural Handbook. I think you should give it a read.”

Amata’s voice was sandpaper rough and Keelah startled at it. She stared at her old friend, surprised by her aggression. The wastelander didn’t bother picking up the heavy book. “Why do I need to read that?”

“Because you’ve been remiss in your duties. And some reeducation is in order.”

“What are you talking about? My duties? Reeducation? I don’t work here.”

“You are Vault 101’s Community Liaison. You’re also the Chief Caravan Merchant. It’s high time you start behaving in a manner befitting those titles.”

Keelah shook her head. Suddenly dizzy. “What the hell is going on here Amata?”

Amata’s eyes flashed angrily. All propriety gone out the window. “You seem to be unaware of office protocol for professional staff, so let me remind you. The vault has a policy against gratuitous PDA. Rule 47. Subsection 16.” Amata opened the policy manual and flipped to the page in question. Jabbed a finger at a paragraph that had been heavily highlighted.

And were those handwritten notes in the margins?“I find it highly inappropriate that you continue to behave lewdly in public,” Amata accused.

“Lewdly? Are you talking about that kiss with Bittercup? It was one peck. And it was friendly like.”

Amata waved off Keelah’s explanation. “It was hardly friendly. It’s bad enough that I found you locked in a torrid embrace in Bittercup’s bed—”

“Torrid embrace? You make it sound like a scene from some pulp novel.”

“Then the two of you go at it like rabbits in the cafeteria last night.”

Keelah’s brow crinkled in confusion. “How’d you know about that?”

“At least last night’s tryst happened after hours. But today, it’s the middle of the lunch rush. Kids were present. And the two of you are making out where everyone can see!”

“I would hardly call it making out. It was one kiss.”

“It still qualifies as PDA.” Amata’s chest heaved, and the Overseer slammed the manual closed.
Folded her arms across her chest and glared at Keelah. “Read the handbook. And report to me tomorrow for a pop quiz.”

Keelah scowled. “You’re out of your mind. I’m not reading shit. You’re not my boss, and I’m certainly not one of your employees.”

“You’re supposed to be a role model for the Lamplighters. How does it look? You running around with a teenager?”

“Bittercup’s older than me!”

Somewhere along the way they’d begun shouting at each other. Amata’s face was blotchy and red. And Keelah’s hands trembled at her sides.

Amata pursed her lips. Tried to regain control of her emotions as she searched for a more cogent argument.

Keelah beat her to the punch.

“And what about you, huh? You’re getting on me about PDA, but I’m pretty sure the clinic counts as a public area. Yet you and Red sure spend a lot of time dining there.”

“The air quotes aren’t necessary. And, yes, I spend a lot of time in the medical clinic with Red. But need I remind you that there are private quarters attached to the medical bay? There’s nothing public about our displays of affection.”

Keelah’s heart sank. Or deflated. She couldn’t tell which. But suddenly the wastelander felt sick. Like all the food she’d ever eaten in her entire life was about to be violently projected from her stomach. ‘Cause, no, she didn’t need to be reminded that there were bedrooms right off the medical wing. She and her father had lived there after all.

Keelah swallowed down bile. “Dear god…please tell me that you and Red aren’t having sex in my old bed.”

Amata rubbed at her temples. “Keelah…”

Keelah’s hands clenched into fists. Pounded against her thighs. “Sweet Jiminy Cricket! Just…not in my bed, alright? Anything but that.”

“That’s really none of your business.”

Keelah saw red. Screamed something unintelligible that had Amata’s personal guard racing into the office.

“Do you require my assistance ma’am?” the young officer panted at Amata.

“Get the fuck out!” Keelah screamed at him.

“Don’t speak to my officer that way!” Amata bellowed. Not to be outdone with the hysterics.

And the guard inched closer to his superior. Subtly angled his body between the two feuding women. “Overseer?” he asked again.

“Get out John!” Amata exclaimed. Her nerves so rattled that the command came out like a shout.

The officer bolted.
Amata turned her ire back on Keelah. “I expect you and Bittercup to restrain yourselves from here on out.”

“My relationship with Bittercup is none of your business!”

“Oh, so you admit that you’re in a relationship with her? Just last week you were telling me that the two of you are friends.”

And as sudden as it came, the fight went out of Keelah. The wastelander’s shoulders slumped and she lowered her voice; depleted. “What does it matter Amata? You’re busy getting…physicals from the good doctor anyway.”

“Again…air quotes not necessary.” But Amata's anger had tapered too.

“Whatever.”

And they turned away from each other. Stared at opposite walls with burning eyes. Both women furious and more than a little heart sick. Agonizing over the fact that the other person was romantically involved with someone else.

Keelah found just enough anger. Held on to it. She turned accusing eyes on Amata. “You had to go for my friend, right? All the people you could have chosen. Yet you went for Red. You didn’t think that would hurt me?”

Amata closed her eyes. Shook her head slowly from side to side. “I didn’t know how close the two of you were until afterwards.”

Keelah bit into her bottom lip. Hesitant to ask the next question. “Is it serious between the two of you? Like…love?”

Amata’s eyes flicked away. “Early days.”

Keelah willed herself not to cry. “Congratulations.” But because she was heartbroken and just a little petty, she had to give one last parting shot before she left the office. “Hope my bed is as comfortable as you remember.”

And she was halfway through the office door when Amata barreled after her. The Overseer slapped her hand against the door release button, making the sliding door close again and forcing Keelah to step back into the office.

Amata’s anger had gone from vehement irritation to white-knuckle fury. It was damn near palpable. And the heat of it rooted Keelah to the spot.

“You know…I always thought you were brave because you stood up for me and anyone else who was too afraid to defend themselves,” Amata hissed. ”You fought the Tunnel Snakes and my father. You went out into the wasteland and made it back. Not once but twice. But you’re not brave Keelah. You’re stubborn. And there’s a difference between the two. Bravery would be fighting for us even when it doesn’t make sense. Even when it means abandoning your old hurts and resentments. But you would rather be stubborn. You’d rather push me into the arms of another woman than find some courage and want me as much as I want you.” Amata's mouth trembled with unspent emotion. Years of longing. “You still can’t admit it, can you? That you want to be with me?”

Keelah didn’t answer. She couldn’t find the words. There were no words to describe the mishmash of emotions that were currently churning her insides.
“Say something!” Amata demanded. Her voice hoarse and paper-thin.

And when Keelah still refused, Amata shook her head in defeat. “Leave then. I have nothing more to say to you.”

And Keelah turned towards the door again.

Amata made a sound of disbelief. “You would actually do it? You would walk out on me?” Her eyes welling with tears. A blanket of wet.

The Overseer turned. Tried to hide the emotion. She walked an unsteady line back to her desk.

When she’d retreated behind the heavy table; when she’d leaned against the metal surface and found some solidity, she addressed Keelah again.

“Before you go, let me say this…” A deep breath. Summoning strength. Some reserve stashed away for just this conversation.

“You. Everything about you. Since we were kids. The way you smile. The way your eyes light up when you have a story to tell. Your silliness. Your charm. You stood on your head for me for god’s sake! You sang me out of my despair. Every time I looked at you I was happier than I was the moment before. You made me feel special Keelah. Like—finally!—I meant something to someone. You were everything to me…” Her voice quavered. “I waited for you. For three years. Probably my whole life. I waited for you beside the vault door. Outside Brotch’s classroom. Your bedroom on the weekends. Everywhere you went, I waited for you. Waited for you to reciprocate. For you to want me as much as I wanted you. Did you know how bad it was for me? Thinking you were dead because you didn’t come back after six months? Then a year with no return? Then another one?”

“Don’t blame me for that.”

“I do blame you! I blame you every day! You took away your friendship without even discussing it with me! You held me responsible for things that were outside of my control. Your friendship was more important to me than anything Keelah. I trusted it. I believed in it. But you didn’t. And now it’s gone…”

“I didn’t take it away. You did. You sent it away. Sent me away so that you could save your precious vault!”

“I asked you to come back. I waited for you to come back. I’m still waiting! You built yourself up to be the most important person in my miserable life then you walked out on me. You made me feel Keelah. Things I’ve never felt before and probably never will again. And then you threw those feelings in my face! You didn’t come back even though I asked you to. I begged you!”

“That’s not fair.” And Keelah was crying now. Overcome with emotion. Damn near sick from it. “You sent me away.”

“Not forever Keelah.”

“You told me to go—”

“But not forever.” A heartfelt whisper. “You should have known I didn’t mean for it to be permanent.” Amata sniffled. Wiped her eyes against her sleeve. A gesture so pitiable that it seemed almost childlike. “I don’t know how to be apart from you.” She laughed weakly. A self-deprecating chuckle. “I mean…come on…you taught me how to play marbles when we were eight years old. You sang me happy birthday. The first time I can remember hearing it. You couldn’t get rid of me.
after that. I was your shadow from then on.”

Her eyes so wet and wide that Keelah couldn’t fathom how the woman could see.

Keelah shook her head. Disagreeing with the words. “No. I was yours.”

The moment was huge. Significant. And Keelah could have chosen to walk away. Because her concerns were valid. And her pain was real. But Amata was right about one thing and wrong about another.

Keelah was stubborn.

But she was also brave.

The wastelander erased the distance between them. Moved slowly across the metal flooring, still unsure.

And when she was within centimeters of Amata, Keelah stopped. Put a trembling hand against the woman’s cheek.

“You were the best thing in my life, too,” Keelah murmured.

And she would have said more. Made some sort of declaration. But Amata cut the words off with a kiss. Dissolved the statement into a whimper; a throaty exhalation.

It was a meeting of lips and tongue that was passionate and sweet. Keelah could barely breathe, she was so focused on kissing Amata. Holding Amata; touching her. More. More.

Her hands traveled to rounded hips; settled there; drew the Overseer close.

Amata looped her arms around Keelah’s neck. Twined her fingers through the thick hair that she’d been fantasizing about for years.

They kissed for long moments. Pulling away only when breathing became necessary.

Keelah rested her forehead against Amata’s. Forced fluttering eyes open so that she could stare into her first love’s eyes.

“Bittercup was breaking up with me,” she confessed. “That kiss you saw was a goodbye kiss. And I never slept with her.”

"You did sleep with her," Amata pointed out.

"Yes. But only sleeping."

Amata’s hands curled around Keelah’s shoulders. And the Overseer smiled broadly; relieved. “I never slept with Red,” she admitted. “We never even kissed. Unless you count pecks against the cheek.”

“But Red’s my friend. And you’re dating her. So…”

“We broke up last night.”

“Really?” The news surprised Keelah. She searched Amata’s eyes. Hoping.

“Yes. Red’s wonderful. And I tried with her. I did. But I just couldn’t…” Amata took a moment to
compose herself. Swallowed deeply and tried to find the right words. She stared up at Keelah with shimmering eyes. “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t love you. I can’t imagine that I’ll ever stop.”

And Keelah interrupted her this time. Kissing Amata so softly that the woman shivered; felt every nerve ending in her body respond.

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Amata pushed Keelah down onto the bed. Wasted no time climbing on top of her. Sinking teeth into the woman’s shoulder.

Keelah hissed happily at the contact. Laughed softly at Amata’s enthusiasm.

“What is it?” Amata asked. Pulling back to stare down at her friend.

“You’re bossy at all times,” Keelah teased.

“You disapprove?”

“Amata, it’s pretty damn easy to tell that I approve of everything you’re doing right now.”

Amata let her gaze travel down Keelah’s body. Paid special attention to the sheen of sweat and pebbled skin that indicated Keelah did indeed appreciate her attentions.

They’d left a trail of clothes from Amata’s office to the bedroom. They only article of clothing that remained between them were Keelah’s socks. And Amata hadn’t given the woman a chance to remove the footwear. She’d pushed the wastelander into the sheets; had immediately began to lick and nibble all that available skin.

But now Amata sat back; took her time studying Keelah’s lean musculature and bronzed skin. She couldn’t help herself. She pressed her teeth into the soft flesh of Keelah’s breast. Followed the bite with a swipe of her tongue. Purposefully avoiding Keelah’s nipple.

“Tease,” Keelah panted. And even saying that one word took a considerable amount of effort.

Keelah’s hands gripped the fabric above her head. And the thrashing of her feet loosened and removed her socks.

Amata smiled. “You look distressed, dear.”

The return of pet names. And Keelah experienced a different sort of wetness in her eyes.

Amata recognized the emotion. Gentled her actions and kissed Keelah on the mouth. Tenderly. Lovingly. Again and again until they both sighed.

And when the kisses traveled southward and Keelah gripped the sheets again, they said “I love you,” one after the other.

It was lovemaking. And friendship building. And coming home.

It was long overdue. And it was perfect.

Chapter End Notes
I intended for the make-up sex to be all angsty and fierce but the LW and Amata wouldn't let me write it that way. Once the anger was stripped away only tenderness remained.

For those readers who are most interested in the romantic elements of the story (And there's nothing wrong with that. I appreciate you reading this far), feel free to count this as the end. The LW & Amata reconcile and live happily ever after. (Although I'm sure they continue to have misunderstandings and Keelah persists in being stubborn).

For those of you who want to know what happens with the Pitt and the Pip-Boy, there will be a few more chapters coming (and still more LW/Amata throughout including more angst).

**Another Beaches reference in Keelah and Amata’s argument at the end. That line about “You took your friendship away from me without discussing it with me…and now it’s gone” is from the 1988 movie starring Bette Midler. Arguably the best breakup scene I’ve ever seen in a film.**

**Also included a reference to the UK Prison Series, Bad Girls (Rule 47, Subsection 16 line)**

**I like including minute details that are actually game canon. Like the fact that Bittercup dated Flash and Timebomb.**

**Chapter title inspired by James Vincent McMorrow song “Cavalier.”**
Amata burrowed deeper into Keelah’s embrace; breathed in the scent of musk and vanilla. Moved a hand until it curved around Keelah’s nape. Squeezed.

“Your feet are cold,” Amata murmured into soft skin.

“My feet are always cold,” Keelah reminded her.

“I know. I’ve missed that.”

And Amata’s other hand clenched on Keelah’s hip. The Overseer traced a circular pattern into the other woman’s skin.

Keelah sighed contentedly. Blinked sleep out of her eyes.

They’d been lying like this for hours. Holding each other, breathing softly. Talking only when the emotion became too much and needed release.

But for the most part they communicated without words. A hand against cheek; a roving finger catching tears; kisses that seemed to go on forever.

“I’m going to have to apologize to my guard, John,” Amata commented. “I think we scared him. Screaming like that.”

Keelah was distracted by Amata’s mouth. By the hint of tongue that appeared when the woman spoke. The wastelander tilted her head; captured Amata’s lips in a scorching kiss.

The Overseer’s hands immediately went to Keelah’s face; cupped her; pulled her close.
“I’m being a terrible Overseer,” Amata murmured against Keelah’s mouth. “How long have we been back here? Four hours? Five?”

“Not long enough,” Keelah responded. Maneuvering her body until she’d pressed Amata into the bedsheets. She shifted until they were lying flush; pressed her hips into Amata’s.

Amata gasped at the contact. Seemed to lose her train of thought as her fingers dug into Keelah’s back; left indentations.

Keelah smiled down at friend. At the fluttering eyes; the lush bottom lip that was currently caught between teeth. Keelah nudged forward; produced the sigh she was looking for. Bent her head to swallow the sound. A mash of lips, a swipe of tongue as she started a gentle rocking motion; used the bed as leverage. Push.

And when she slid her hand between their slick forms; twirled a finger at the apex of Amata’s thighs, it was enough.

Color.

More color than was left in the world.

Amata released a sigh (high-pitched) that was so sweet that Keelah was drunk from it; had to close her eyes to keep from being overwhelmed.

“Kiss me,” Amata demanded breathlessly.

And Keelah obliged. Their tongues dueling, laving at skin. Again and again.

And for long moments, there was no part of their bodies that wasn’t touching. And both women had trouble distinguishing where they ended and the other began.

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Keelah leaned back against Amata’s chest; fiddled with her Pip-Boy, trying to find music. Amata tutted beneath her breath as she massaged coconut oil into the wastelander’s hair.

“Find anything?” Amata asked. Placing a kiss against Keelah’s neck as she parted another section of hair. Twisted the dreadlocks. Repeat.

“Nope. Can’t get a good signal.” Keelah tossed her Pip-Boy off to the side. Canted her head so that she could meet Amata’s eyes. “You could always sing for us.”

Amata laughed amusedly. Put a hand against Keelah’s shoulders and turned the woman back around. “You know I don’t sing.”

“You used to sing all the time. When we were kids, I couldn’t get you to be quiet. Not that I wanted to,” she added quickly.

“I was just playing around. Singing to interrupt the quiet.”

“And whenever you’d braid my hair, you would hum.”

“Humming was the only way I could keep you still.” And Amata repositioned Keelah’s body again. Put an arm around the woman’s shoulders to keep her in place. Keelah refused to keep still! “You’re going to get coconut oil all over the bed,” Amata scolded.
But Keelah ignored the complaint. Tilted her head up. Stared at Amata through long lashes. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,” she sang. “You make my happy when skies are gray…” A soft smile. “You remember that?”

Amata kissed her. Quick and chaste. “Of course I do. It’s my favorite song.”

“Mine too.” And Keelah reached up to clasp Amata’s hand. Ignored the slick feel of coconut oil that stained her hand. She interlaced their fingers. “I’d never heard that song before you. It was so pretty. And sad. The way you would sing it.”

A kiss pressed into Amata’s palm. An invitation.

Amata’s eyes were heavy-lidded. Guarded. Hiding old emotions. But her vision cleared after a moment, and the Overseer’s gaze flickered from Keelah’s eyes to their joined hands.

“It’s all I have left of my mother,” Amata said softly. “That song and this bracelet.”

Keelah disentangled their hands. Used a finger to trace the fine yellow bracelet that circled Amata’s wrist. A tangle of plastic hearts.

“What was your mother like?” Keelah asked.

Her voice gentle because they’d never had this conversation before.

They both had dead mothers and had always left it at that. A fact.

But to Keelah, it was suddenly important that she know who Amata inherited the sweetbitter song from.

Please don’t take my sunshine away…

Amata hesitated for a moment. Seemed to search for words (the energy) to discuss a parent who had been gone for more than twenty years.

“I was so young when my mother died,” Amata explained. “I can only remember certain things about her. The sound of her voice. Her smile.” Amata pursed her lips. Blinked back the surfacing pain. “I remember being happy when she was alive. And when she died…I remember nothing but sadness. Until you.”


“Never again,” Keelah promised. Her hand circling Amata’s wrist like a second bracelet.

The wastelander was astounded when Amata slipped the yellow bangle off her wrist and onto Keelah’s.

“What are you doing?” Keelah sputtered.

“My mother gave me this bracelet to show how much she loved me. I want you to have it for the same reason.”

Keelah shook her head. “I can’t. It means too much to you.”

She tried to take the bracelet off; reattach it to Amata’s wrist. But the Overseer stopped her; stilled Keelah’s hand.
“Before the war...before the bombs...people would show their commitment to each other by exchanging rings. Remember that? In the books we read?” Amata asked.

“Yes.” So soft that it was almost a whisper.

“Well...I don't have a ring. But I still want to show you how much I care. What you mean to me. I want you to know—”

Keelah interrupted her. “I know Amata.”

Keelah surged up to press a kiss against the other woman’s lips. “I know. I know. I know.” Each declaration punctuated by a sweet kiss.

Keelah pulled back. Stared at her girlfriend/lover/bestfriend with earnest eyes. “I’m sorry it took me so long...to move past everything.”

Amata smiled into another kiss. Said something that was muffled by the movement of their mouths; the heavy breathing.

“What?” Keelah asked. When they came up for air.

“I said: I know you’re trying to distract me from finishing your hair.” Keelah had a giggle fit. And Amata’s eyes twinkled. The Overseer swatted Keelah on her bare leg. “Now sit still so I can finish.”

And she waited until Keelah had settled against her again; the back of her head coming to rest near Amata’s shoulders.

Amata’s hands went back into Keelah’s tresses. Keelah’s eyes turned to the bracelet on her wrist. A circle of hearts. Plastic but enduring.

The significance of the gift was enough to make Keelah’s eyes water.

And when Amata began to hum—the song from before, about love and sunshine—Keelah released a breath that carried away all of the hurts from before. The resentment. The ill feeling.

Until all that was left was the press of Amata’s fingers; the steady breathing: comforting and close; and a friendship restored.

. . . . .

When Keelah’s stomach growled some hours later, Amata chuckled. Scratched her nails down the wastelander’s firm belly.

“I suppose I should feed you,” Amata teased.

“If you want me to keep up my stamina.”

Amata snorted. Reached towards her night stand to check her Pip-Boy. “It’s five AM. I suppose we could sneak down to the cafeteria before Pepper starts breakfast. Heat up leftovers.”

Keelah lifted her head from the pillow. Fixed Amata with a serious look. “Or I could make us breakfast. In Megaton.”

“Hmm?”

“The sun will be up soon. You’ve never seen it before. Let’s walk to Megaton. You can watch the
sun rise. I can make you eggs.” She snuggled closer to Amata. Held her hand. “You can see my home.”

Amata smiled but the turn of mouth was forced; her eyes apprehensive. “I don’t know Keelah. I’ve never been outside.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t know how to shoot a gun, so if someone or something attacks us—”

“I won’t let anything happen to you. And it’s a short walk. There and back.”

Keelah waited for Amata to decide. Didn’t want to push.

Amata’s eyes fluttered closed; her hand trembling in Keelah’s grasp. “I almost left before…” she whispered. “When you didn’t come back that second year. I was going to leave the vault and find you.”

“I know.”

Amata’s eyes sprang open. “How did you know?”

“Your father told me.”

Amata looked surprised. Tore her gaze away from Keelah’s. “He talked me out of it. And I don’t know…maybe I wanted him to. I was so afraid to venture outside.” She shook her head; ashamed. “I still am.”

Keelah swiped a thumb across Amata’s bottom lip. A reassurance. “It’s okay Amata. I’m glad you didn’t go out there on your own. It’s too much for one person.” And Keelah’s eyes darkened momentarily. Remembering her own banishment. The terror of being out in the wasteland alone. But the wastelander blinked past the painful memory. “This time we’ll be going together.” Her voice a husk. Her hands so soft against Amata’s skin.

Amata smiled. This one heartfelt. “Let’s do it,” she stated firmly. Making a choice that she hoped would counteract the decision she made four years ago: sending Keelah out into the wasteland on her own.

“Yeah?” Keelah confirmed.

“Yes.” Amata kissed Keelah again. Then smacked the wastelander on her naked rump. “Now let’s go. I’m starved.”

And they leapt out of bed; giggling and exchanging glances, as they reclaimed the clothes they’d abandoned more than ten hours ago.

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Amata faltered twice.

Once outside the vault door, as the heavy door swung inwards, shutting them out. The squeal of metal so loud that Keelah grimaced. Even after so many times passing through that entryway.

And when they’d reached the wooden lattice door—the final barrier to the wasteland—Amata hesitated. Gripped Keelah’s elbow even as she put on a brave face. Lifted her chin.
“I’m with you,” Keelah reminded her. Removing the hand from her elbow; catching it with her own hand; a tight grasp.

They took baby steps to the wooden door; through it. Until they stepped outside in sweltering light.

Yellow.

So much yellow that it was gold.

So much that Amata threw her head back, closed her eyes.

“How do you feel?” Keelah asked her. Ready to retreat back into the tunnel if the heat and sunshine proved to be too much.

“I feel warm,” Amata responded. A small smile on her face. “I feel good.”

And she surprised Keelah by taking the first step down the incline. Then another. Until she was bathed in the full glow of sunlight.

She was beautiful like that. Amata. The rays of sun painting ephemeral streaks in her hair.

She was like some sundrenched goddess. A precious thing. And Keelah’s mouth went dry at the sight of her. The wastelander’s hand jangling the new jewelry on her wrist.

Amata stared back at her. Smiled tenderly at the expression on Keelah’s face.

“You ready?” Amata asked her. Extending her hand.

“I’m ready,” Keelah responded.

And she clasped Amata’s hand again. Squeezed.

Then the two women made their way towards Megaton.
Hallelujah

Chapter Summary

The Lone Wanderer ventures into the Pitt.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warner: Mention of rape and torture.

Chapter inspired by Leonard Cohen song “Hallelujah.” (I’m partial to the Rufus Wainwright version, however).

*Maybe there’s a God above  
And all I’ve ever learned from love  
Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you  
And it’s not a cry you can hear at night  
It’s not somebody who’s seen the light  
It’s a cold and it’s a broken hallelujah…*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 33 – Hallelujah

Pittsburg, Pennsylvania was a city of steel and water. Before the war, Pittsburgh was an industrial hub known for its skyscrapers and steel factories. A city perched between three rivers. Thriving. It was known as the City of Bridges.

But when the bombs dropped—streaking fire across the sky—the water and bridges doomed the bustling metropolis. Highways were choked with traffic as residents tried to flee the burning city. Residents were trapped in stalling cars; stranded as entire bridges collapsed beneath them and exits were made inaccessible.

Those who weren’t killed by the nuclear fallout retreated back into the smoldering township. These “survivors” would spend the next two hundred years raising their families amongst the ruins of a once-proud city. They were fenced in by irradiated water; had to contend with a poisoned sky. And with resources dwindling to catastrophic levels, they were forced to drink radioactive sludge. At times, they even turned to cannibalism.

Over time, their bodies mutated. Their children were born with extra limbs; if they were born at all.
Stillbirths were common. As was infertility. And those children who were born with physical deformities—“the helpless” as they were called—were abandoned on the remains of the great bridges. Sacrificed as offerings for feral dogs and ancient gods who’d long since abandoned humanity.

The Pitt was like hell on earth. Raider gangs; mass rape; widespread child slavery. Every kind of brutality imaginable. And then some.

The rest of the wasteland knew to stay away from the wretched settlement.

Two hundred years after the Great War ended, the Pitt still smoldered.

But then the Brotherhood of Steel came. By accident. A tactical misstep. The military faction stepped into the smoke-filled ruins and was horrified by what they saw. The cannibalism. The widespread violence. The squalling children with too-wide eyes.

The Brotherhood laid waste to the Pitt. Killed any inhabitant that put up a fight. Then the military group fled the massacre with a handful of unmutated children. The Brotherhood left Pittsburg even more ravaged than before.

A single Brotherhood Paladin was left behind. Ishmael Ashur, who was injured during the melee and left for dead. When Ashur recovered from his injuries, he found himself a god amongst men. The surviving Pitt residents were awed by his power armor; by his oratorical skills and intelligence. Ashur capitalized on their infatuation. He consolidated the remaining raider gangs into a single unit. He formed his own army.

Ashur created a government. He created an industry—reopening the abandoned steel mills and putting his minions to work.

And when the raider population wasn’t enough to man his factories, Ashur enlisted slaves. His raiders swarmed the wasteland looking for able bodies; kidnapping unsuspecting travelers; enslaving hundreds.

Soon the Pitt was filled with the sounds of the blast furnace; the groans of slaves working past their capacity. Smoke filled the air again—this time from the fire of iron being wrought.

Disease remained. The violence. People mutated by air and water who devolved into a subhuman species known as trogs.

Ashur ruled them all with an iron fist. But he was a curious dictator.

In one breath he would pontificate about enterprise and liberty. He would stress the importance of rebuilding humanity.

Not even a second later, he would turn to his lieutenants and demand more slaves.

....

Keelah, Butch, and Trinnie stood at the border of the Pitt Bridge. Keelah had visited the city a time before, so she didn’t balk at the bleak surroundings. But the Pitt was new to Butch and Trinnie. The wastelanders were visibly startled by what greeted them.

There were rows upon rows of train tracks filled with overturned box cars. A smattering of trash cans burning brightly with god-knows-what inside. Decomposing bodies hung from highway signs, stirred by invisible wind. And there were so many crumbled buildings—gutted beyond repair— that
they couldn’t be counted.

Even the sky was different over Pittsburg. It seemed lower somehow; like an open mouth. As if the heavy storm clouds would descend at any moment and consume the world.

The entire sky was a mishmash of orange and gray from the constant fire and smoke. The air so thick that breathing was difficult. A person had to swallow deeply. Then swallow again to find breath.

Trinnie put a hand against Butch’s elbow then shot a worried glance at Keelah. The former Lamplighter wasn’t easily spooked. She’d survived enough tragedy already; had become emotionless over the years. But there was something about the Pitt. An ominousness that couldn’t go unnoticed.

Trinnie pinched the bridge of her nose. Tried to find enough oxygen to form words. “My brother’s in there?” she asked Keelah with quavering voice.

“I think so.”

Keelah took a step towards the bridge line. She studied the broken passage they’d have to navigate to get to the interior of the city. There was a trail of blackened cars and landmines. Tiny orange lights on the explosives that blinked like glowing eyes.

There would be feral dogs on the bridge. There would be snipers. But Keelah had walked this mile before and had survived it. Hopefully the guards would recognize her and not shoot.

But she warned Butch and Trinnie. Just in case. “Stay close,” she reminded them. “Try to stick to the railing. And remember to step lightly. If the raiders start shooting, retreat back to the train yard and I’ll go on to the Pitt alone.”

Keelah didn’t give her companions the opportunity to second guess their mission. She hopped onto the hood of the nearest car; crouched down, eyeing the mines that were on all sides of them. Then she began the slow trek towards the Pitt’s downtown.

They made it to the front gate with only one hiccup. A pack of rabid dogs swarmed the trio the moment they’d stepped from the cars to the ground.

Trinnie wasn’t an experienced fighter, and the young woman stumbled backwards, flailing wildly. She stepped directly onto a trip wire; sent an entire row of cars exploding behind them. Butch just managed to push his girlfriend to the ground before a piece of shrapnel flew past, nearly impaling her.

Keelah focused on the dogs. She fired rapidly into the throng of snarling beasts until they scattered in a mad dash or succumbed to hemorrhaging wounds.

When the gunfire stopped—when the explosions ceased—Keelah and her companions continued to the front gate.

The heavily armed guard, Mex, glared at them through the wired fence.

“I thought for sure that blast would get you,” he grunted at Keelah.

“You couldn’t have helped with the dogs?” Keelah asked him. Nodding at the pistol attached to the man’s hip.
Mex snorted. Spit a blob of brown goo on the ground before smirking at Keelah. “I ain’t wasting bullets on no scab.” He turned wary eyes on Butch and Trinnie. “Who are they?” he asked Keelah. “New bodies for the boss’s steel mill?”

“No. Ashur said I could use the ammo press any time I want. These two are here to help me carry my gear out.”

“Shit, you need two people to carry ammo? You going to war or something?”

The guard coughed up more brown liquid. Seemed to quake from the convulsions. But he opened the front gate without any other questions. Waved Keelah and her companions in.

Ashur had made it clear three years ago when Keelah “sided” with him against the slaves, that Keelah was a full citizen of the Pitt and should not be mistreated by the raiders.

The raiders would scowl at her and curse, but they would let her pass unmolested. They wouldn’t shoot.

Keelah was relying on that neutrality to get her through the Pitt unscathed. She had to find Trinnie’s brother and help him escape. Keelah was also hoping to rectify the mistake she’d made three years ago when she abandoned the slave rebellion; left all those wastelanders toiling in the steel mill.

Keelah, Butch and Trinnie made their way into the smoky city; gagging on the toxic fumes. Rubbing desperately at their eyes as the soot settled on their skin.

They walked in near darkness. The only light was the glow of trash cans burning. The cackling red of fire irons as they spit ash and flame.

The trio passed slaves cutting metal; using hammers to shape steel.

There were bodies on the ground of workers who’d died of exhaustion and were left there to rot.

Even more slaves were locked in wooden stockades; their heads and arms bound as they dangled helplessly, waiting to die.

Trinnie’s eyes tracked the still forms, searching for her brother’s face. The woman gasped audibly when one of the slaves fainted right in front of her; his body jerking wildly on the ground; his eyes rolling back, his mouth frothing up a pink liquid. Blood.

The raider bosses looked on, unconcerned. One of them shouted for the man to get up. Kicked at the convulsing slave with a steel-toed boot. But the slave didn’t rise; he didn’t move again at all. The spittle dried around his mouth as his face became permanently locked in a rictus of death.

Keelah closed her eyes against the gruesome scene; nudged Trinnie forward. “Keep moving,” she whispered. Not wanting to draw undue attention with their gawking.

“Do you see your brother?” Butch asked. As they moved along. Towards the steel mill that stood at the heart of the city.

“Not yet. But I’m not sure I would even recognize him. It’s been five years. And these people…” Trinnie’s voice trailed off as they passed another group of slaves hammering at a pile of metal that looked too large to ever be diminished. “…many of them don’t even have skin.”

It was true. Contamination and disease ravaged residents of the Pitt. Slave and free alike. The combination of smog, sickness, and overwork was lethal. Led to hair loss, reduced cognition,
peeling skin. And a general malaise that was so potent that people died abruptly. Left vacancies that had to be refilled with more slaves. A pernicious cycle.

Keelah led her team to the steel mill door.

“We’ll pretend to use the ammo press,” she told her companions. “But Trinnie, I want you to keep your eyes peeled for your brother. Once we find him, we proceed with the second part of our mission.”

Keelah was hoping for a nonviolent resolution to their Pitt predicament. There was no way she and her companions could survive a gun battle with the raiders. In order to settle things peacefully, Keelah would have to appeal to Ashur’s diplomatic side. She would also have to rely on a bit of cunning.

They stepped inside the steel mill.

Noise and heat. That’s all there was.

Slaves hammering at iron; grinding metal. Audible groans and coughs from slaves sick with exhaustion. There was the steady bark of raiders, striking at slow-moving workers. Flicking heavy metal chains that produced ribbons of blood on already inflamed skin.

Trinnie wobbled on unsteady feet. “This is worse than I imagined,” she whispered faintly. “Five years of this…”

Butch kept hold of Trinnie as they walked through the cavernous building.

The raiders recognized Keelah. Nodded stoically in greeting. The slaves recognized Keelah too. Some of them glared openly and muttered beneath their breaths. But most of them were too tired to mount much protest. They stared back at her with bleary eyes before returning to their assignments. Slumped back into a feeble position and commanded their limbs to work.

“He’s not here,” Trinnie said. When they’d crisscrossed the building a second time.

And they were taking a risk, strolling about like this, scrutinizing the slaves. Already the lead guard, Hammer, was watching the trio with suspicious eyes.

“You’re sure none of these are your brother?” Keelah asked. Retracing her steps. One more pass through the factory.

“Yes, I’m sure. I would recognize his eyes, at least. And I don’t see them. I don’t see him.”

Trinnie continued to peer into the faces of the slaves as they passed; even as Keelah motioned for the woman to be more subtle.

Keelah grabbed Trinnie’s arm. Led the woman away from a slave she’d been openly ogling. “Maybe your brother works Uptown. They have a few slaves who do domestic work up there. Let’s grind out a few bullets to keep our cover, then we’ll head up there.”

But as they turned towards the ammo press, they were intercepted by Hammer. The burley guard blocked their path. Folded his arms across his chest as he stared at them with cold eyes.

“Doing a bit of sightseeing?” he asked Keelah.

“No. I just got turned around a little bit. It’s been so long since I’ve been here…”
It was a weak lie and Hammer scowled at her. Jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “The boss radioed. He heard that you’re in town. He wants you to come up and see him.”

Keelah had intended to head Uptown anyway so she nodded. “Fine.”

Hammer kept an eye on them as they took the flight of stairs to the second level and made their way across the bridge into Uptown. Keelah could see the guard speak into his radio; sending a message back to Ashur at Haven.

...  

Uptown was the area of the city were Ashur’s underlings lived. A collection of ruined apartments that the raiders used as home and garrison. Makeshift bridges stretched from building to building, and dozens of raiders patrolled continuously. Watching for rival gangs or slacking workers. Firing warning shots at the slaves below. Some of the raiders fired their weapons just for the hell of it; a way to break up the tedium of slave-watching.

Keelah led Trinnie and Butch in a slow promenade around the higher deck. They kept their eyes peeled for slaves. Stopped occasionally to let Trinnie get a good look at the emaciated workers.

When they passed through the final building and began their descent towards Haven, Trinnie finally exploded.

“If my brother’s not here, where is he?!” she exclaimed. Her eyes moving from Keelah to Butch, demanding an honest answer from one of them. Either of them. “Do you think he’s dead?” she asked them weakly.

“Trin…” Butch began. His face contorting with sympathy. But the 101er didn’t know what else to say so he turned to Keelah too.

Keelah released a heavy sigh. Thought about the decaying bodies they’d already passed on the way to the courtyard. Thought about the slaves she’d seen collapse her first time in the Pitt.

Trinnie’s brother had been in the Pitt for more than five years. It stood to reason that he’d already succumbed to illness, to overwork.

“I’m sorry Trinnie,” Keelah said finally.

And when the former Lamplighter burst into tears, Keelah turned away to give the woman some privacy.

It was disquieting, seeing the normally dispassionate woman lose her cool. Keelah wandered off a few yards. Left Butch to comfort his girlfriend.

Almost immediately, Keelah was surrounded by a gaggle of raiders that had been patrolling the area outside of Haven.

“Oi! It’s the Champ!” Reddup called. Smiling at Keelah as he circled her. A hint of bone was visible on the man’s forehead from where his skin had rotted.

The other two raiders, Squill and O-Dog, followed suit. Forming a loose circle around Keelah. Grinning mischievously at the woman they hadn’t seen in more than three years.

Keelah studied the trio warily. It was only a matter of time before they mobbed her…
And they did. The three raiders threw thin arms around Keelah and bearhugged her between them. The raiders squeezed Keelah so hard that her head rattled back and forth, and the wastelander briefly saw stars.

Keelah pushed at Reddup’s chest. “Come on guys,” she complained. “It’s hard enough to breathe in this place.”

The raiders released their hold on her. Smiling happily at their returned associate.

Most of the Pitt raiders were brutes. Beating slaves on the whim and being openly hostile to anyone who wasn’t Ashur. The Pitt raiders referred to Keelah as ‘pet’ or ‘meat.’ They’d wanted to attack Keelah on sight and had been disappointed when Ashur had forbidden it.

But Reddup, Squill and O-Dog were different. All three were former slaves who’d earned their freedom by fighting in the Pitt arena.

Keelah had fought in the arena herself and been crowned champion. Her success in combat had earned her the respect of Reddup, Squill and O-Dog. It had also earned her their friendship.

Reddup looped an arm around Keelah’s shoulders and wagged his eyebrows at his two companions. “See? I told ya she’d come back. I’m irresistible to women.”

“I resist you just fine,” Squill joked.

Reddup glared at the pink-haired woman. “You don’t count Squill. You like your men with a little more trog than I possess.”

“Hey! Bert wasn’t fully trog when I dated him.”

Keelah shook her head at the bickering raiders. Turned her attention to the more mild-mannered of the bunch. “How’s it going O-Dog?”

The soft-spoken raider took a drag on his cigarette before stubbing it out beneath his boot. “It’s the same old thing Keelah.” He was the only raider who’d bothered to learn her name. The civility still surprised Keelah. “Just trying to survive this shithole.”

Reddup punched O-Dog in his shoulder. “At least you still have a face Oscar Mayer. And all that long hair you got? You’re the prettiest muthafucka in this dump. No offense Squill.”

Reddup dodged Squill’s kicks and punches. Laughed loudly as the diminutive raider tried to pin him in a headlock.

O-Dog frowned at his friends; tucked his hair behind his ears. And his hair really was long. Fire-colored and curly. So vibrant that he stood out from his peers. Seemed out of place somehow.

“Whyn’t you two stop goofing around?” O-Dog snapped. “You want Krenshaw to come out here and starting wailing on us again?”

Reddup and Squill immediately stopped the horseplay.

Squill scowled at the mention of Krenshaw, and Reddup rubbed anxiously at a fresh-looking bruise on his right arm.

Krenshaw was Ashur’s second-in-command. And the man was vicious. Blood-thirsty. Keelah remembered how he’d glared at her when they first met in Ashur’s office. Krenshaw’s eyes had been
blazing hot; hungry. And Keelah knew, without a shadow of doubt, that Krenshaw would have ripped her apart with his bare hands had Ashur allowed it. The lieutenant exuded violence; a barely controlled contempt. Of all of the raiders, Krenshaw was the one who took the greatest pleasure in torturing slaves.

“Krenshaw has a major stick up his ass lately,” Squill explained to Keelah. “He beats on us like we’re one of the slaves.”

“Yeah,” Reddup added. “He damn near broke my arm the other day. And he took a hot iron to Duke just ‘cause he missed a patrol shift. Burned half of Duke’s face off. The bastard! And he’s always picking on O-Dog.” Reddup turned to the O-Dog. “Didn’t he pull a blade on you the other day?”

O-Dog ignored Reddup’s question. Moved closer to Keelah and spoke in a lowered voice. “Krenshaw might be turning trog. He’s been coughing up blood lately. Losing weight. He’s pissed that Ashur hasn’t made much progress with the cure. So he takes his frustration out on the rest of us.”

Keelah digested that bit of information. “Three years and still no cure, huh?”

“None.” O-Dog shrugged. “But it’s not like they’d tell us anything anyway. We just hear things…”

Keelah gnashed her teeth. *Three fucking years!*

She turned slitted eyes towards Trinnie and Butch; tried to gauge how the woman was faring.

It infuriated Keelah to hear that Ashur and Sandra still hadn’t developed a cure for Pitt mutation. She’d walked away from the slave rebellion because she’d assumed freedom was only a few years away for the indentured workers.

*The cure is almost ready,* Ashur had promised her.

Who knew how many slaves had died during those three years? And Trinnie’s brother was probably one of the fallen.

*I shouldn’t have left, she brooded. I still wouldn’t have abducted Marie, but maybe there was something else I could have done to help the slaves.*


“A friend,” Keelah answered. And she made her way back to Butch and Trinnie’s side.

Reddup, Squill and O-Dog followed her. Curious about the outsiders who’d accompanied Keelah into the Pitt.

Keelah was just about to make a series of awkward introductions when she was interrupted by two simultaneous gasps.

Trinnie and O-Dog gaped at each other.

“Kat!” O-Dog cried.

“Orange!” Trinnie shrieked.

And Trinnie and O-Dog flung arms around each other. Began jumping up and down in place, sobbing loudly.

_Siblings reunited after five years._
There was a flurry of questions and exclamations.

“What are you doing here?!”

“My god! Orange… It’s really you! You look so… so different.”

“So do you. Your hair… And you’re all grown up!”

“So are you.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“I thought you were dead!”

They hugged again. Crying and laughing in equal measure.

Reddup and Squill stared in confusion. Even Keelah was floored by the unexpected development.

“You’re Orange?” she asked O-Dog. The raider nodded. Keelah turned to Trinnie. “And you’re Kat?”

“You already know me Keelah,” the blonde responded.

“I know you as Trinnie.”

“My name’s Katrina, remember?”

Details clicked into place and Keelah shook her head in amazement. “The missing Lamplighters. Kat and Orange.”

O-Dog turned to her in surprise. “You know about Little Lamplight?”

Keelah nodded. “Yeah. But we don’t have time to play catch up O-Dog… Orange… whatever… I need to talk to you in private.”

And she motioned Trinnie and Orange to the side, but Reddup stepped forward. Stared back and forth between O-Dog and Trinnie, seeing the resemblance. “What’s going on here O? This chick related to you or something?”

“Don’t call me chick, creepo!” Trinnie screeched. And she moved towards Reddup with balled fists.

Squill immediately jumped to Reddup’s defense. Her hand going to her assault rifle. Butcher moved to Trinnie’s side, unholstering his own gun.

Keelah stepped between the dueling parties. “Hold it!” she commanded. “Put your guns away.” She turned to Reddup and Squill with pleading eyes. “Be cool, alright? These guys are friends of mine. I just need a moment with O-Dog. So give us a few seconds. Please?”

Reddup and Squill exchanged glances. Communicating their disapproval. Then Reddup turned narrowed eyes on Keelah. “I don’t think Krenshaw would approve of this here parlay going on,” he sneered.

Keelah frowned. And O-Dog blanched. But after a few more tense seconds, Reddup grinned. His brown and white flecked skin stretching across his ruined face. “I’m just fucking with you. I hate
Krenshaw. Whatever you got going, I hope it kills the bastard.” Reddup socked Keelah in the arm. “This time, don’t leave without saying goodbye, ‘kay? I got a new rifle scope I want to show you.”

Squill snorted. “That’s the way to a woman’s heart Reddup. Show off your rifle scope.”

“Hey! Some women like firearm accessories.” Reddup protested.

“And some women like two-ply toilet paper. That doesn’t mean you should take them to a bathroom for a first date.”

“I only did that the one time! And you said you liked how I decorated the commodes.”

“Well, the paper flowers were a nice touch. But if you put tissue paper in a toilet bowl…”

“It gets soggy. I know that now.”

And the two raiders walked away, still squabbling.

O-Dog heaved a sigh of relief. Rubbed a trembling hand across his brow. “I thought for sure they were going to get Krenshaw. That would have been bad. Krenshaw has it out for me.” And O-Dog brushed his hair behind his ears again (a nervous gesture). Before turning back to his sister. The smile returned to his face. “I can’t believe it’s you. After all this time. What are you doing here Kat?”

Trinnie put her arms around him, smiling happily. “I came to bust you out Orange. Five years ago you sprung us from those slave pens. Now I’m returning the favor.”

“Oh. Huh…” And O-Dog fidgeted. Seemed to grow pale.

“What’s wrong?” Trinnie asked him. “Aren’t you glad I came?” She rushed on. Not giving her brother a chance to respond. “Where we’re going Orange, it’s so much better than Little Lamplight. I live in this huge ship that has guards and everything. It’s the safest place in the Wasteland. And they have food and clean water. And beds! Can you believe it? I don’t have private quarters or anything like that, but there’s room enough for you in the common area. And Butch said he could get you a job with his caravan.” Trinnie put a hand on Butch’s shoulder. Smiled shyly. “This is Butch. He’s my…well…he’s mine.”

Butch blushed. Extended a hand to for O-Dog/Orange to shake. “Hey.”

Orange accepted the greeting. Nodding weakly. But the young man didn’t look enthused about the prospect of leaving the Pitt.

Trinnie’s face fell at his muted reaction. The woman tugged stepped back from her brother; tugged clumsily at a lock of her hair.

So the twins have something in common, Keelah thought, as she studied her distressed friend. They both toy with their hair when they’re anxious.

“Don’t you want to come back with me?” Trinnie asked her brother. “We have a plan that will disrupt this entire operation. You don’t have to be a slave anymore.”

And since they were running out of time and Ashur would be wondering what was keeping her, Keelah decided to cut to the chase. “He’s not a slave,” she told Trinnie.

“What?” Trinnie asked. Still not getting it.
The blonde was so ecstatic to see her brother alive that she failed to notice the simple things: like the fact that her brother was wearing battle armor. And that he was carrying an assault rifle. Or the fact that he was lean, muscular. Whereas the Pitt slaves were all malnourished to the point of being infirm.

Orange coughed unnecessarily. Reached into the pockets of his leathers for another cigarette. The raider didn’t speak until he’d lit the homemade cigar; until he’d filled his lungs with eye-watering smoke.

“I work for Ashur,” he admitted to Trinnie. “I’m not a slave. Haven’t been for years.” Another pull of the cigarette as he avoided Trinnie’s gaze.

“I don’t understand…” Trinnie stammered. “They took you five years ago.”

“Yeah.”

“They put those welts on your body.”

“Yeah.”

“And now you work for them?” Her eyes hard and angry. Accusing.

“That’s the way of the Pitt, Kat. You’re a slave until you’re not a slave. Most slaves die from exhaustion or disease. A few of us are fortunate enough to climb the ranks and become soldiers in Ashur’s army. I was one of the fortunate ones.” Orange flicked the cigarette away. Didn’t bother to watch where it landed.

“Fortunate?!” Trinnie bellowed. “You’re a fucking slaver is what you are! Don’t you remember how raiders used to attack us at Little Lamplight? How many of our friends they took in the middle of the night?”

“I remember.”

“Cheese and Little Omar? Ben? He was five.”

“I said I remember!”

“You can’t possibly remember Orange! If you did, you wouldn’t have turned into one of them! You wouldn’t…!” And Trinnie couldn’t even look at him. She turned away. Tugging so fiercely on her serrated tufts of hair, that she winced from the fresh pain. But yanked harder still.

“You don’t understand Kat,” Orange interjected.

“Hell no I don’t understand! Explain it to me. Explain how you can take part in this…this sickness! There’s a trail of bodies from here to the bridge. All those people! Some of them young. The age we were when slavers captured us. How could you do it Orange?!”

And Butch had to put an arm around Trinnie before the blonde sprang at her brother with open hands.

Orange cut his eyes at his sister. Seemed to swell in anger. His fire-colored hair falling into his eyes. “Stop calling me that. My name is O-Dog. Orange died a long time ago. He was weak. Pissing all over himself at the first lash of the whip.” The raider sneered at his sister. “You don’t know what they did to me. You couldn’t understand. So don’t fucking judge. You made it out of the slave pen.”
“So did you! You made it out Orange. You chose to go back.”

“So did I. I went back. And look where it got me.” He lifted his chin. Displayed an ugly-looking scar that stretched across his throat. “I got this my first week in the Pitt. They cut me all over, but they started here.”

He rubbed a finger against the raised skin. His eyes blinking rapidly as he remembered what he desperately wanted to forget. “I hoped I would bleed to death. But I wasn’t so lucky.”

Trinnie twisted out of Butch’s grasp and grabbed her brother. She shook the raider violently until he finally met her eyes.

“You escaped the slave pen,” she whispered. “But you went back to free the other people trapped there. You were a good person Orange. You were brave.”

Orange broke away from her. “I was a fool. When they caught me the second time, they beat me. They beat me every day for hours at a time. They did other things…” His eyes dimmed and his hands fluttered near his face. An unexpected tremoring. “Where were you Kat?” he asked. “You didn’t come back for me.”

“I did Orange. But you were already gone.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway. Not anymore.”

And Orange looked away from his twin. The raider opened and closed his hands as if he were trying to grab on to something. Find anything that would keep him moored. And as he shivered in the humid night air, Keelah could see the scars dotting his body. The telltale marks of torture; the bruised skin. The slavers had gone so far as to brand the young man with a cattle iron. Keelah could see the U-shaped burn on his left shoulder.

Orange had been burned with fire. Had probably been violated in countless ways. It was clear in the way he trembled. In the way he fumbled in his pocket for yet another cigarette. Anything, anything that would help him suppress the memories.

“We don’t have time for this,” Keelah said gently. “I have to see Ashur. We need to proceed with the plan while we still can.”

“What plan?” Orange asked weakly. Struggling to light his cigar. Giving up when the flame bit into his thumb and blackened a fingernail. The raider pulled the injured digit into his mouth; sucked on it as if he were a toddler.

And Trinnie wept anew. Buried her face against Butch’s shoulder.

Keelah adjusted the pack on her back. “There’s going to be a slave rebellion,” she told Orange. “Round two.”

Orange shook his head. “No. No, no, no. They’ll kill you. They’ll do worse than that. You know how many slaves they killed during the last rebellion? There were so many bodies in the courtyard, we couldn’t reach Downtown for days. No. I can’t let you do that. I should report you…”

And he gulped deeply. Considering his options.

“They would punish your sister,” Keelah reminded him.

Orange’s eyes flicked to Trinnie. Then to the ground. He shuffled his feet. “They’ll punish me if I
“I’m hoping to end things peaceably,” Keelah assured him. “But we could use your help. Maybe Reddup and Squill if you can talk them into it.”

Orange looked torn. That part of him that was still courageous warring with the side of him that had been cowed years ago.

But when he saw the tears in his sister’s eyes; the yawning disappointment; the barely concealed loathing, Orange made his decision.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked Keelah.

. . . .

Haven was Ashur’s base of operations. A looming structure more than forty-stories high. Before the war, Haven had been a university—the esteemed Cathedral of Learning. The college was world renowned for its architecture, its Gothic styling, and plate-glass windows. It was a building so tall and extraordinary that its highest floors were only visible if you craned your neck.

Even after nuclear fire, it was impressive. Intimidating. Ashur had chosen Haven as his headquarters for that very reason.

Keelah and Trinnie made their way to Haven’s front door. They had to pass through the courtyard; sidestep a towering wooden statue:


The raiders had placed a corpse inside the wicker man: a slave, long dead. It was disturbing to say the least. A body within a body. Art imitating life.

Keelah and Trinnie averted their eyes. Stepped inside the slumbering building.

. . . .

Krenshaw glared at Keelah. That same hot, hungry look from three years ago. As if the man was fantasizing about tearing into her body. With fingers, blade, teeth. Anything that would draw blood.

Keelah stared back at him (a warning) before turning her attention to Ashur.

The raider boss’s looks were beguiling. Ashur was smooth skin and honeyed voice. He was sparkling wit and arresting eyes. He was a charmer. He was a warrior. He could cradle his infant daughter with gentle hands. He could snap the neck of a disobedient slave.

He wore his Brotherhood power armor at all times. Had redecorated the steel suit with sharp bone. A Brahmin skull perched on his left shoulder. A tiny skull (human?) near his waist.

Ashur stood quietly behind his desk. His arms folded behind his back. There were no chairs in his office. No invitation to have a seat. The raider boss considered sitting to be a form of laziness.

So Keelah and Trinnie stood too. A cluttered desk separating them from the self-professed Lord of the Pitt.

Ashur spoke first. His voice a pleasant baritone. Misleading. “I see you’ve returned,” he said to
Keelah. “You look well.”

Beginning with frivolity even though his eyes burned.

“Just taking you up on that offer to use the ammo press,” Keelah lied.


He smiled at Keelah. An almost tender expression. Amused that she would lie.

And why was Keelah evading the truth anyway? Ashur appreciated frankness. Better to get on with it.

“How’s the cure coming along?” she asked him.

Ashur rubbed at his graying beard. Exchanged a pointed glance with Krenshaw. “Sandra and I are making progress. But a miracle cure isn’t so easily developed. We have to be mindful of Marie’s health, after all. She’s just a child. We can only push her so much.”

Keelah could see Krenshaw’s scowl from the corner of her eye. She could also hear the man’s labored breathing. The fluttering in his throat that made him wheeze in regular intervals.

“And how is Marie?” Keelah asked Ashur.

The raider boss took a second—staring sharply at Keelah—to determine whether her inquiry was sincere or not.

And when he’d decided that Keelah was being genuine, he gave a warm smile. “Marie is doing well. Remarkable actually. She’s probably the healthiest child in the wasteland. And the most mischievous.” His face softened. Clearly a proud father. “She’s always underfoot, grabbing anything she can get her hands on. Exploring every nook and cranny of this old place. She’s going to be an explorer, like her dad. Or a scientist, like her mom.”

“That’s good. Maybe when she gets a bit older, she’ll develop the cure herself.”

Ashur’s nostrils flared. A mild irritation. “Maybe she will.” And he clapped his hands together. Adopting the tone he used when he gave fiery market speeches to the slaves. “This miracle cure will change the world,” he pontificated. “It could very well end mutation altogether. Across the entire wasteland. But such an ambitious project…it takes time.”

“How much time?” Keelah asked him. “It’s already been three years.”

“What’s three years in the grand scheme of things? We’re talking about revolution here. A brave new world.”

“Spare me the political speech, Ashur.” And Keelah didn’t blink when the raider boss narrowed his eyes at her. Or when Krenshaw took a step forward. “You promised results. And all I see are more dead bodies. New faces of slaves you’ve captured.”

“They are not slaves. They are workers.” Ashur smiled again. “We have to be mindful of morale, you know? Calling them workers reminds them that they’ll earn their freedom. One day.”

“I’m thinking that day is upon them.”
A muscle ticked in Ashur’s jaw. And the raider boss gestured for Krenshaw to sheathe his weapon; to abort his approach of Keelah. “Come again?” Ashur asked Keelah.

Keelah kept an eye on Krenshaw—he was a more immediate threat than Ashur—but she directed her words to Ashur. “Time’s up for your dangerous enterprise Ashur. You want to keep working on the cure, that’s fine. But no more packing bodies into those factories. No more slaving.”

Ashur chuckled in amusement. “Do you expect me to say ‘yes ma’am?’ For me to upend my empire just because you say so? Need I remind you that there are turrets behind you? And that there are soldiers on every floor of this building?” Another snort of laughter that Krenshaw joined. “You have gumption, young one. I’ll give you that.”

And Ashur was so unconcerned with Keelah’s threat that he turned his back on her. Began studying the medical notes he had tacked on his wall.

Keelah pressed on. “You were a good man once upon a time, Ashur. You were a Brotherhood Paladin. You had principles.”

Ashur whirled back around. “You try to appeal to me with the Brotherhood of Steel?” It was a sneer. Suddenly he was livid. “I was just a dumb convert back then. Someone who got left behind by my brothers. Stuck here in the Pitt. The Brotherhood of Steel was content to loot a dead city. But I… I vowed to bring the city back to life. And I will. I just need more time. And I need workers. This city will fall apart without their labor. But I promise you, once we have a cure, things will be different. We won’t need to kidnap people. We’ll be able to grow naturally.”

It was the same spiel Ashur had given Keelah three years ago, and the woman wanted to scream at him. She was so sick of his politicizing; his empty rhetoric.

“I can’t let this continue,” Keelah told him in a strained voice. “I walked away during the last rebellion. But I can’t do that this time.”

“And how do you intend to stop me?” Ashur nodded at Trinnie. “That waif there doesn’t even have a gun. And there are only three of you versus an entire army.” He turned to Keelah’s left. Noticed for the first time that Keelah was short a companion. “Where’s the other one? Hammer said there were three of you.”

“Butch? Oh, he’s at the power plant. Waiting for me to send a signal to his Pip-Boy.” She lifted her left arm, displaying her own Pip-Boy. “One message from me and Butch turns off the floodlights in Uptown. And you know what’ll happen then, don’t you?”

Ashur’s eyes widened. “The trogs…”

“Yeah. Without those lights keeping ‘em back, the trogs will flood into Uptown. Overrun the city. And Haven.”

Haven. Where Marie and Sandra resided.

"No way your friend made it to the power plant on his own," Ashur argued. "He's probably being eaten alive by the trogs as we speak."

"He has help."

Orange. And Reddup and Squill.

Krenshaw unsheathed his combat knife. Stepped threateningly towards Keelah. “Let’s just kill this
bitch and be done with it,” he told Ashur. “We’ll send someone to kill her friend at the power plant.” He leered at Trinnie. “And I’ll keep this one as a plaything. She looks like another toy of mine.”

Trinnie snarled. Not caring that she was outmatched and outsized. Keelah put a hand out. Stopped the slight woman from attacking Krenshaw.

“Leave it Krenshaw!” Ashur demanded. And the raider boss walked around his desk until he was standing in front of Keelah. “You have fire. And I respect that. You should be fighting with me not against me. There’s still room for you in my army. With the steel we produce in the factories and the miracle cure we’ll develop, we can remake this world. You and I. Together.”

He put a hand out. An invitation to shake hands; to forge a bloody contract. But Keelah only stared back at Ashur. Unmoved by his bombast.

Ashur chuckled. Dropped his hand to his side. “You are bold, but you are limited in your understanding. I am not the enemy. The enemy was the atomic fire. The enemy was the Brotherhood of Steel who plundered this city to its bones. Join forces with me and we shall restore Pittsburg and this entire world to its glory!”

Ashur twirled in a circle, his hands lifted; his voice booming in the enclosed space. He was a man who spoke at all times as if he were speaking to multitudes.

And that’s when Keelah knew Ashur was insane.

He was a despot who lectured on freedom. He was someone who had perfected cruelty even as he moralized tirelessly about health and longevity.

“Just let the slaves go,” Keelah pleaded with him. Desperate to avoid conflict. “They’ve worked for you long enough. Just let them go.”

Ashur studied her. Quietly. His eyes pensive as if he were truly considering her proposal. “It’s a shame,” he finally said. “I really liked you.”

And he nodded for Krenshaw to finish Keelah.

But as Krenshaw drew close to do his master’s bidding, a gunshot rang out and the lieutenant’s right leg exploded; sent him careening into the far wall screaming at the top of his lungs.

Krenshaw crumbled into a ball, making guttural noises as he grasped at the stub that used to be his right leg.

Ashur’s eyes widened. Keelah hadn’t moved an inch. Hadn’t even reached for her weapon.

“I should have mentioned,” Keelah told the stunned Pitt boss. “I have another friend with me. His name’s Charon, and he’s been using stealth boys to stay undetected. I’m willing to bet he’s got his shotgun aimed at you right now. Am I right Charon?”

And the unseen gun went off again. Put a hole in the plaster right behind Ashur’s head.

Ashur’s hands twitched. The raider boss wanted so badly to reach for his own weapon. But he couldn’t see where Charon was. Couldn’t be sure that he could get his gun up in time before a bullet pierced his armor.

“My soldiers heard that gunfire,” Ashur told Keelah. “They’ll be here soon. They’ll kill you and your friends.”
“I’ll kill you first. I don’t want to…” And Keelah really didn’t. There’d been enough death in the Pitt. She just wanted it all to stop.

Keelah also didn’t want to make good on her earlier threat. But if Ashur refused to cooperate…

“Your soldiers may kill me,” Keelah told Ashur. “But before they do, I’ll signal my friend. He’ll shut off the floodlights to Uptown. The trogs will come here. They’ll come en masse.”

Marie.

Ashur’s eyes blazed. “You would do that? You would imperil my daughter?”

“That’s the last thing I want to do. You know that. I chose her last time. But this time…I choose them.”

The slaves.

Ashur nodded; his teeth tearing into his bottom lip, producing blood. But the Pitt boss ultimately accepted defeat. “I won’t risk Marie,” he said quietly. “Not even for the cure. The workers are free to go.”

“And you won’t go back into the wasteland? You won’t abduct any more people?”

Ashur stared at his downed lieutenant. At the bloody man trying futilely to climb to his feet. “I won’t,” Ashur promised.

And even though Ashur was a tyrant, was a slaver, was a murderou king: Keelah believed him. As delusional and misguided as the Pitt boss was, he was still a man of ideals. A man who kept his word. Who’d let Keelah walk out of his city before without injury.

But more than anything, he was a father. And he would sacrifice the whole of his empire for his young daughter. Keelah had been counting on that filial devotion.

Keelah turned to her Trinnie. The blonde was staring down at a writhing Krenshaw, a satisfied smile on her face. “Trin, there’s a bedroom to the left of here. A safe behind a photo on the wall. It should be unlocked. Take the bag of caps you’ll find there.”

“My life savings…” Ashur protested softly.

Keelah nodded. “Yeah. I think your…workers are entitled to a bit of severance pay. Don’t you agree?”

Ashur leaned against his desk; a dejected slouch. But he nodded slowly. Waved Trinnie on.

And when a half dozen of his soldiers raced into his office not even a few seconds later, Ashur commanded his followers to put their weapons away.

“Let them pass,” he instructed the raider gang. “And notify the others that the factories will be closing. The workers are free to go.”

There was murmuring. Stunned glances. And Krenshaw’s labored breathing. But the raiders did as they were told. Leaving Ashur alone with Keelah and Trinnie.

Keelah reached into her supply sack and produced two Teddy Bears. “For Marie,” she told Ashur. And the raider boss actually smiled.

Ashur didn’t look up when Keelah and Trinnie (and Charon) left the office. The fearsome leader clutched the Teddy Bears to his chest and mumbled something that sounded strikingly similar to a Brotherhood proverb.

. . . .

The slaves (now wastelanders) streamed out over the Pitt Bridge. Three slow-moving lines of ailing people who would reenter the Capital Wasteland with fractured body and spirit.

Charon went on ahead of them, disabling mines and shooting feral dogs. Trinnie passed out fistfuls of caps. Pressing the rusted money into the scabbed hands of the workers.

Most of the raiders fled too. Eager to escape Ashur’s tyranny; to return to the friends and families they’d been stolen from. Many of them hadn’t been raiders before Ashur’s influence. They were former slaves, beaten and brainwashed into capitulation. They hoped that they could return home and find peace. They hoped that they could forget the horror that had been inflicted on them; the horrors they’d inflicted on others.

Keelah and Butch stood together; watched as the last of the slaves disappeared over the bridge.

“So many of them are ill,” Butch commented. “Won’t they die out there?”

“Maybe.”

“And won’t they infect others with their sickness?”

“What they have is deadly but not contagious. It was the Pitt that made them sick. The pollution and dirty water. Hopefully being away from this place will help them recover what they lost.”

But even as she said it, Keelah wasn’t so sure.

Just look Trinnie and Orange. The twins were standing side by side but couldn’t look at each other. Orange was smoking again. Clutching a cigarette so tightly between his fingers that the flaky paper bulged. He kept burning his fingers with ash.

Keelah and Butch watched the twins closely. Waited for some sort of resolution.

But Trinnie refused to speak to her brother. She could barely look at him. Keathed away.

And Orange was so ashamed of himself. Of what he’d become. He kept burning himself with the cigarette. Again and again. Ash against skin. A repeat of the hell he’d endured for more than five years.

Trinnie tried; swallowing back her malcontent. She kept stealing glances at her brother. Moving her eyes over his face as if she were memorizing his features.

“You’re still in there, right?” She directed at her brother. “The Orange I grew up with? He’s still there…inside of you?”

Because she couldn’t see past the spiked armor; the assault rifle; the haunted eyes.

Orange shrugged. He didn’t know the answer to that question.

“You could still come with me.” Trinnie finally offered. A hesitant proposition. Fragile and soft. “We
could try.”

It would be difficult for them. Rebuilding. Forgetting. Difficult but not impossible. And Trinnie was willing to try.

But Orange cleared his throat. Moved backwards. A step away. His silence was his answer. The way he wrapped arms around himself; shivered uncontrollably even though Pittsburg was unnaturally hot.

“That sounds like a good idea. And living in a ship. Wow…” He forced a smile. A crooked slash of his mouth. “We should definitely do that. But… not right now. I have things I need to sort first. And I need to prepare. I can’t just relocate without…you know…” And he looked over his shoulder at Reddup and Squill. The people who had been his family for the past five years. “But, I’ll catch up with you Kat,” Orange assured. Nodding vigorously. Trying to convince Trinnie and himself. “I’ll come back for you. I promise.”

It was same pledge he’d made when he’d left Trinnie at the radio tower all those years ago. When he’d gone back to the slave pens to free the other captives.

Orange had promised to return for Trinnie. But he’d never come back.

Trinnie’s face fell at the familiar words, and the woman turned her attention to the bridge. To the line of rusted train cars; the railroad tracks that led to nowhere.

And Orange knew he was hurting her. So he made his own offer. “I would do it all again, you know…” he told his sister. His eyes riveted on the factories in the distance. On the plumes of smoke that still darkened the sky even though no slaves remained at the iron press. “Even if it meant getting caught. If it meant ending up back here… like this…” Orange closed his eyes. Couldn’t bear to think about the scars. His broken skin; the blistered brand against his shoulder. All those injuries below the surface. Not visible to the eye. “I would endure it all again Kat, if it meant you got away.”

And he touched her shoulder. A single finger. Cautious and trembling. Then Orange turned around; joined Reddup and Squill at the front gate.

The three of them had no intention of leaving the Pitt.

Pain and misery was too much a part of them now. So deeply engrained that it had rewired their understanding.

And as Orange followed his friends inside the gate, Trinnie chased after him.

“Wait!” she cried out. Rushing to her brother’s side. Staring at him with sparkling eyes.

And the twins looked so much alike that it was unnerving. Even after all this time. After such a prolonged separation, there were so many similarities. Trinnie had shorn her hair. Orange had grown his. Trinnie had accumulated scars through self-mutilation. Orange's blemished body was a product of abuse. They had the same oval-shaped eyes; the same downturned mouth. And a sorrowfulness that was so thick that it seemed catching.

Trinnie licked her lips. Stared into her brother’s eyes as if she were trying to communicate telepathically. “You remember that one day, summers ago, when Chauncey found that puppy in the wasteland? Bought it into Little Lamplight?” Trinnie laughed softly. Eager to share a pleasant memory with her twin. “You remember…it was right before Gabby’s sixteenth birthday and Chauncey gave her the puppy as a final gift.” Trinnie felt a flush settle over her skin; bought hands against her cheek. Smiled lovingly. “That pup was so cute. So much fur. With paws so big she
couldn’t even walk straight…And we were all so enamored with her that we argued over who got to name her. Remember? Little Andre wanted to name her Blitzen. And Cheese thought we should call her Muffin Top.”

She giggled. Nearly reached out to touch her brother’s arm. But she stopped herself. Just in time. “What kind of name is that for a dog? Muffin Top?” Trinnie snorted. Tilted her head. She stared expectantly at Orange. Hoping he’d latch onto the memory. “But in the end, the puppy was Gabby’s, so she got to name her. And Gab ultimately decided to name the puppy after herself. That way, even after she turned sixteen and left Little Lamplight, we’d still have one Gabby left in the caverns.”

Trinnie smiled even as her eyes watered. “That was one our best summers ever… Before Gabby left. And Chauncey. Before Ben was taken. And Little Andre got sick. We had food and water that tasted good most of the time. We had books that hadn’t completely faded. We had each other. And we had a puppy whose paws were too big for its body. ” The tears splashed against Trinnie’s cheeks. And the blonde stared at her brother with reddened eyes. Waiting for him to acknowledge the story. Waiting for him to exhibit any kind of emotion. “Remember that Orange?” she asked softly.

Orange stared back at her. His brow furrowed as he searched the recesses of his mind.

“I don’t,” he finally answered. His voice forlorn; his eyes dropping to his feet.

All his childhood memories had long been extinguished. Consumed by fire and chronic torment. Until nothing was left. Nothing.

Trinnie shook with disappointment. The blonde wiped at her face with frenzied hands as if relieving herself of the tears would also relieve the heavy emotion.

Siblings who looked exactly alike. But they couldn’t look at each other. Couldn’t stomach it any longer.

Orange had already turned towards the Pitt.

“I’ll see you around Orange,” Trinnie whispered with trembling voice.

“See you around Kat.”

They both said it. A reiteration. A promise.

Even though they knew they wouldn’t see each other again.

Chapter End Notes

**I did a little research on Pittsburg before writing this chapter. Fallout writers actually did base Haven on Pittsburg’s Center of Learning so I tried to read up on the city and university to better capture some of those details. I also revisited the DLC to remind myself of the atmosphere.**

**Borrowed a little of Ashur’s dialogue from the Pitt game to stay true to his character (particularly his disdain for the BOS)**

**All of the Pitt raiders mentioned in this fic are actually from the game (including O-Dog). I’ve tried my best to focus on incorporating characters from the game rather than**
writing original characters.

**It may seem odd that I wrote some of the raiders so positively (Reddup, O-Dog and Squill) but when I played the Pitt, I actually had a positive reaction to some of the raiders (some of them were nice to the LW and seemed to genuinely hate that they were raiders. Some of them were former slaves who had been tortured into submission). I think that ambiguity is what made the Pitt such a compelling DLC. It was hard for the LW to determine who were the good guys vs the bad guys and which choice was good karma vs bad karma.

** Hopefully no one expected a lot of action and gun play with this chapter. When I played the Pitt, I found Ashur to be this really perplexing combination of honorable and dangerous, so I wanted to write a scenario where the LW could resolve the Pitt debacle through dialogue.

** A small allusion to a Wire episode (Season 4 finale) in that final exchange between Trinnie and Orange.
Chapter Summary

A nasty surprise as LW and company return from the Pitt.
Some LW/Amata as well.

Chapter Notes

I'd like to dedicate this chapter to lasalle1alpha and ArchonAssault. I was ready to trash this chapter and rush to end this fic until the two of you encouraged me to write at my own pace and continue with my vision for this story. I'm glad this chapter didn't end up on the scrap heap. :)

Chapter inspired by Death Cab for Cutie song

Love of mine
Someday you will die
But I'll be close behind
I'll follow you into the dark

You and me have seen everything to see
From Bangkok to Calgary
The soles of your shoes are all worn down
The time for sleep is now
It's nothing to cry about
Cause we'll hold each other soon
The blackest of rooms…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 34 – I Will Follow You Into the Dark

Keelah, Charon, Butch and Trinnie hobbled into the Rivet City marketplace. It was after nine o’clock, near closing time; and only a handful of Rivet City patrons lingered about, haggling over the price of goods, shooting the breeze, making after dinner plans with their friends.

Keelah and her companions lingered in the entryway, catching their breaths after the long walk from Pittsburgh.

Trinnie was still disconsolate after everything that had transpired with her brother; her eyes were bloodshot and tufts of bleach blonde hair stuck up all over her head from where she’d run her fingers
through the strands again and again. But the woman was stone-faced when she turned to Keelah. The devastation in her eyes temporarily subdued.

“Thanks for helping me,” she said to Keelah softly. A simple statement loaded with meaning and a touch of pain.

The blonde circled a hand around Keelah’s wrist (a curious substitute for an embrace) before turning towards the stairs that would lead her to the second floor.

Butch stared after his girlfriend—one long look—before turning back to Keelah. “You were right,” he murmured sadly. “We shouldn’t have gone to the Pitt. I don’t think she’ll ever get over what happened with her brother.”

The four of them had camped in an abandoned duplex last night. The long walk from the northern city had exhausted them and none of the travelers could manage another step. The four companions had separated by pairs into the conjoined house. Keelah and Charon on one side and Trinnie and Butch on the other. And even though there had been a wall dividing them, Keelah and Charon had heard Trinnie cry that entire night. Loud, choking sobs that were interrupted only by the soft murmuring of Butch’s consolations.

Trinnie had lost her brother for a second time. The repetition was too much for the young woman to handle. Even now the blonde looked liable to fall apart.

Keelah watched as Trinnie—Katrina, Kat—moved unsteadily up the flight of stairs; her hands clenched around the banister as she approached each step like it was precipitous.

“You should go to her,” Keelah reminded Butch.

Butch nodded. “I will.” He angled his body away from Keelah; a prelude to his exit. “Will I see you tomorrow?” he asked Keelah.

“I don’t think so. I promised Amata that I wouldn’t be gone from the vault long. And it’s already been a week.”

The Overseer would worry. And now that she and Keelah had reconciled, well…even a day apart seemed like an eternity.

Butch nodded. Snagged Keelah in a quick embrace. “Tell Amata hello for me. The same for my mother if you see her.”

Then he was racing up the stairs; looping an arm around Trinnie’s waist just in case the woman’s strength failed her and she lost her battle with the stairs.

Keelah turned to Charon. The mercenary hadn’t spoken at all during their latest mission. Which was customary for him. “Want to get a drink before heading back out?” Keelah asked her friend.

Charon nodded. But only for Keelah’s benefit. The mercenary didn’t drink alcohol. And he had enough water in his supply sack to keep him satisfied for the cross-county trip to Megaton. But he knew Keelah could go only so long without her favorite beverage. She had a weakness for alcohol. A certain affinity. And though Charon disapproved of the addiction, he knew he was powerless to stop it. The best he could do was supervise Keelah’s drinking. He’d let his friend have her glass of whiskey (or five); then he’d privately “discourage” the bartender from pouring any additional drinks.

The duo headed towards the stairwell that would take them to the Muddy Rudder bar. Keelah’s mouth watering already at the thought of the acerbic drink; the mouthful of fire that would dissolve
her thoughts for minutes at a time; maybe hours if she drank enough.

But she hadn’t descended even two steps when she was shoved violently from behind.

Keelah stumbled face-first into Charon; felt a sharp pain as her nose collided with the mercenary’s shotgun.

“What the fuck?!” Keelah screeched as she spun around to identify her attacker.

“You!”

It was James Hargrave’s mother, Tammy, and the woman was blind drunk. Her breath and clothes stinking with alcohol; her hair all over the place; her eyes blazing as she pointed a trembling finger in Keelah’s face.

“You! You bitch!” Tammy shouted. “I’m going to kill you!”

And the woman actually lurched at Keelah, her arm pulled back as she made to slap the wastelander across the face.

But Tammy was intoxicated and wildly uncoordinated, so Keelah easily sidestepped the aggressive woman. Tammy barreled down the stairs. The woman would have fallen down the steep incline and possibly broken her neck had not an irked-looking Charon grabbed her at the last moment.

Charon wrapped an arm around Tammy and tugged the screeching woman back up the stairs and into the market.

Keelah followed bewilderedly; rubbing at her newly swollen nose and keeping a watchful eye on Tammy just in case the woman attacked again.

But Charon had Tammy in a vice grip. The mercenary somehow retained an impassive expression even as the middle-aged woman flailed in his arms; kicking wildly and cursing to the high heavens. Tammy called Charon a “feral fucker” as she tried to gouge fingers into his eyes, his mouth, any part of his body that she could get ahold of.

The commotion attracted a crowd. The last few customers wandered over from the shops and openly gawked at Tammy’s hysterics. The merchants shook their heads, clucked their tongues at Tammy’s display.

“She’s having another one of her episodes,” the cook, Gary, commented.

The weapons dealer, Flak, was less diplomatic. “Crazy bitch,” he muttered. Before closing up his shop and leaving the hullabaloo for the city guard to handle.

Keelah tried to reason with Tammy. The wastelander placed a hand up. Non-threatening. “Tammy, I don’t know what the problem is, but let’s talk it out. No fisticuffs, okay? Now…if I tell Charon to let you go, are you going to try to attack me again?”

“Yes!” the woman immediately shouted.

Keelah raised an eyebrow. At least Tammy was honest. Keelah gestured for Charon to keep his hold on the belligerent woman.

“What’s going on?” Keelah asked Tammy incredulously. “Why are you so upset with me?”

“You’re a stuck-up bitch who causes trouble wherever you go. And I don’t care how many guns you
carry, I’m going to slap you a good one when I get free.”

And the woman lurched forward again. Her hands flapping towards Keelah’s face as she tried to twist her way out of Charon’s grasp.

Keelah stepped back. Charon tightened his grip.

Chief security officer Harkness barreled his way down the stairs. “What’s going on here?!?” he demanded loudly. But the security officer halted his inquiry when he saw the source of the disturbance.

“Tammy,” he sighed. His hands coming to rest on his hips as he frowned at the city’s most notorious troublemaker. “How many times do I have to warn you about starting fights in the marketplace?”

“I wasn’t fighting in the marketplace,” Tammy protested. “I attacked that bitch on the stairs.”

And, really…how many times could Keelah be called a bitch before she lost her cool?

The wastelander turned to Harkness. Took a steadying breath before addressing the officer. “I don’t know what Tammy’s problem is. She and I have never had an altercation before.”

“Ha! I never liked you bitch!” Tammy spat.

Charon whispered in Tammy’s ear. “Call her bitch again, and I’m going to show you what a feral ghoul actually looks like.”

Tammy immediately closed her mouth. But Charon’s threat didn’t keep the inebriated woman from mumbling beneath her breath; from glaring daggers at Keelah.

Harkness moved forward, put a hand around Tammy’s elbow. “Let her go Charon,” Harkness instructed. “I’ll take it from here.” And when Charon released the loudmouthed woman, Harkness pulled Tammy off to the side. “A couple of days in the holding cell should do you some good,” he told her.

“You should be punishing her!” Tammy cried. Once again pointing a finger in Keelah’s face.

“What’d I do?” Keelah exclaimed. She hadn’t even been in Rivet City in over a week!

“It’s because of you my little boy ran away!” Tammy shouted.

“What?” And Keelah was stunned into silence. Horrified.

At that exact moment, Vera Weatherly came rushing down the stairs. The pretty brunette was waving a sheet of paper, tears streaking down her face.

“Bryan!” she cried, as she ran up to Keelah; pressing the wrinkled paper into the wastelander’s hands. “Bryan has run off. I found this note in his bedroom.”

Keelah took the scrap of paper with trembling hands. Studied the messy scrawl.

Me and James left to find his father. Don’t worry. Keelah taught us how to protect ourselves. – Bryan.

“I got the same letter from James,” Tammy bellowed.

And Keelah suddenly realized why Tammy Hargrave was so pissed with her. James and Bryan had
run away from Rivet City.

The wastelander was so stunned that she could barely form coherent sentences. “Wha--?” she stuttered. Flipping the paper over, looking for more. Some explanation. *What the fuck James?*

She stared back and forth between Vera and Tammy. “I didn’t tell them to do this,” she said breathlessly.

But Tammy’s fury had ratcheted up another level. “You filled my little boy’s head with talk of adventure and the outside. You even gave him a gun! Of course he was going to try to emulate you and go out into the wasteland.”

“I gave you a gun,” Keelah contested hotly. “One you weren’t supposed to give James until he was sixteen years old. By the way, he told me that you sold that rifle for booze.”

Tammy took a swing at Keelah. And missed badly. The woman ended up slapping Seagrave Holmes who’d ventured a little too close with his spectating. The nosy shopkeeper howled in pain and slunk off cursing loudly about drunken good-for-nothings.

“I didn’t sell the gun,” Tammy screamed at Keelah. Her face red with anger and intoxication. “I just *told* James that so that he would give up this fool notion of finding his father.” The woman’s anger left her suddenly, and she slumped tiredly in Harkness’s arms. “My little boy is out there in the wasteland,” she keened. “Eleven years old and he’s never even spent a day outside this ship. Can you imagine all that could happen to him?”

“And Bryan,” Vera added. Her hands clasped together as she stared at Keelah with tortured eyes. “Bry’s already so fragile after everything that happened in Grayditch. With his father…” She moved a step closer to Keelah. Put a hand on the wastelander’s elbow. “Please Keelah…You have to find them.”

Keelah swallowed deeply. Felt competing impulses to drink and faint. The wastelander licked her lips. Stared down at Bryan’s note. “Last time I was here, James mentioned something about a riverboat near downtown DC. He thought his father was there. Maybe that’s where the boys went.”

Tammy shook her head back and forth. She was sobbing brokenly and Harkness finally took pity on the grieving mother and let her go. Tammy wobbled closer to Keelah, who narrowed her eyes in warning. But the intoxicated woman stopped a reasonable distance away.

“His father ain’t on no riverboat,” Tammy husked. “Richard was a womanizer. Couldn’t keep it in his pants. That’s why he left Rivet City. There wasn’t enough tail for him to chase. No way he’d take up residence on other ship unless it’s chock full of women.”

The crowd murmured amongst themselves, scandalized by Tammy’s slurred argumentation. The Rivet City residents began to conjecture in frenzied whispers.


Vera folded her arms across her stomach; seemed upset by all the talking that was going on when there were two children wandering the wasteland on their own.

“If that’s where you think they are Keelah, then go there,” Vera encouraged. Her eyes soft where Tammy’s were steel. “I’ll come with you. I know how to handle a gun. And I was pretty familiar with that area around DC before I moved to Rivet City.”
“I’ll come too,” Gary offered. Wiping his hands on his apron as if he were preparing to step out into the wasteland at that very moment.

But Keelah shook her head. “No. Vera you should stay just in case Bryan and James come back to the ship. They could get turned around…or change their mind…anything. But you and Tammy should wait here for them. And Gary…your daughter’s heavy with child. The thought of her dad risking his neck in the wasteland might be too much for her.”

Gary nodded. Murmured his encouragement before walking away. It looked as if Vera would argue with Keelah’s recommendation, but eventually the hotel owner nodded too.

Vera sighed audibly as she wrapped her arms even more tightly around herself. It surprised Keelah—like literally made Keelah’s jaw drop—when Charon made his way to Vera’s side. The mercenary whispered something in Vera’s ear as he patted her robotically on her back. Whatever Charon said seemed to make Vera feel better. She gave Charon a stilted smile. Rested a hand against his shoulder, briefly, before turning towards the stairs.

Keelah was so dumbfounded by Charon’s uncharacteristic solacing that she didn’t hear Harkness speaking to her. “What?” she finally asked. When she’d returned her attention to the security officer.

“I said we can’t send any guards with you since our jurisdiction is confined to Rivet City—”

“What kind of piece of shit operation are you running?!” Tammy interrupted. Newly angry with Harkness. “There are more than two dozen guards running around this place and you can’t spare two or three?!?”

Harkness rolled his eyes at Tammy. Refocused on Keelah. “You’re free to utilize our armory though. And I’ll tell Dr. Preston to comp you any medical supplies you may need.”

Keelah nodded. “I’ll take you up on that. Thanks.”

Keelah rubbed a hand down her left side. Felt the tension in her hip. The injury that still hadn’t fully healed. She and Charon had just made it back from a long trip. Were about to launch into another one. No rest. No alcohol.

But none of that mattered now. Keelah bit her bottom lip. Produced a sharp pain that helped her focus.

She’d been eighteen years old when she’d first ventured into the Capital Wasteland. And the violent passage had nearly killed her. James Hargrave and Bryan Wilkes were eleven. The two boys wouldn’t even be able to fend off feral dogs.

“Charon?” Keelah called.

The mercenary had been watching Vera ascend the stairs. Keelah made a mental note to ask him about that…peculiarity later.

“Yes?” Charon answered.

“Get Butch while I head over to Doc Preston’s to restock our supplies.”

“Do you think Butch will want to leave Trinnie in her condition?” Charon checked.

Keelah hesitated. But only for a second. “Butch would want to come. James is important to him.”
Tammy’s mouth wrinkled and Keelah expected the woman to hurl more invectives. To accuse Butch of corrupting her son too. But the irritable mother simply ran a hand through her gray-flecked hair; her fingers trembling from worry and withdrawal.


Then Tammy turned on her heels. Tottered slowly towards the location Keelah had originally intended to visit: the Muddy Ruddy bar.

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The last time Keelah had been in Rivet City, James had begged her to escort him to the riverboat he suspected his father captained. James had mentioned that the ship was big and near downtown DC. There was only one such boat that Keelah knew about. The Duchess Gambit. A steamboat that ferried passengers from DC to Point Lookout, Maryland.

That was where Keelah, Charon and Butch were headed now.

A mere two hours after they’d returned from Pittsburg, the trio was already back on the road. This time headed far east. This time looking for two lost boys.

They didn’t talk much. Butch’s nerves were frayed. He was worried about his heartbroken girlfriend; now he was distressed about the absent James Hargrave. The former 101er kept sighing. Deep and heavy exhales that rattled his chest.

Keelah wondered if Butch was sighing as an alternative to crying. Butch had always been an emotional person. Adept to punch or scream when he was upset. But now that he’d mellowed—had matured and retired his trusty switchblade—Butch had to find other outlets for his churning emotion. And since he wouldn’t allow himself to cry (or to rage like he used to do when he was a teenager), he sighed. Again and again. The weighty noise a fourth companion as the weary travelers trekked towards DC.

Keelah was anxious too. Troublesome thoughts bombarding her constantly. Thoughts of abducted children; preying Deathclaws; Yao Guis with insatiable appetites.

Bryan Wilkes had barely survived the mutant fire ants at Grayditch, now this…

Keelah blamed herself. She should have told James Hargrave that his father was dead. She should have recognized that the boy would stop at nothing to find his absent parent. Hadn’t she been just as tenacious when she searched for her own father?

Keelah curled her hands into fists. Didn’t stop until her fingernails bit into the flesh of her palms. She needed a distraction from her gloomy thoughts.

Did James and Bryan even know how to swim? Would they attempt the water in an effort reach the steamboat?

My god…

Mirelurks and radiation and drowning.

“Charon…” Keelah would force conversation if she had to. Her mind needed to be occupied. “What was that thing back there? With you and Vera?”
The combat mercenary switched his shotgun from one hand to another. He and Keelah were walking side by side, so Keelah couldn’t tell if Charon was avoiding her gaze.

“What was what?” he deflected.

“You and Vera. The whispering. The touching.”

And goodness it sounded almost lewd when she said it like that! And it was nothing of the sort. Charon had been trying to comfort a distressed...friend? But that was unusual in and of itself. Charon didn’t comfort. He grunted. He threw water bottles to make a point. He showed his affection with pinpoint accuracy of his combat shotgun. (I killed that raider for you Keelah).

But Keelah was no fool. “Come on Charon. You watched Vera walk up an entire flight of stairs.”

Charon didn’t have much skin on his face to evidence blushing, but Keelah saw just enough to confirm her suspicions.

“You and Vera!” she exclaimed. And she was so loud that even Butch broke out of his silent contemplation and stared.

Charon narrowed his eyes at Keelah. Bumped her with his hip to make her stumble a bit in the road. The two of them smirked at each other before Charon tore his eyes away. Fixed his gaze on a spot in the horizon as he explained himself.

“Those evenings when you would spend hours talking science crap with Dr. Li in the lab, I would wait for you in Vera’s hotel lobby. I would stand by her front door until you came for me. Vera liked me being there ‘cause that slaver, Sister, was always on her about something. Staring.” The shotgun switched hands again. “You spent a lot of hours in the lab with Dr. Li. I spent a lot of time waiting for you in the hotel lobby.”

It was an answer. It was a non-answer. It was so Charon.

And Keelah decided not to push. Because whatever Charon had stumbled into with Vera, it seemed to benefit both the mercenary and the hotel owner. Keelah was satisfied with that.

But there was one more thing.

“What did you tell Vera?” Keelah asked him. “Back there in the market? Whatever you said seemed to lift her spirits.”

Charon looked at Keelah then. Full on. “I told her we would find her nephew.” And he put a hand on Keelah’s shoulder. Patted her in the same robotic fashion he’d patted Vera. “And we will.”

It was exactly what Keelah needed to hear. The wastelander doubled her stride; was soon breathing as loudly as Butch was from the added exertion.

They had two children to find; a father to bury (finally); and more than one hundred miles of desert to traverse before they could accomplish either of those goals.

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Keelah and crew made it to DC in three days’ time. It took another four hours to make the slow climb down the eastern shore line of the Chesapeake Bay where the Duchess Gambit was docked.

By the time the trio reached the small steamboat, it was early morning. The sun burned fire-engine-
red swaths across the sky and lent an oppressive heat to everything it touched.

Keelah, Charon and Butch sweated from exertion, from the humidity, from the growing unease. They’d thought they would have found James and Bryan by now; had assumed they would overtake the short-legged boys before they reached the Duchess Gambit and return them to their worried caretakers. But they’d been three days on the road and hadn’t seen hide nor hair of the eleven-year olds.

*They could have traveled a different route,* Keelah reminded herself when the worry became too much and formed a lump in her throat. *They could already be turning back. Could be a mile ahead. Or a few yards. Or right around the next curve in the road.*

But moodier thoughts prevailed and Keelah didn’t find much success in beating them back.

*What if Bryan and James went somewhere else altogether? There are other docks and ships. The boys could be anywhere in the wasteland. Or what if slavers got to them? Or Deathclaws?*

Bryan and James didn’t have Pip-Boys and maps. Didn’t have any experience with exploring the outdoors. *What if they got turned around altogether? And are walking directionless with no end in sight?*

By the time the cross-talk got to be too much, Keelah and her companions were at the dock, staring up at the Duchess Gambit.

Nadine was the new captain of the steamship. And the orange-haired twenty-something was already awake, aboard. The young captain perked up when she saw Keelah standing at the dock. She gestured Keelah and her friends onboard.

The gregarious captain gave a face-splitting grin when Keelah stepped onto the small vessel.

“Well, I’ll say…” Nadine crowed. “I thought you said you’d never set foot on this dingy again after that idiot Tobar cut out a chunk of your brain.” Keelah exchanged embarrassed looks with Charon and Butch. “You here for passage or punga fruit?” Nadine asked her.

“Neither. A coupla friends of mine were headed this way. To see the Duchess. Two boys. You seen ‘em?”

“Why, yeah! Two kids came through here last night looking for Tobar. Apparently the bastard was one of their fathers or something. The kid was real broke up when I told him Tobar was dead.”

Keelah’s eyes widened. “Why’d you tell him that Nadine?”

“Well, it’s the truth ain’t it?”

“Actually it’s not. Tobar isn’t his father.”

Keelah felt herself getting angry and the wastelander made special effort to dial down her agitation. None of this was Nadine’s fault. There was no point in Keelah taking her frustrations out on the friendly ship captain. “Did they say where they were headed?” Keelah asked Nadine.

“They said something about… burying one father since they couldn’t find the other. Something weird like that.” And Nadine’s face wrinkled with confusion as she tried to recall the exact wording.

Butch looked just as confused, and he stared at Keelah, looking for answers she didn’t have herself.
Nadine prattled on. “Those boys looked worse for wear,” she told Keelah. “All scraggily-looking and hungry. I gave them some food and water and let them take a nap on that cot in the back. I tried to talk them into going back home, but they didn’t pay me no never mind.”

Nadine grabbed a straw broom that was leaning against the door of the captain’s quarters. The young woman began to sweep at dust that wasn’t there. “I’ve been stubborn like that,” she continued in a serious tone. “I ran away from home every chance I got. Searching for adventure. Searching for treasure.” She stared at Keelah. “You know that. Hell…my mother sent you to retrieve me from that church in Point Lookout, remember? But it ain’t right for kids to run off like that.” Nadine frowned. Began sweeping furiously at the deck again. “Too many things can happen to them out here. Why, I’ve seen awful things happen to unsuspecting travelers. Like this one time when I was backpacking through Wilmington…”

But when Nadine looked up, Keelah was already hurrying off the ship; racing back in the direction she had come.

The wastelander had suddenly realized where James and Bryan had gone, and she sprinted along the path she suspected the two boys had taken.

. . . . .

*They said something about burying one father since they couldn’t find the other.*

Nadine’s recollection of her conversation with James and Bryan.

The two boys had gone to Grayditch. Keelah knew it. She just *knew*. It explained why Bryan had accompanied James on this trip. Bryan would help James find his father. And in turn, James would help Bryan bury his.

When Keelah had taken Bryan away from Grayditch all those years ago—after she’d fought off the remaining fire ants that were besieging the town; after she’d hidden Bryan in a preservation shelter until she could find his aunt—the two of them had left Bryan’s father behind.

A corpse. His father had been a corpse. Burned beyond recognition. Lying face down in the family sitting room. Keelah had had to pry Bryan away from the body (*Come now Bryan. Don’t look. Don’t look*). She’d thought the kindest thing was to get the then eight-year old away from the charred remains. Protect him (too late) from the horror of a murdered parent. She should have considered that Bryan would want to bury his father. She should have realized that the boy would regret leaving his dad like that: face down in the family sitting room.

A fresh wave of regret made Keelah walk until her feet swelled. She only stopped for camp when Charon demanded it. When he pointed out that her and Butch’s faces were peeling from sunburn; that the two ex-vaulters were struggling to breathe.

They camped for three hours. Beneath an overpass. Completely silent because all three of them were too tired to make conversation.

Then they pressed on towards Grayditch. More days. More miles. More time for Keelah to remember the travesty that had occurred in Bryan’s burned out home town.

. . . . .

“This is the house,” Keelah told them. Gesturing at the two-story town house before them. Dust-colored brick and mortar with a wooden door that was still intact even after a fire ant attack.
Keelah knocked on the door before entering. Why’d she do it? She couldn’t be sure, but it seemed fitting somehow. Neighborly to knock on the door before barging in.

Neighborly in a veritable ghost town. The thought of it made Keelah’s head hurt, but the woman pushed through the disquiet. Pushed the front door open.

Darkness. A heavy cloud of dust. And the smell of burnt upholstery. Even after all this time. Acridness. Sharp and pungent. So much so that all three of the travelers choked on it.

Charon forced open a window to let air in; let it circulate. And Butch ran upstairs calling for Bryan and James.

But Keelah knew where to find the boys. She turned the corner, near the dining room. Bypassed a rickety table, blackened chairs, and made her way into the small family room.

Bryan and James were there. Sitting on the ground, cross-legged. Staring at an indistinct form beneath a faded blanket. Bryan’s father. Skeletal remains.


“Boys…”

It was all Keelah could say.

But since it felt like a funeral—with the tense sitting and the quiet observation; the covered body and the solemnity—Keelah joined the boys on the floor. She sat next to Bryan and held his hand.

And when Butch and Charon wandered in a few minutes later, they did the same. Sat on the floor until they’d all made a loose circle around a body that had been ignored for too many years.

Charon dug the grave.

How many graves had the mercenary dug during his long lifetime? Keelah wondered if Charon knew the answer himself.

Keelah recited the Brotherhood of Steel proverb she’d learned from Donovan.

*Life has not forgotten you. It holds you in its hands.*

Bryan cried.

And while Keelah and Charon took turns refilling the grave with earth (*Goodbye Dad*, Bryan said. Over and over again), Butch took James back into the house and told him the truth about his own father.


But Butch left out the most gruesome parts. The cannibalism. A rusted refrigerator.

When Keelah, Charon and Bryan returned from the graveside and reentered the house, James had left again. The eleven-year old had crumbled under Butch’s confession. Had broken into a run and stormed out into the streets of Grayditch, bawling about his irrecoverable dad.
Butch stared after the boy; his face stricken with sympathy.

“You told him?” Keelah asked. Her voice hoarse from fatigue.

Butch nodded. “I had to.”

Butch had lost a father when he was an adolescent. He knew how much it hurt. Losing a parent. But Butch also knew how important it was to confront the loss. To accept it. Grieve and heal.

They could hear James’s crying. Muted and loud at the same time. The sobbing seemed to echo in the deserted town.

“I thought Nadine told him that Tobar was his father?” Charon asked. “Didn’t James already think his dad was dead?”

But Bryan shook his head. “James cried at first when that orange haired woman said his dad was dead. But then he thought about it. That lady said the former ship captain was short and had brown eyes. James said his father didn’t look anything like that. He was tall. Had gray eyes like James. James said his dad was still out there, so we were going to keep looking for him. Right after we buried my father.”

Butch ventured to the open door. Scanned the dark neighborhood for the eleven-year old. James hadn’t run away this time. He’d just run. Tried to distance himself from a harsh truth. Was probably hunched over somewhere in this dead city grieving for a father that he’d kept alive by sheer will alone.

“I’m going to go find him,” Butch said. Already moving through the front door. Bryan followed after him.

“They’ll be alright out there, won’t they?” Charon asked. His hands moving instinctively to his shotgun. “There aren’t any more mutant ants?”

Keelah waited until Bryan was out of earshot before responding. “There aren’t any more fire ants,” she told Charon. “Everything in this town is dead. Everything.”

And Keelah could tell when Butch and Bryan found James because the eleven-year old sobbed even louder.

. . . . .

And then they were back in Rivet City.

Walking back through those metal doors after six full days on the road. Back in the marketplace; this time more crowded because it was dinner time, peak hours.

James had been quiet during the long walk to the ship-shaped city, but the eleven-year old spoke up as the exhausted group of travelers crossed the threshold into Rivet City proper.

“My dad was all I had to look forward to,” James said suddenly. His face pinched and waxen-looking. As if the boy had somehow plasticized; became less human. “I don’t have nothing else,” he declared sadly. “Nothing!”

And he pounded a fist against his thigh. Violently. Repeatedly. Until Butch grabbed the offending hand. Interrupted the boy’s self injury.
“You’ll feel better,” Butch promised.

But James wasn’t some ordinary child. He wasn’t comforted by empty platitudes. The eleven-year old narrowed his eyes at Butch. “When will I feel better? Tomorrow? The day after that?”

Butch didn’t get a chance to answer. The travelers was suddenly overtaken by crying women.

Tammy and Vera.

Vera swept Bryan into a hug. Held the boy tenderly as she kissed his brow; ruffled his hair looking for injury. “Don’t ever run off again Bryan, “she scolded. Even as she coddled him; pressed more kisses against his temple.

And the hotel owner thanked Keelah and Butch and Charon (an especially soft smile for Charon) before guiding Bryan to the stairs with promises of a warm bath and hot food and a good talking-to.

Tammy clutched James just as desperately. But her hanging-on seemed to have less to do with comforting James and more to do with finding solace for herself.

Tammy hugged James around his neck. So tight that the boy winced. And when she pressed open-mouthed kisses against her son’s forehead, his cheeks, his forehead again—the smell of bourbon was so strong that the eleven-year old recoiled from it. Just barely managed not to pull away from his mother altogether.

“Jimmy! Oh Jimmy. My sweet boy is back. I was so worried.” And Tammy raised her voice to better underscore her concern. Sent it booming across the crowded marketplace. “Did you find your father? How is he? Does he look the same? Was he with another woman?” The questions were rapid fire and Tammy didn’t pause long enough to let James answer. She also didn’t ask James how he was after such a perilous journey across the wasteland. “No. Don’t tell me if he has another woman. That doesn’t matter now. The most important thing is that he’s coming back."

Tammy continued to focus on her ex-husband, Richard. Didn’t pay attention to the sudden dampness in James’s eyes.

“He is coming home, isn’t he?” she asked her son. Her eyes wide and cloudy. “He saw you and remembered how good he had it here with us, and he decided to come home, didn’t he?”

Tammy nearly swooned at the thought. “Oh, I have to fix myself up for him. Richard’s not used to seeing me like this. I was still fresh-faced and spry when he left Rivet City.” And Tammy patted her hair clumsily. A mousy brown with streaks of gray. Dull from years of neglect. But the smile Tammy presented to her son was 1000 watt. Dazzling. And for a moment Keelah could see the stunner Tammy must have been back in her youth.

“I’ll go off the drink for your Pa,” Tammy promised James. “I will. “Her hands returned to her son’s face, his shoulders; the springy hair that curled around his nape. “When’s your dad coming back Jimmy?” Tammy asked. And she seemed as desperate for the man’s return as James had been the past five years.

James’s eyes slid to Keelah’s; to Butch’s. The boy was discernibly conflicted. Not eager to share the news that had recently broken his heart.

But James had played grown-up for so long that the lie came easily. “Dad will be here real soon Ma. He just needs more time.”

Tammy beamed. Pressed trembling hands against her son’s cheek before kissing him again. This
time more tenderly against his forehead.

“I knew he would come back,” she whispered. “We had a big row, me and him, all those years ago, and he stormed out of this place, vowing never to return. But I knew he would come back. We just had to wait for him to sow his wild oats and see all those ships that he fancied. Didn’t I tell you that Jimmy? That he’d come home to us?”

James didn’t answer. He stared sullenly ahead. Let his mother paw at him and ramble on about a future family reunion.

Tammy’s hands returned to her hair. Moved unsteadily across her forehead; her face. “I’m going off the drink this time. I swear it. And when Richie comes back, we’re going to be a family again. Just like old times.”

And she grabbed James’s hand. Clasped it firmly. It couldn’t be called a handhold (not really) because Tammy was pulling at the boy. Dragging him along. And James was simply allowing his mother to pull him. His hand remained flat in his mother’s grasp. His eyes dull.

And when Tammy pulled the boy into the direction of the Muddy Rudder (Because sobriety always started tomorrow. Keelah knew that better than anyone), Butch cursed out loud. Muttered something about his own mother (They never change!). Then he stomped upstairs to check on his girlfriend.

. . .

Keelah wanted nothing more than to get good and drunk herself. But Tammy was in the bar. And possibly James. And Keelah didn’t want the eleven-year old to see her intoxicated. She didn’t want to sit at the bar, side-by-side with Tammy Hargrave, and feel convicted about her addiction.

But (god!) Keelah needed something to take the pain away. Something that would supplant that look of melancholy that Keelah was certain had settled permanently into James’s face. Or that look that was on Trinnie’s face when Orange backed away from her. And Agatha…damn it…whenever Keelah looked at her Pip-Boy, she thought of Agatha.

There were so many broken people in the wasteland. So many lost. Keelah wanted to forget about them. At least temporarily.

. . .

Charon found Keelah on the highest level of the ship. She was sitting on the edge of the deck, outside the railing; staring out into a moonlit darkness.

It startled Charon. Seeing his friend lounging so precariously. Her legs hanging over the side of the ship. Her arms at her side. She wasn’t even holding on to anything! A strong wind could have pushed Keelah over. Made her plunge to the depths below.

Charon inched towards his friend. Careful. Just in case. “I was looking for you,” he said. His eyes wandering over Keelah’s form. Searching for any indication that she would…

She wouldn’t do anything rash, would she? A question he had asked himself several times before. Those times Keelah had neglected to properly cover the injuries to her forearms (self-inflicted, Charon knew). Or those nights the woman would drink herself into a stupor, crying and laughing in equal measure.

She wouldn’t…?
But Keelah didn’t move from her dangerous perch. Didn’t surge forward or backwards. She just sat there outside the railing. Staring out. Trying to see into an inky blackness that had no form.

“The world is shit Charon,” Keelah finally said. Her voice so tired and sad that Charon felt something prickle in his heart.

And it was odd to Charon (and disturbing) that the young woman could speak so calmly while balanced one hundred feet above the ground.

“This entire world is shit,” Keelah said again.

And this time Keelah shifted. Backwards? Forward? Charon couldn’t tell.

But the combat merc knew exactly what to say to get Keelah back on the other side of the railing.

“Amata’s waiting for you.”

. . . . .

She had been gone from the vault for two weeks. She’d promised Amata she’d back within one.

Keelah and Charon separated at the dirt path outside of Vault 101. Charon pressed on towards Megaton while Keelah shuffled into the vault.

It was late. Or early. Depending on perspective. After two in the morning. And only the overnight guard was still awake, on patrol.

The guard waved at Keelah as she slid past. Her boots loud against the metal flooring. Clanking noisily even as she tried to move softly, slow.

And when she reached her destination—the vault cafeteria—Keelah slid into her favorite booth. Let her head fall against the table. Took cleansing breaths.

She was tired and achy, and she was sure that she’d worn a hole into her boots and possibly the bottom of her feet.

She should have made her way to Amata’s bedroom. Curled up beside her girlfriend and gotten some rest. But Keelah still had the urge to drink. And she needed to do that privately. Away from Amata’s concerned eyes.

She fumbled into her supply pack. Found what she was looking for. A flask; cool to the touch.

And she drank. Tipped the bottle to the smiling cartooned vaulter (Fuck you buddy!) and drank herself (not drunk because Amata would disapprove) but happy. She drank herself happy.

Or...happier. Happier than she was before the whiskey.

And warm. Yes. She drank herself warm.

And when Amata appeared in her line of vision some time later, Keelah almost thought it was a hallucination bought on by tipsiness.

But then there was an arm around her waist. A kiss pressed into the side of her neck, and Keelah realized her girlfriend wasn’t an apparition.

Amata. Hair tousled. A silk robe cinched tight around her waist. And eyes so brown and loving that Keelah smiled miserably. God! Keelah was so in love that it actually hurt.
“I missed you,” Amata said softly. Moving in for a quick kiss. And when the Overseer tasted the alcohol, she pulled back. Stared at Keelah. Sharp and long. “Why didn’t you come upstairs?” she asked Keelah.

“I was going to. But first…” And Keelah slipped the flask back into her satchel. Tried to hide it. But of course Amata saw.

“How was your trip?” Amata asked. Allowing Keelah her subterfuge. “You were gone longer than I expected.”

Keelah nodded. Toyed with her fingers as her eyes returned to her cartoon nemesis. “Something came up.”

The lack of detail frustrated Amata. But the Overseer was patient. And she was in love. So she focused on the woman rather than the silence.

“How are you?” Keelah asked. Placing a hand atop Amata’s. Using a single finger to trace delicate lines against beloved brown skin.

“I’m well. Better now that you’re here.”

They exchanged a glance. Soft and sweet. And for the first time in two weeks, Keelah smiled. Felt a flutter of happiness.

The alcohol flavor didn’t spoil their kisses. Amata was eager. Pressed her girlfriend into the vinyl booth. Nipped at Keelah’s mouth until the wastelander gasped for breath; her heart racing.

Keelah giggled against Amata’s mouth. Pulled back just enough so that she could tease her amorous girlfriend. “What about that policy against PDA? You know…Rule 47? Subsection 16?”

Amata used teeth to tug on Keelah’s bottom lip. Smiled playfully “You’re right. This is unseemly behavior for a public space. Perhaps we should retire someplace more private.”

And she slid out of the booth. Extended a hand for Keelah to take.

Keelah aligned their fingers. Allowed herself to be pulled out of the booth. And the two women kept their hands joined as they walked out of the cafeteria; down the quiet hallway.

“Was it bad?” Amata asked Keelah. A vague question that Keelah immediately understood. Amata was asking about the Pitt. And whatever else that had kept Keelah away for so long.

“It was.”

And when the urge to drink rose again, Keelah focused on the hand in hers. The hazel-flecked eyes that stared so compassionately.

“I think I have something that will make you feel better,” Amata said.

And Keelah was expecting a kiss. Even leaned forward to accept the brush of lips. She was surprised when Amata tugged her towards one of the corner bedrooms. The Overseer pressed the door release button. Revealed the inhabitants sleeping in the full-sized bed.

Reilly.

And Butcher.
The rangers were fast asleep. Arms wrapped tightly around each other.

Keelah was agog. “He woke up?” she stammered. Stunned and hopeful.

Amata smiled. “Yes. About a week ago. He’s still a bit weak, and he’s been relying on crutches to get around, but Red said he’s in good shape. No major damage. No side effects from the coma.” And Amata’s eyes gleamed. The Overseer was on the verge of crying for a man she’d known for less than a month.

*Why is she so perfect?* Keelah thought adoringly. And she squeezed Amata’s hand. Communication. *I love you.* Before turning her attention back to Reilly and Butcher.

The ranger leader’s face was as serene as Keelah had ever seen it. *Probably the best sleep Reilly’s had in years,* Keelah thought.

“It’s kind of creepy, isn’t it?” Keelah said after a minute had passed. “Standing here watching them sleep?”

“Yes.”

Amata closed the bedroom door and the two women resumed their walk towards the Overseer’s office.

For the first time Amata noticed the dirt staining Keelah’s leathers; the dust and twigs in the woman’s hair; the slump of her girlfriend’s shoulders.

“You need a bath,” Amata said decisively.

Keelah flushed with embarrassment. “Thanks for telling me that I stink.”

Amata smiled. “You misunderstand, dear. That’s not an insult. It’s an invitation.”

And Amata tugged gently on Keelah’s hand. Smiled when Keelah blushed softly; before leading her girlfriend to the bath that she planned to closely supervise.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Keelah should marry Amata already. I know I would.

I always felt bad for James and Bryan, so I’m glad I went ahead and concluded their story arc. Listening to Death Cab for Cutie while I wrote this chapter made it especially moody (sad face).

**Rainer Maria Rilke quote**
Chapter Summary

All hell breaks loose.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 35 – Landslide (Part One)

Be careful with that bomb…

Keelah woke from a dream involving explosions and choked screams. The wastelander put a hand to her brow, found sweat. Clammy and cold. But it wasn’t just the pressure in her head that had interrupted her sleep. Keelah’s stomach roiled as well. Churning from the alcohol she’d drank hurriedly hours before.

She was going to be sick.

Keelah disentangled her body from Amata’s. Gently, gently (Amata was a light sleeper) then the wastelander eased from the bed.

She barely made it to the bathroom before the contents of her stomach escaped her. Violently.

Keelah vomited into the porcelain toilet. So much that her chest ached from it, her throat. And the sympathetic tears that sprang to her eyes joined the perspiration; soiled her face.

A hangover.

From the drinking and the rigorous travel and the general bullshit that came along with being a wasteland wanderer.

Keelah hunched over the commode; waiting—there seemed to be more bile; delayed for some reason—and the wastelander tried to catch her breath; tried to get control of her emotions before she generated some sound or careless action that would awaken Amata.

She and Amata had fallen into an exhausted sleep just a few hours ago. They hadn’t made love like they intended.

Amata had joined Keelah in the bath. Had pressed her body against the taller woman’s back as she washed her hair; as she ran a damp washcloth along the scars and lines that marked her girlfriend’s body.

She’d pressed a kiss against Keelah’s neck. Soft. An invitation. But Keelah had shuddered at the contact. Had leaned forward. Then she surprised both of them by bursting into tears.

Keelah didn’t know why she was crying. She admitted as much to Amata as she tilted her head towards the running faucet and tried to lose her tears in the surrounding damp of the tub. But Amata grabbed her hand (Don’t hide from me Keelah). And Keelah allowed her girlfriend to pull her out of
the bathtub, lead her into the bedroom, into the bed, where Keelah really lost it.

The wastelander pressed her naked body into cotton-soft sheets and sobbed brokenly into her pillow.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?* A moody thought that came and went.

Keelah tried to stem the tide of tears with her hands and failed.


It was quite the role reversal. Throughout most of their childhood and adolescence, Keelah had been the one comforting Amata. Catching Amata’s hand; catching her tears. Wrapping her body around Amata’s until she’d made herself a cocoon for her friend’s grief.

But now Amata was the shield, the soothing voice. The Overseer fist her hands in Keelah’s hair and waited.

*I’ve never seen her fall apart like this,* Amata thought to herself. Her eyes lingering on the dampened cheeks, the shuttered lashes. And it was a struggle for Amata, not to cry along with her girlfriend. Because Keelah looked so fragile like this. Naked. Without her combat armor. Her battle scars on full display. She looked small and brittle. She looked human.

And maybe that was the problem. Keelah had played the part of protector, champion—the fucking *Lone Wanderer* of the Capital Wasteland—for so long that she hadn’t allowed herself the space and time to be sick, tired, afraid. And now the emotions—the fragility—were pushing their way to the forefront against the wastelander’s will.

So she wept.

Keelah couldn’t explain why she was sobbing or determine when the onslaught would stop. It just was. And was. Until it felt like something rupturing inside of her. Something vital that would compromise her continued survival.

Amata brushed a thumb against Keelah’s cheek. A different sort of touch than they’d planned tonight but a contact of skin that was just as intimate and significant.

“I’m sorry,” Keelah finally managed. Pulling back a little; embarrassed by her breakdown. “I’m tired. And my emotions are all over the place.”

Amata nodded. Didn’t push. Just waited. But the Overseer’s eyes were wide with concern.

Keelah sniffled. And the sheen of her brown eyes was the brightest thing in the dim bedroom.

The wastelander’s eyes flickered to the ceiling then back, and she exhaled softly. “I have an entire catalog of missions to get to…in my Pip-Boy. Supply runs…Things I’ve been putting off for weeks. And I dunno…” Keelah rubbed at her eyes. Her strength (or rather, the affectation of it) was coming back and the wastelander wanted to be rid of the tears. “I’m not ready to go back outside just yet.”

She’d spent more than five years in the Capital Wasteland and had realized just last night—while sitting on the upper deck of Rivet City; staring out into the stillness of the desert—that she was sick of it. The whole thing. Scavenging and shooting, laying traps, deactivating bombs.

She was fucking *tired* of it.
“Then don’t go back outside,” Amata suggested solemnly.

Keelah blinked. Slow and deliberate. “But there are folks out there who depend on me.”

Struggling settlements that needed supplies. Good-natured vampires who needed blood packs. Not to mention all of her friends in Rivet City and Megaton who relied on her field experience, her talent with a gun.

Amata placed a hand against Keelah’s cheek. “Playing hero is something you do well Keelah, but maybe it’s time you look out for yourself for a change.”

Keelah scowled; immediately pulled away from the caress. “I’m not a hero. I’m not playing one either.”

“I don’t mean to offend you Kee, it’s just…” Amata sighed. Deep-seated frustration bubbling to the surface. “You’ve spent your entire life getting pummeled for other people.”

“Hey! I’ve won most of those fights.”

“You lost your fair share too.” And Amata’s eyes drifted across her girlfriend’s battered body. Scars that had their own scars. It wasn’t condemnation in Amata’s eyes. Nor revulsion. It was worry. “You need rest, dear.” And Amata reached for Keelah again. Cradled her face. “Your body needs time to recover, but also…” A soft tap against Keelah’s temple.

“But the vault caravan—”

“The caravan can wait. Indefinitely. Permanently.” Amata suddenly looked anxious. Her voice dropped an octave. “Maybe you should move back into the vault…For good.”

They hadn’t discussed this. Keelah’s living arrangements. But both women were aware that Keelah’s thirty day pledge to stay in Vault 101 was nearly over.

“Move in and…stay in?” Keelah clarified.

“Well…I think the wasteland has taken a lot out of you.”

Literally and figuratively. Amata didn’t say it. But her meaning was clear.

“The vault took more,” Keelah reminded.

And now Amata was the one pulling back. Her hands dropping from Keelah’s face as she sighed. “It was only a suggestion. You don’t seem enthused about venturing back outside.”

“I’m not. But I can’t just walk away from my responsibilities. My friends. The wasteland is my home too.”

And the comment mollified Amata. Somewhat. Because at least Keelah was admitting that Vault 101 was beginning to feel like home again.

Amata scooted close. Until she and Keelah were sharing the same pillow. Her eyes lingered on the tear tracks that lined her girlfriend’s face.

Keelah had fallen asleep. That quick.

Amata whispered a ‘good night’ that couldn’t be heard before drifting off herself.
And now the wastelander was awake; leaning over a toilet, trying to gauge whether she’d expelled all of the alcohol from her system.

She felt woozy. More than a little drowsy. But when Keelah tried to get to her feet so that she could return to the bedroom, she found she couldn’t move. She had no mobility in her right side. Just throbbing pain.

_Damn hip!

Those long walks to Pittsburg and Grayditch hadn’t been good for her recovery.

She tried to move again. Felt a sharp pain radiate from her spine outwards.

She thought about calling out for Amata (_God this is embarrassing. Bare ass naked and hugging a toilet_) but Keelah reasoned that Amata would take her lingering injury as proof that she needed to scale back her wasteland duties.

So Keelah braced her hands against the floor. Pushed with all the strength she had. And nearly bit a hole into her tongue when tendons retracted, joints protested.

It took her a full ten minutes to pull herself up from the floor. And she broke Amata’s towel rack in the process. It took another twenty minutes for her to wash her face and mouth; put on her armor and boots. She was in so much pain that she decided to pay the good doctor a visit.

Red.

Who Keelah hadn’t seen since her reconciliation with Amata.

_Shit._

... 

It was barely six in the morning so no one was in the clinic at this time of day. Keelah expected for Red to be asleep, and she planned to wait in the waiting room until the doctor woke. Keelah was surprised to find Red bustling about the office. Making notes to charts, tidying things up; talking to herself as she sprayed disinfectant on metal surfaces.

Keelah stopped in the doorway. Cleared her throat, feeling awkward.

Red looked up at the sound; smiled cheerfully when she saw Keelah. “Haven’t seen you in a good long while,” Red commented. Putting away the cleaning spray before crossing over to her friend. “How’s it going?”

Keelah tilted her head towards her right side. “Hip stuff. You think you can fit me in?”

“Yes, _please_. I was just about to do some dusting, so you’ll provide a welcome distraction.” Red gestured Keelah over to the examining table.

“Unh unh…” Red scolded when Keelah positioned herself on the table. “Clothes off.”

“Why do I have to be naked every time we do this?” Keelah grumbled. But the wastelander’s hands were already moving to the buttons on her armor. And Red was already helping her. Pushing the thick fabric down around Keelah’s waist when the wastelander struggled to bend.

And when Keelah was naked (again) and face down on the exam table, Red went to work. Kneading and adjusting; pressing into taut flesh until Keelah grunted.
“You’d convalesce a whole lot faster if you took a day off once in a while,” Red commented. And the doctor smacked Keelah on the thigh in a way that seemed less like therapy and more like discipline. “You’re free to go.”

Keelah stretched. Was pleased to find flexibility, a muted pain. She hopped off the exam table and began refastening her leather suit.

Red went back to fiddling with items in her filing cabinet. Neither woman spoke for a few moments. Preoccupied with menial tasks. Buttoning, stacking, drumming their fingers when they ran out of things to do.

“I’m not mad at you, you know?” Red eventually said. Her words muffled by the fact that her head was buried in the filing cabinet. “About Amata.”

“So we’re still friends?” Keelah asked hopefully.

“We never stopped being friends.”

Red looked at Keelah then. Smiling shyly. And Keelah broke into a smile of her own.

The doctor’s eyes moved to the clock mounted on her wall. “It’s 6:30 and I am positively starving.”

“Wanna grab some breakfast with me in the cafeteria?”

Red folded her arms across her chest; settled comfortably in one of the visitor’s chairs. “Actually, I want the person who’s promised me breakfast twice to prepare me a good meal and hand deliver it to my office.”

Keelah looked abashed. “Ah…yeah…I was going to cook you breakfast if you ever visited me in Megaton.”

"But I'm hungry now."

Keelah pouted. “But Pepper hates it when people use her kitchen. And she hovers.”

"Like...above ground?" A smile twitched at Red's lips. Then the woman tapped her chin; contemplating her meal options. “You know...I think I want something pancakey,” she said.

“Short stack?”

“You calling me names?”

Keelah laughed. “No. As in, do you want a short stack of pancakes?”

“Tall. Very tall. And I want bacon.”

“So does the rest of the Capital Wasteland. How ‘bout some fried cram? I’ll slice it thin and fry it extra crispy.”

“Sounds yummy.”

Keelah was halfway through the clinic door when Red called out: “And don’t forget Keelah. That’s two breakfast trays.”

“Right. Because I promised you two breakfasts.”
“No. Because I want you to join me.”

They exchanged a quick smile. Then Keelah went on her way to charm Pepper Gomez into letting her use her kitchen.

. . . .

A month passed in Vault 101 and Keelah continued to reside there. It was easy to get sucked back into that world—vault living—when there were so many friends about now; when the 101ers were nice and sociable again (although Officer Taylor still had his moments) and when Amata was there, pulling Keelah into soft kisses; spooning her at the end of the night; holding her hand those evenings they snuck down to the reactor room to read and cuddle.

Keelah continued to do all of her wasteland assignments (There was a Mirelurk Queen in Rock Creek Caverns like Moira reported. And the Mirelurk Queen was big. And friendly. Who’d have thought?)

But at the end of each mission, Keelah made her way back “home” to the vault; leaving Charon to look after the Megaton property. Slowly transitioning her clothes, her weapons, her dog to Vault 101.

At month’s end, Butcher was well enough to travel again and he and the other rangers made their trek back to the Ranger Compound. The Lamp/Towners and 101ers hated to see the rangers go (Bumble especially since the little girl had begun to see Reilly as a surrogate mother). Amata went to so far as to offer the rangers permanent residence in the vault, but Reilly and crew were accustomed to being outdoors; to traveling for long periods of time. The rangers gave heartfelt goodbyes to their new friends (Donovan hugging and kissing Susie, and Reilly clasping Bumble to her chest for long minutes). The rangers promised to visit then took their leave of Vault 101.

Overall, things were going well.

The vault’s store in Springvale was up and running. Keelah, Susie and Sammy sold goods there three times a week and made pretty decent hauls. They caught all the foot traffic coming to and from Megaton and sold mechanical do-dads to wastelanders who were eager to buy such advanced tech.

The success of the store and Keelah’s interpersonal relationships greatly lifted the young woman’s spirits. Over time, Keelah’s weariness—that functional depression she’d been struggling with for years—abated; became more tolerable.

And so it was one Tuesday afternoon, at the close of a business day in Springvale, that Keelah found herself whistling gaily as she packed up supplies to be stashed in Silver’s house.

Susie looked up from the box she was sorting. “God! It’s like being at a jamboree,” the blonde scoffed playfully.

“I’m only whistling.”

“You danced a jig not even an hour ago.”

“It wasn’t a jig.”

“I definitely saw some heel, toe coordination.”

Keelah chuckled. Then took a broom and began sweeping down the small area they used as a storefront. “You ‘bout done with the supplies?” she asked Susie.
“Yeah. I’m going to cart this box on over to Silvers and come back for the rest.”

“See what’s keeping Sammy, will you? It shouldn’t have taken him that long to drop off that box of computer chips.”

Sammy had actually been a nice addition to their little enterprise. The eleven-year old had a way with numbers and handled all of their sales. He was also quick on his feet and would ferry goods back and forth between Silver’s house and the store as needed.

Susie lifted the supply box to her hip and made her way to the door. “He’s probably talking Silver’s ear off again. I swear that kid is worse than Sticky with his adventure stories.” Susie paused in the doorway. “On second thought…no, he isn’t.”

Keelah laughed heartily and resumed sweeping. Removed the dirt and buildup that always seemed to resurface no matter how many times she cleaned the room.

She was proud of their little shop. They never carried more than two shelves of items and there were days when they only attracted one or two customers. But it was a decent enough start for Vault 101. And the store generated just enough caps to keep the vault stocked with medical supplies and wasteland clothes. Keelah couldn’t have asked for more.

Keelah was carrying the final box of goods back to Silver’s house when she heard the gunshots. Loud firing from somewhere off to her right; some area outside of the town’s perimeter. She didn’t think much of the gunfire at first. Raiders passed through Springvale on occasion and there was always someone attacking or being attacked in the Capital Wasteland.

But then Keelah heard Susie yell. A bloodcurdling shriek. And Keelah dropped the box of electronics. Snatched her assault rifle from her back and raced through the deserted town towards the source of the commotion.

She was stunned by what she saw.

Susie standing at the top of an incline; her hunting rifle in hand, pointed down towards a rugged patch of desert.

It was what Susie was pointing at that drew a gasp from Keelah.

Sammy. A few feet below them. Being cornered by a giant albino radscorpion. Supplies were littered near the boy’s feet. Bottle caps and computer chips flattened by the boy’s feet.

Sammy must have gotten ambushed by the radscorpion as he was returning to Silver’s. He’d been chased down the incline by the large insect.

The radscorpion hissed. Drew closer to the mewling boy.

Radscorpions were tough enough opponents. They had thick, impenetrable skin; pincers that could cut through flesh and bone; and stingers that oozed highly toxic venom. Albino radscorpions were even worse. They were larger than common radscorpions. Quicker. And damn near impossible to kill.

Keelah had yet to find a weak spot on the oversized bugs. The best strategy when fighting an albino radscorpion was to run away. And if that failed, to use a shit ton of explosives.

The radscorpion was trying to flank Sammy. To get the boy turned around so that it could deliver a crippling blow to Sammy’s legs or spine.
Keelah fired a warning shot at the creature. Sent the large insect scuttling back a few feet. But the retreat was temporary. The radscorpion skittered close again. Stalking. Circling.

“I’ve hit it a half dozen times already,” Susie gasped. Her face blotchy with sweat and anxiety. “I don’t even think it felt it.”

“You have grenades?” Keelah asked. Firing another shot. This time hitting the scorpion’s stinger; making it shriek. Keelah inched forward.

“I have two frags,” Susie answered. Following behind Keelah.

“Good. I’ll try to create enough distance so that I can grab Sammy. Then you explode that fucker.”

“But you’ll be in the blast radius…”

“Just do it!” Keelah commanded.

The wastelander was well aware that radscorpions never retreated from their prey. She and Susie would have to kill the large insect. Kill it or risk it killing one of them.

Keelah tiptoed closer; firing successive rounds at the radscorpion. Legs. Pincers. Stinger. It was a war of attrition. Perhaps after a dozen combustible rounds, the insect would soften; capitulate.

But for now it hissed; kept pressing Sammy backwards; looking for an opportunity to strike. And when Sammy stumbled on a boulder; lost his footing and went down, the radscorpion found its chance. A pincer came up towards Sammy chest. Descended lightning fast—

Keelah jumped in the way. The serrated claw tore into the wastelander’s right leg. Took out a chunk of flesh. Keelah screamed at the top of her lungs. Went down firing wildly. Bullets flying into the air harmlessly as she landed in a painful heap on the ground. Keelah felt and saw an artery in her leg give way. There was so much blood that the spray painted the radscorpion a new color: vibrant red.

Sammy scrambled to his feet. Tried to help Keelah get up, but the radscorpion batted the boy away. Sent him flying several yards away, yowling. Then the scorpion turned on its new victim. Its unoccupied pincer drifting towards Keelah’s face.

Susie’s gun fired. Again and again seeking purchase. Rounds flew into the dirt near Keelah’s body.

“Susie!” Keelah cried out. The wastelander could barely speak. The pain was blinding. “Don’t shoo—”

The sound was taken from her as the pincer continued to shear into the soft tissue of her leg. Keelah screamed; was worried that the radscorpion would take her leg off in its entirety. She also worried that Susie would shoot her accidentally.

The radscorpion was looming over her. Its heavy body blanketing hers. One errant shot from Susie’s rifle and Keelah would be pierced by lead.

Keelah put both hands against the pincer that was tearing into her leg. Tried to stop the assault. Keep the claw from reaching bone.

But her movements left her vulnerable in other areas. The giant radscorpion saw an opening. Immediately jabbed Keelah with its stinger. A direct shot to her abdomen.
A hole. It punctured a hole in Keelah’s stomach. Kept digging.

Keelah saw stars. Could actually feel the life leaving her body. One blood-spattered hand worked to keep her leg intact while the other moved to the stinger. Tried to wrest the sharp spur from her body. Tried to keep it from plunging any deeper and killing her on the spot.

Then Susie was there; whacking at the radscorpion with the butt of her rifle; her fists. Anything and everything to interrupt the savage attack.

But the radscorpion was the size of a full-grown human. Weighed twice as much. And it had weaponry and armor built into its skin. When the blunt force did nothing to dissuade the insect, Susie tried shooting again. Close contact shots from her rifle that left grooves in the insect’s hard shell but which also put indentations in the ground near Keelah’s head.

“Don’t shoot,” Keelah gasped again. A gurgle this time because her mouth had filled with blood. The wastelander could barely speak.

She could feel it, when the radscorpion released it poison. A spine-tingling burn that set her skin on fire; tore at her nerve endings.

It was enough to make Keelah lose consciousness for a few seconds. Color swam before her eyes. A mishmash of orange and blues. Red. So much red.

Sound receded until all Keelah could hear was the thrum of her flagging heart.

She was dying. Slowly and painfully. Poisoned and pummeled to death by a mutated scorpion.

But Keelah knew the puncture would kill her before the poison. The stinger plunged deeper still into her stomach. An excavation of her insides. It was so painful that Keelah blubbered. Considered giving in to it. Welcome death.

But even in her haze, she thought of Amata. Of the two companions that the radscorpion would turn on next: Susie and Sammy.

“Bomb,” she croaked at Susie. Indicating that the blonde should use one of the frag grenades. Take Sammy and run before exploding the insect. “Leave me—”

“No!” Susie shouted. And the blonde risked her own life by jumping on the radscorpion’s back. Scrabbling at knotty skin.

The giant insect threw Susie off in the same way it had thrown Sammy. Sent the vaulter catapulting across the sand.

Keelah had a choice to make. Her gun was out of reach; knocked away at first contact. But there was a combat knife tucked in her boot. Sharp enough to pierce the underside of the scorpion’s belly.

But to reach the knife, Keelah would have to sacrifice. Her stomach or her leg. Both her hands were occupied; trying to still the scorpion’s assault. She would have to free one of them.

Keelah let go of the stinger (She had been poisoned already. Might as well) and when the stinger burrowed further into her skin, the wastelander released a scream so loud that an animal howled nearby; sympathetically.

Susie hobbled to her feet; ignored her own injuries and jumped on the radscorpion again.
The distraction proved useful. When the insect turned to slash at Susie, Keelah snagged her combat knife from her boot; pressed upwards into the radscorpion’s jowls until purple blood rained down; stained her face.

The radscorpion twitched. Clicked its mandibles near Keelah’s face—wanting to bite—before shuddering to a stop. Frozen. Dead.

The radscorpion was heavy against Keelah. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. But she was dying anyway. Keelah closed her eyes. Felt blood trickle from her mouth and nostrils.

“Keelah!”

Susie tried to pull the oversized insect off of Keelah. Only succeeded in pushing the stinger deeper. Made the pincer pull at Keelah’s ruined leg.

“Stop,” Keelah gurgled. Because even though she was dying, she couldn’t manage the additional pain.

Susie knelt on the ground beside Keelah. Winced when she saw her friend’s face; the state of her body. “Oh Keelah…”

Blue eyes wide and racing as the vaulter tried to determine her next steps. What she could do to save her friend.

Sammy wandered into view. Limping and bloody from where the radscorpion had thrown him. The eleven-year old began to sob when he saw Keelah’s bloody body.

“Help me,” Susie barked at the boy.

And she and Sammy tried again; to lift the mammoth insect. But the radscorpion was even heavier in death. Content to smother Keelah now that it could no longer impale her.

Keelah opened her eyes. Tried to find the energy to speak. Some final message for Amata; if she could get past the blood.

But when Keelah looked up, in the direction of her friends, she saw a flash of pink hurtling their way.

Two more albino radscorpions skittering across the sand.

Keelah managed a single word: “Run.” Followed by a ragged cough that sprayed blood against her face. “Run.”

Then everything went black.

. . . .

She woke up to the sound of muffled voices; whirring machines; a sound like waves pressing against her skull.

And so much pain that she screamed. Even though she was sure she no longer possessed voice.

“She’s coming to.”

Keelah blinked against harsh light. Tried to distinguish the shadowy forms looming above her.

“It’s okay. Take your time,” she heard.

A needle pressing into the soft flesh of her arm. The refreshing chill of administered Med-X.

Keelah blinked. And it was hard to accomplish even that small act.

When her eyes reopened, she could see clearer. Red leaning over her. The doctor’s eyes wide behind her wire-rimmed glasses. And Officer Gomez. Mouth tight and quivering.

“Get Amata,” Red instructed. And Officer Gomez vanished from sight.

Keelah tried to speak but her mouth didn’t work. And her tongue felt so thick in her mouth. Weighty. Like a foreign body. She could only gurgle. Tasted blood in the back of her throat.

“Gmrrgga…” she warbled.

“Shhhh,” Red cautioned. “Don’t try to talk. Just keep still, okay?” And Red brushed the back of her hand across Keelah’s cheek. The action of a friend not a doctor. “Amata’s going to be upset that she wasn’t here when you woke up. She’s been by your side, night and day. The moment she stepped away to change clothes, you come to…”

Red trailed off. Seemed to read the question in Keelah’s eyes. “You’ve been in a coma. For two weeks.” Keelah made a distressed sound in her chest and Red’s eyes watered. The veneer of cool professionalism disappearing for a second. “Thank God you’re resilient Keelah. You must be half-robot or something. You were a mess when they bought you in here. So much blood. I didn’t think you’d make it…”

Keelah could move her head. With some difficulty and much pain. But she managed it (against Red’s protestations); saw that she was lying on the exam table, hooked up to an IV and some other machine that was clicking and whirring, monitoring her breathing.

Keelah was trying to get her mouth to work again so that she could ask Red a follow up question, but then there was a flurry at the clinic door. A choked sob as Amata burst into the room—wild-eyed and feverish. And then Amata was leaning over Keelah. Wrinkles in her brow, dark circles under her eyes as the Overseer used every ounce of self-control to keep her from launching at Keelah; wrapping her arms around her; having a public meltdown.

“Keelah,” Amata whispered. Her hands fluttering near Keelah’s face and neck. Should she touch her girlfriend? Would it hurt her? How is she?

Keelah lifted her hand. Well, she tried to. It only amounted to a fluttering of fingers. But Amata saw. Linked their hands together. Used her other hand to caress Keelah’s face. “Sweetheart…” Amata cooed.

And she didn’t have to say anymore. Because it was written across her face. In the way her eyes gleamed and her mouth trembled. In the way her hand pressed rhythmically against Keelah’s.

There was a crowd gathering in the clinic. Lamp/Towners and 101ers who’d heard that Keelah was awake. Bittercup staring intensely, Freddie at her side. MacCready with arms folded across his chest; a concerned look on his face. Old Lady Palmer crying with joy. More than a dozen others standing about, waiting expectantly.

Red shooed the spectators out of the clinic. “She needs rest,” the doctor repeated when some of the
more vocal Lamp/Towners tried to stay behind.

Then Keelah was alone with Amata and Red. Officer Gomez lingering near the clinic door.

“How’d…?” Keelah tried. But she was overtaken with coughing.

Amata shushed her. And Red hastened to provide information before Keelah could overexert herself with talking.

“Sammy ran to get help,” Red volunteered. “Amata and a few of the guards went to Springvale to get you. They bought you back here.”

Keelah’s eyes flickered to Amata’s. *You went outside?*

Amata nodded. Pressed a kiss against Keelah’s forehead. Breathed an affirmation in her girlfriend’s ear.


“He’s fine,” Red explained. “A few cuts and bruises and an ugly scar on his forehead. But nothing too serious.” Red exchanged a quick glance with Amata. Some secret code. Then she began twisting knobs on Keelah’s oxygen machine. “Now that’s enough talking for you,” Red instructed. “You need your rest. You have a nasty wound from where that thing punctured your abdomen. And a bit of poison still in your system. But I’ve been treating you with anti-venom and hope to have you poison free in a few days.” Red crossed over to the exam table. Adjusted the sheet around Keelah’s injured body. “I did the best I could with your leg. But I’m afraid you’ll have a permanent limp moving forward.” A light touch against Keelah’s knee. “But considering the circumstances…I’d say you’re fortunate.”

Keelah licked chapped lips. Tried to summon the saliva she would need to make sound. But Amata shook her head. Another meaningful look passing between her and Red.

“Try to sleep,” Amata said softly. Stroking Keelah’s hair. “I’ll be right here. We can talk more tomorrow.”

The Med-X was kicking in. And Amata’s hand was so soothing. Keelah was right on the cusp of sleep.

But there was one thing she needed to know.

There was a face missing from the crowd that had gathered minutes before. One more person she needed to see before she could fall asleep.

“Where’s Susie?” she asked. Fighting to keep her eyes open.

Susie had saved her life. Had jumped on the back of a radscorpion (twice!) for her. Keelah wanted to say thank you. Hell, she wanted to recite poetry for the blonde.

Amata closed her eyes. Bit into her bottom lip. And Red looked away.

Keelah’s eyes snapped open. Her breath coming in choppy pants. “Susie…?” she asked again.

Red spared Amata from answering. “Susie didn’t make it Keelah.”

Keelah heard Amata’s suppressed sob but couldn’t see her girlfriend’s reaction. Because Keelah’s vision was clouding. Dark spots appearing behind her eyelids.
“Suze…” Keelah croaked.

Red shook her head sadly. “Sammy said that she refused to leave you. Even though the other radscorpions were coming. He ran to get help and Susie stayed behind. To protect you. When the guards got there, she was already gone. And there was blood. A trail of it. From where the radscorpions had…dragged her to their den.”

Keelah was crying. Choking on it. Snot and tears and blood. Everything that she had, coming forth all at once.

She tried to get up. To leave the bed and see for herself. ‘Cause NO! Not Susie. Susie couldn’t be… She wouldn’t…

But Keelah’s right leg was useless. Her body debilitated from weeks of unconsciousness. Instead of standing, she nearly toppled from the bed. Could only strain uselessly as Red and Amata pressed her back down on the table.

Red and Amata commanded again and again for Keelah to be still, stop moving, calm down. Please. Please. Please!

“No! No! No!”

Keelah fighting them. Losing the battle with her injuries, her tears, the misery that was ballooning in her chest.

Susie!

The struggle to stand tired her. Keelah’s head pounded; the air fleeced from her lungs; and when she felt a pinprick of a pain on her arm—a syringe depositing clear liquid into her blood stream—the wastelander’s mouth opened and closed like a dying fish.

Oblivion. Cloudy and thick.

And for the second time in two weeks, Keelah passed out.

. . .

She awoke hours later. Days? She couldn’t be sure.

Her mouth dry like crushed paper. She was dehydrated and achy. Her hand moved to scratch an itch on her stomach. Blinding pain. Swift and blistering. Bringing tears to her eyes.

“Try not to touch your stomach.” Red. Floating near. Her lab coat so fresh and white that the coloring lanced Keelah’s eyes. “That wound’s going to take a long time to heal,” Red commented. Taking a peek below the blanket at the bandaged hole in Keelah’s stomach.

“Amata?” Keelah asked. Pleased to hear that her voice worked better now. Still raspy but more firm. Whereas before it had been as articulate as a baby’s cry.

Red motioned towards a chair at Keelah’s side. Amata curled into a ball. Sleeping in an uncomfortable slouch; her right hand clenched in Keelah’s bedsheets.

“She hasn’t slept properly in days. Weeks really if you count the time you were in a coma.”

Keelah pushed herself into a sitting position. Grimaced when a pain radiated from her hips to her toes. Her right leg was bandaged from the ankle up. And the leg felt wrong somehow. Numb but
sensitized at the same time. Like it didn’t belong to her anymore.

Red noticed the wastelander’s chagrin. Began to massage the battered limb. “You lost some of the mobility in this leg. Had a damaged artery. And a cut more than a foot long.”

But Keelah didn’t care about the medical prognosis. “I have to find Susie,” she said. As she wiggled her feet and toes. Testing them. Trying to determine if they would work well enough for her to leave the vault.

“Susie’s gone,” Red reminded her. As if Keelah would forget such a thing.

Keelah frowned. “No, she’s not.”

“I’m sorry Keelah, but it’s the truth. The best thing for you to do right now is focus on getting healthy. Maybe then we could—”

But Keelah had already swung her legs across the bed. The wastelander stood gingerly on her feet and tried to balance upright. She crumbled immediately. Her legs giving way. And hit the ground hard.

“Keelah!” Red admonished. Racing to the wastelander’s side.

Keelah’s IV came out of her arm and other wires disconnected. A loud beeping noise filled the room and the commotion startled Amata awake.

The Overseer shook her head, still groggy, then clambered to her feet when she saw Keelah sprawled on the floor. “What are you doing?!” Amata decried.

The Overseer and Red tried to get Keelah back in bed, but the wastelander resisted. Leaning her weight against the exam table as she tried to catch her breath and find some solid footing.

“I have to find Susie!” Keelah shouted. “She’s out there. Probably hurt.”

“Susie is dead!” Amata bellowed. Saying it forcefully and directly because the honesty was needed at the moment. To jolt Keelah to reality.

Keelah shook her head. “No.”

“She’s gone Keelah.” Amata swallowed deeply. Blinked back the tears that had filled her eyes. “I saw it myself. Blood. Pieces of her recon armor. And…” Another throat convulsion as Amata tried to keep her composure. “We found her Pip-Boy near the scorpion den. It was badly damaged, but the HP counter still functioned. And it showed that Susie had died.”

Keelah sagged against the exam table. Nearly keeled over. She wanted to deny it (fuck no!) but some part of her knew the truth. She had barely survived one radscorpion attack. No way had Susie fended off two giant radscorpions.

Keelah cried into the palm of her hand. Felt herself grow woozy from the sustained activity. She stumbled backwards, about to collapse again, and Amata and Red rushed forward to catch her.

Red tried to maneuver Keelah back onto the table. “You’re overexerting yourself,” Red told her. “Lie down and I’ll get you another shot of Med-X.”

But Keelah twisted away. “No. The least I can do is recover Susie’s body.”

“You can’t even walk!” Amata exclaimed. And she stared in dismay as Keelah wrenched the
medical tubing from her body.

“Keelah, lie down,” Red directed.

“Where’s my armor?”

Amata swore beneath her breath.

Keelah began to unfasten the medical gown. Gagged when she saw the blood-soaked bandage covering half her stomach.

“You aren’t going anywhere!” Amata stated. “And your armor is completely ruined. There are holes in it that mirror the holes in your body!”

Amata was shouting; almost hysterical. And Red put a hand on the woman’s elbow; tried to calm her.

“Keelah…” Red said gently. “You can recover Susie’s body when you’ve healed from your injuries.”

“There won’t be anything left!” Keelah shouted.

And the yelling cost her. The wastelander collapsed against the bed. Had to hang on by her fingers since her strength had deserted her.

“Help me,” Red said to Amata. And the two women lifted Keelah back onto the exam table.

Keelah pushed at them, trying to stand back up. But her vision was murky. She could barely lift her hands. She kept murmuring Susie’s name as Red reattached the medical tubing; administered a large enough dosage of Med-X to dissolve Keelah’s protestations.

... 

Keelah drifted in and out of consciousness. The catastrophic trauma to her body; the steady supply of chems; it kept her loopy and compliant. She had no concept of time. Had extended periods where she could feel absolutely nothing. Not even her fingers or own breath. That numbness would be followed by waves of pain so intense that Keelah screamed her throat raw.

And through it all, she thought of Susie. Those spirited blue eyes, the quick tongue. A woman who pinched and poked her way into Keelah’s heart.

“Suze…”

Keelah kept trying to leave. Every time she regained consciousness. The wastelander tried to roll out of bed. Tried endlessly to depart Vault 101 so that she could find and bury her friend’s body.

After five straight days of Keelah trying to force her way out of the clinic, Amata took extreme measures. The Overseer posted a guard outside the clinic door. Made it known publically that Keelah was forbidden from leaving Vault 101.

Amata also confiscated Keelah’s weapons and supplies.

Keelah was furious. She stared up at her girlfriend with smoldering eyes and scowled at the guard that had been assigned to her. A young officer with a cowlick, who could barely look at Keelah without flushing.
“So I’m a prisoner?” Keelah asked Amata; her voice lowered to a dangerous decibel.

Amata blinked at the severe tone. “No. You’re a patient. I’m trying to do what’s best for you.”

“Fuck that. I decide what’s best for me.”

“You have a hole in your stomach,” Amata growled. ‘Cause now she was angry. Why did Keelah have to be so damn stubborn? “And you can’t walk. If you leave the vault in this condition, you’ll die.”

“All I need is a cocktail of Med-X and Buffout. I can make it to the radscorpion lair, no problem.”

There was a chance that she could overdose on the potent combination of chems, but Keelah would risk it for Susie.

“No, Keelah.”

“You can send an emergency transmission to Charon. He can help me reach the lair.”

“No!”

“Look, you can’t tell me what to do!”

“I can and I am. I’m responsible for your wellbeing.”

“You’re not my Overseer!”

“I know that. I’m your girlfriend.” Amata’s voice quavered and the Overseer took a step towards Keelah. “I’m your best friend. We already lost Susie. I don’t want to lose you too.”

Amata extended a hand towards Keelah, but the wastelander turned away. Stared at the far wall so that she wouldn’t have to look into Amata’s anguished eyes.

“It’s not right,” Keelah whispered. Her voice pitchy, full of pain. “Leaving Susie like that. In a fucking cave…”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. Couldn’t bear to think about her friend’s body languishing below ground in some damp animal den. Bits of bone and flesh picked over by radscorpions. Until Susie decomposed into nothingness.

“I thought Susie was your friend,” Keelah accused.

“She is. She was…” A lone tear escaping Amata’s eye.

Amata took a deep breath. Ran trembling hands down the front of her officer’s jumpsuit. “Her parents want to have a memorial service for her. Tomorrow. I’ll let you leave the clinic so that you can attend.”

“Let me?” Keelah scoffed. Turned narrowed eyes on her girlfriend. “You really get off on this power trip thing, don’t you?”

“That’s not what this is Keelah.”

Keelah’s eyes softened suddenly. As did her voice as she entreated Amata. “Please ‘Mata. Let me go. I’ll come back to the vault and play the perfect patient. But let me find Susie first. Please.”
Keelah hadn’t been able to bury her father. Didn’t even know where her mother was interred. She couldn’t leave Susie alone like that. Another body going unclaimed, unacknowledged in the wasteland.

Amata’s mouth stretched into a thin line. The Overseer was resolute even as her eyes watered. “I can’t,” she said simply.

And with those two words, Amata altered their relationship.

Keelah stared at her. One long, cold look. Judgement.

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” Keelah told her. A decisive statement. Emotionless.

Amata’s breath hitched and the Overseer wavered on her feet. Pain and surprise contorting her features.

Keelah turned away. Fixed her eyes on the far wall again.

And all she could think about was how unfair it was. That she had survived the radscorpion attack and Susie hadn’t.

It was unfair and it was wrong. And if there was one thing Keelah was good at, it was righting wrongs.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by my favorite song in the entire world (Fleetwood Mac "Landslide")
Landslide (Part Two)

Chapter Notes

Angst. So much angst.

LW/Amata heavy chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 36 – Landslide (Part Two)

Another two weeks passed with Keelah confined to the medical clinic. Her leg mended slowly and Red put the injured limb in a splint; gave Keelah a crutch to help with her mobility. The wastelander was able to hobble for short distances around the clinic. Walking was painful, but the fact that she could put weight on the leg signaled progress.

The nasty wound to her stomach hadn’t improved much. It still bled regularly; was full of puss and hurt like the dickens if Keelah jostled it even a little bit.

But Keelah paid little mind to her injuries. She continued to petition Amata to let her leave the vault. Every day the same until Amata conditioned herself to ignore Keelah’s pleas.

Amata became a woman possessed. Committed to Keelah’s recovery at all costs. Amata restricted Keelah to the medical wing. Monitored her progress daily. And when the Overseer caught Keelah trying to dupe the young guard into letting her “exercise” in the rec room—It was an escape attempt, of course. By the time the guard realized the deception, Keelah had wiggled halfway through a ventilation shaft—Amata doubled down. She assigned two guards to the clinic door and posted Officer Hannon at Keelah’s bedside. The senior officer was no-nonsense and not the least intimidated by Keelah. Amata was confident that Keelah wouldn’t be able to manipulate him.

Keelah and Hannon spent the better part of most days glaring at each other. Muttering beneath their breaths about their bullheaded counterpart. The tension between Keelah and Hannon was so thick that Red found herself making excuses so that she could retreat to her office.


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Officer Hannon leaned against the wall beside Keelah’s bed. Folded his arms behind his back as he watched Keelah poke disinterestedly at her lunch tray.

“Stop playing with your food,” the officer remarked. “Eat it. You already skipped breakfast.”

“Amata posted you there for security not commentary.” And it took a tremendous amount of effort for Keelah not to fling the meal tray at the officer. “This is ridiculous!” she huffed. “I’m not allowed to go to the cafeteria. I can’t go to the showers or the rec room.”

She stabbed irritably at a rubbery piece of steak. Four weeks in this fucking bed! With Amata

Acts of love that went unappreciated since Keelah and Amata were (once again) feuding and could barely say hello to each other without it dissolving into a shouting match.

“The Overseer just wants you to be safe,” Hannon reminded Keelah.

“She’s treating me like a child.”

Perhaps if you stopped behaving like one…”

Keelah’s eyes flashed. Her lip curled as she glared at Hannon. “I was just beginning to like you,” she growled. Thinking back to the officer who had helped her transport the Lamp/Towners to Vault 101. Who had enthusiastically played kickball with them; who had helped bury Dusty.

Officer Hannon laughed at Keelah’s petulance. “I still like you,” he told her. “We haven’t always gotten along, you and I…” And his eyes dimmed as he remembered his harshness towards Keelah. When he’d wanted her expelled from the vault. “But we’re in a better place now. All of us. You had a lot to do with that.”

And he walked over to Keelah. Cut the piece of meat that she’d been struggling with. Neat, even lines of steak. “So stop giving the Overseer such a hard time, yeah?” he admonished gently.

He was so close that Keelah could smell his aftershave; could see the fresh polish of his 10 mm pistol. “She cares about you,” he emphasized.

“This isn’t care. Amata just wants to control me.”

“Well, considering who her father is, it’s not surprising that Amata would confuse the two.”

Keelah blinked. Considering his words. Then Officer Hannon stepped away. Pushed the meal tray towards Keelah, prompting her to eat.

“You want water?” he asked her.

Keelah shook her head. But she began to nibble on her food. Could only taste grease; the sourness of her own emotion.

Her eyes flickered from Hannon’s kindly eyes to the gun on his hip.

She plotted.

. . .

Keelah had a steady stream of visitors to her bedside. Sticky and Knock Knock came by each day to tell stories; longwinded jokes that Keelah had heard a hundred times before.

Old Lady Palmer snuck in sweets. Freddie Gomez bought comics, faded magazines. Bittercup fluffed pillows; kept Keelah’s hair neat.

A different crop of visitors every day. But each night it was the same. Amata at Keelah’s bedside; cleaning her girlfriend’s body with a soft sponge. Nodding politely as Red gave her updates. Falling asleep in the visitor’s chair.

“Lift your arms,” Amata commanded softly. And she moved the sponge from Keelah’s neck, around her shoulder. Across her back; down her arms. A trail of soap and water. Goosebumps.
“I can bathe myself,” Keelah said. When Amata reached the stomach wound.

The Overseer gentled her ministrations as she brushed at purpled skin.

“Let me do it,” Amata responded tiredly. “You should conserve your energy.”

She and Keelah had this argument every day. Keelah complained and Amata commanded. Keelah pushed and Amata pushed back. The standoffs were beginning to get exhausting. And redundant.

Keelah shifted her hips. Helped Amata pull her gown back up. “I walked three rotations around the room today,” Keelah said.

“That’s good.”

Amata was perspiring from her efforts. She buttoned Keelah’s gown. Delicately. Expertly.

“And the last of the venom is gone from my system.”

Keelah used a thumb to wipe Amata’s forehead. Soft strokes to remove the tiny beads of sweat. Keelah was angry with her girlfriend, but this was instinctual for them. Tending to the other. Easy care.

“Red told me. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Amata fastened Keelah’s top button. Found herself centimeters away from Keelah’s face. Both women licked their lips. Exchanged a glance. Looked away.

“I think I’m well enough to go outside,” Keelah posited.

Amata began to gather up the bath supplies. “Let’s not have this argument again.”

“I can walk now.”

“Barely. And only with a crutch.”

“I haven’t needed a Stimpack in days.”

“You’re still using Med-X. Multiple doses every hour.” Amata interrupted Keelah before she could interject. “And your stomach looks no better than it did the first day.”

“The pain is minimal.”

Amata put a single finger against Keelah’s stomach. Eliciting a loud gasp from the injured woman.

“Sorry,” Amata said regretfully. Removing her hand from the bandaged skin. “But I think I’ve made my point. You’re in no condition to travel.”

“You can’t do this!” Keelah protested. The tenderness sublimated; the resentment roaring back. “You can’t keep me locked up like I’m some hostage.”

“You’re not a hostage Keelah. I’ve said time and time again that your… hospitalization is only temporary.”

“This isn’t hospitalization. It’s imprisonment!”

Amata rubbed her temples. Exhausted from a full day’s work. Running the vault. Tending to Keelah.
“What do you want for dinner?” Amata asked wearily. Ignoring Keelah’s outburst. “I think there’s still a bit of soup left over from last night.”

Keelah glared. “Four weeks. It’s been four weeks Amata! I have responsibilities outside. Charon probably thinks something happened to me.”

“I’ll send him an emergency broadcast. Let him know that you’re okay.”

“That’s not good enough.” Keelah gritted her teeth. “Susie could have been alive, you know? She could have been out there, injured. Waiting for someone to come rescue her. You kept me locked in here for more than a month! Now…”

Keelah shook her head. Demoralized. There wouldn’t even be enough of Susie…left for a proper burial.

Amata smarted from the accusation. Blinked back tears. The Overseer was so tired. Tired and stressed and grief-stricken. Her head ached. Her heart.

“Keelah, I told you…We looked for Susie. We did. But the amount of blood we found…Her Pip-Boy…” Amata closed her eyes. Refused to let the memory surface. “Susie couldn’t have survived all that. And I can’t let you go chasing those radscorpions when they nearly killed you the first time.”

Amata cleared her throat. Felt her mouth turn down involuntarily. “Now what do you want for dinner?”


“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“You can’t mix chems and alcohol. Besides, the alcohol would dehydrate you. I’ll get you tea.”

“Fuck this!”

Keelah wanted to scream until the walls shook. She wanted to hurl obscenities. Throw things. She satisfied those impulses by digging her fingers into her bedsheets. “You won’t let me leave this place. You put a guard by my bed who has me under constant surveillance. Even when I bathe and piss. You boss me around nonstop. The least you can do is let me have a fucking drink.”

“Don’t swear at me Keelah.”

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not totally helpless you know? I’ve fought things in the wasteland you haven’t even seen before. You really think a handful of guards can stop me from getting out of here?”

Amata blinked at Keelah’s tone. The implication. “You would resort to violence?”

A muscle ticked in Keelah’s jaw but the wastelander didn’t deny it.

“Need I remind you that there are children in this vault?” Amata hissed. “Your friends? Any conflict you instigate will imperil them.”

Keelah looked away. Her jaw clenched so tightly that her teeth ached. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt,” she murmured. But when the wastelander turned her gaze back on Amata, her eyes were clear and focused. “But I won’t be held against my will much longer.”
“I have your weapons,” Amata reminded her. Her eyes unflinching. “And I changed the vault password.”

Keelah blinked. Looked away. And when Amata reached to fluff Keelah’s pillow, the wastelander recoiled.

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Amata didn’t sleep in the visitor’s chair that evening. Keelah wouldn’t let her.

_I have enough people watching my every move_, Keelah said snidely.

And Amata stomped out of the clinic. But not before she gave Keelah a very vocal piece of her mind.

Of course Keelah mouthed back. Red and Officer Hannon could only exchange worried glances as the acrimony continued to grow between the couple.

Amata was still agitated the next morning. Keelah was just so damn stubborn and self-destructive. And the wastelander seemed to be allergic to good advice. Amata wanted to throttle Keelah. She wanted to embrace her. It was a confluence of emotions that left Amata exhausted; uncharacteristically irritable.

The Overseer found herself snapping at her security team during their weekly staff meeting, and she called the meeting to a close after only twenty minutes of discussion. She couldn’t concentrate on reports when there was an infuriating woman downstairs probably trying to tunnel her way out of the vault.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she told her security team tiredly.

Officer Gomez lingered in the doorway as the other guards filed out. Stared with some concern at the vault leader who was manically shuffling papers at her desk.

Officer Gomez cleared his throat. “Overseer, the last thing I want to do is speak out of turn…”

Amata looked up from her task. Her eyes immediately wary. “What is it?”

“Well…I was just thinking…perhaps we should let Keelah leave the vault.”

“Excuse me?” A click of heels as Amata strode from behind her desk.

“It’s just…It’s doing a number on her…being cooped up like that in the clinic. All day, every day. I feel bad for her.”

“We’re all cooped up Herman. We live in a vault.”

Officer Gomez flushed at the barb. “Yes, but Keelah’s a wastelander now. She’s accustomed to sunshine and being outdoors. She mentioned to me just yesterday how difficult it is for her, adjusting to the recycled air.”

Amata’s face tightened. Keelah refused to talk to _her_, but here she was sharing personal information with her staff.

Officer Gomez shuffled his feet nervously. “I know you’re worried about Keelah. We all are. But she has more wasteland experience than all the rest of us combined. She’s survived out there for more than five years. I think she’s capable of taking care of herself.”
“No, she isn’t.” And Amata’s tone of voice was reproachful. “Keelah excels at taking care of others, but when it comes to looking out for herself, she’s shit.” Officer Gomez startled at the vulgarity. “You should know that better than anyone Herman. How many fights did you break up when we were younger? How many times did you march her to the infirmary with a bleeding nose, broken bones?”

“Now you’re the one forcing her to the infirmary, huh?”

Amata’s eyes flashed angrily and Officer Gomez’s face softened. “It just doesn’t seem right Amata,” he said gently. “We ran her out of the vault…twice. Now we’re locking her in?”

“She’s not locked in. I’m trying to keep her safe. And I’m going to. Whether she likes it or not. Now if you don’t mind—”

But Amata didn’t get to complete her sentence. Officer Wolfe raced into the office, panting. He interrupted their conversation. “Overseer, you’d better get down to the clinic and fast.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Keelah. She’s gone bananas. She trashed the clinic and wrestled Officer Hannon’s gun off him.”

Amata dashed past the officers. Sprinted down the hallway in a panic. Officer Gomez and Wolfe followed closely behind.

The clinic was a mess.

Cabinets and chairs overturned. Scattered paperwork on damn near every surface.

Keelah had removed the tubing from her body. Her medical gown hung loosely off her body as she leaned heavily on a crutch and tried to push her way past Officer Hannon.

The senior officer hadn’t resorted to force (yet). But he blocked the clinic door with his broad body. Refused to move even though Keelah exhorted him; shoved at him with her free hand.

There was so much glass on the floor that Hannon’s boots crunched over it every time Keelah shoved him. The soles of Keelah’s feet bled. Left red smears across an already untidied floor.

An absolute mess.

Red stood near the door of her office. The doctor shook her head sadly as she repeated Keelah’s name; tried to reason with her troubled friend.

Amata burst into the office; pushed past her officers. The Overseer was seething, and when she saw the ransacked clinic, her ire metamorphosed into fury.

“Stop that this once!” Amata demanded of Keelah. Standing between Keelah and Hannon; using her body as a shield against Keelah’s aggressive action.

And when the other security officers swooped in to seize Keelah, the vault leader put a hand up. Stopped them.

Amata’s eyes were narrowed slits when she turned to Keelah. “So no improvement on your behavior then?” the Overseer asked. Voice thick with anger. Keelah only stared back at her. Breathing
raggedly. “Is that a no?”

“It’s a fuck off just like I told your security officers. You going to put me in timeout?”

Amata walked closer to Keelah. Lowered her voice so that only the two of them could hear. “Why are you behaving like this? Can’t you see what you’re doing to me?”

“And what about what you’re doing to me? Holding me against my will? Assigning guards to me like I’m some sort of criminal?”

“Well obviously I needed to. Look at what you’ve done to the clinic!” Amata’s eyes passed over the broken glass; the ruined furniture. “How could you behave so irresponsibly?!”

“It wasn’t just her ma’am,” Officer Hannon butted in as he moved to the Overseer’s side. Keelah eyed him warily. “The two junior officers went a little overboard trying to restrain her. They contributed to this mess.”

And some tussle it must have been. Amata noticed for the first time that there was fresh blood on Keelah’s gown. Scratches across her neck. And the wastelander was drenched in sweat.

The two officers who were assigned to the door were haggard as well. One bent over holding his stomach while the other worked futilely to clean the mess they’d made.

Amata turned her attention to Officer Hannon. “What happened here?”

“She tried to leave. The officers tried to stop her. It escalated.”

Amata frowned. “And she took your gun?”

Officer Hannon looked embarrassed. “Yes. I was removing her breakfast tray and she grabbed it.”

Amata whirled on Keelah. “Were you planning to shoot your way out of here?”

The Overseer’s face contorted with emotion. Anger and disappointment. Rage and lovesickness.

“I wasn’t after his stupid gun…” Keelah muttered.

Hannon pointed to his 10 mm pistol. The gun was disassembled. Lying on the exam table. “She wanted the bullets.”

At Amata’s confused look, Keelah explained. “My dad taught me how to make a poultice with gun powder. I was going to use the salve on my stomach so that I could walk out of here a bit more easily.”

Keelah was ashen with fatigue. The squabble with the guards; the sustained standing and exertion. The woman looked ready to keel over.

Amata let her concern override her anger. “You need to lie down,” she told Keelah. Placing a hand against the woman’s waist. The Overseer turned to the guards who had followed her to clinic. “Officer Mack and Wolfe, help me clean this place up. The rest of you are dismissed.”

“And you…” Speaking directly to Keelah. Pressing a hand against the woman’s hip. “Get back in bed before you pass out.” And when Keelah didn’t comply, Amata raised her voice. “Now! I will not have you undermining the good order of this vault. I will not have risking your life or the life of my officers because you’re too damn stubborn to take sound advice. Now move it!”
And the bourgeoning hostility stunned everyone in the room. Officer Hannon and Red exchanged another look. Officer Mack and Wolfe pretended not to eavesdrop as they righted furniture; began clearing away trash.

And Keelah still hadn’t moved from her unstable perch against the crutch. The wastelander stared derisively at Amata’s hand, resting against her hip.

“Keelah…” Amata warned.

“I’m not getting back in that bed,” Keelah retorted. “Four weeks is long enough. I can recover just as well in my house at Megaton.”

“You need around-the-clock care.”

“Some care you’ve provided me. Four walls and three armed guards for more than a month!”

Amata released a shaky breath. Softened her voice. “I’m trying to protect you Keelah. You defended me every day for more than ten years. I want to do the same for you. Now, please, get back in bed. I’ll get you some tea and your afternoon dose of Med-X…” She shot a glance at Red. “Red, can you prepare her treatment while I help her back into bed?”

Red nodded but Keelah pulled away. No longer able to stomach Amata touching her.

“I’m going home,” Keelah stated. And the wastelander shifted her weight from one foot to another. Bounced on her heels, testing her right leg. “Just tell me where my weapons are. And if you could have someone fetch Dogmeat for me, I’d appreciate it.”

Keelah sidestepped Amata (with some difficulty). Hobbled towards the clinic door.


And Keelah had finally had enough. The wastelander pressed forward until she and Amata were face to face. “And what if I don’t? What are you going to do? Medicate me until I can’t function? Assign another half dozen officers to my bed? Or maybe you’ll lock me in the holding cell like your father used to, hmmm?”

They’d transitioned to being cruel. Both of them. And neither woman was patient enough realize that the cruelty masked the anxiety, the hurt feelings.

So instead of communicating—and making things better between them—Keelah and Amata persisted in their stubbornness. They made things worse.

Keelah wrenched away from Amata’s grasp. Continued her shuffle towards the clinic door.

Amata sneered. Turned to her senior officer. “Officer Hannon?”

“Yes, Overseer?”

“Please escort Keelah back to her bed. Use force if you have to. Measured.”

Keelah whirléd around, shocked.

“Yes, Overseer,” Hannon responded clumsily.

And with the assistance of Officer Wolfe and Officer Mack, Chief Security Officer Hannon carted
Keelah back to bed.

Keelah was confined to a hospital bed. Not physically. Amata had not ordered the use of restraints (yet) but the Overseer had made it clear that if Keelah stepped one foot outside of the bed she was to be put back (delicately). There were four security officers in the clinic now. One for each wall. And Keelah ridiculed all of them. Loudly. Vociferously. Disparaging them with language of the colorful variety.

None of the officers seemed offended by Keelah’s vocal tirade. Most of them actually felt bad for her and agreed with Officer Gomez that the wastelander should be allowed to make her own decisions.

But the officers dared not cross the Overseer. Amata was behaving erratically. She was operating out of pure fear and administrative zeal. Dictating to her staff when she usually led diplomatically.

Susie’s death had made Amata irrational. Inconsolable. Her fear of the wasteland intensified, and the young leader unwittingly adopted her father’s leadership style. She would protect the ones she loved by way of force.

“Lift your arms,” Amata commanded softly. Wanting to remove Keelah’s gown; put her in a fresh one.

“No.”

“You have blood all over your gown.”

“So?”

“Keelah...”

Keelah cut her eyes at Amata. “Why don’t you just have your guards hold me down so that you can change me more easily? And why don’t you put a diaper on me why you’re at it?”

“Why are you being like this? Can’t you see that I want what’s best for you?”

“No. I can’t see that all.”

A tense silence flared between them. Regret. Hesitation.

When Keelah moved her hand to scratch a spot on her nose, the yellow bracelet jangled softly on her wrist; drawing Amata’s eyes. A heartfelt gift. A symbol of commitment.

Amata caught one of the plastic hearts between her fingers. “I’m sorry if it seems like I’m taking away your independence,” she told Keelah. "But there’s something you don’t know.”

Keelah jerked away; causing the jewelry to fall out of Amata’s clasp.

The Overseer appeared hurt by the rejection. Her mouth trembled. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something. It’s still hard for me to wrap my mind around it, really, but I’ve been so busy with vault operations...And your injuries...Susie...” She swallowed deeply. "Keelah, there's a reason I've been so reluctant to let you leave the vault...”

“ I don’t want to hear any more excuses Amata.”

“It's not an excuse. Something unexpected happened—”
“Just stop! Okay? You said I need my rest, right? Then stop talking to me. Let me rest. Please.”

Amata worked her jaw. Wanting to say more but hesitant to provoke more of Keelah’s ire. “I’ll let you leave the vault,” she finally said. Her voice so sad that Keelah’s eyes shot up in surprise. “Just… wait until your stomach heals. Please?”

Keelah turned away. Tried to find a spot on the wall she could focus on; a distraction. But there were too many guards staring back at her. No privacy. No relief.

When Keelah spoke a few minutes later, she sounded exhausted. Defeated. “There must be something about the Overseer job,” she murmured. “It changes people.”

And the wastelander lifted her arms without further complaint. Let Amata remove her gown.

Amata looked stung by Keelah’s words. The comparison to her father. And her hands trembled long after she’d pulled the clean fabric over Keelah’s body.

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Keelah was well enough to sit up in a chair. The gun powder poultice accelerated her healing. She could bend with only a small amount of pain. But she’d have a limp for a long time yet. Maybe forever.

The wastelander played a listless game of Go Fish with Sammy. She and Sammy both sucked at the game—both too agitated to focus and remember which cards they’d already called. And after another twenty minutes of back and forth, Keelah called it quits.

She tossed her playing cards on the table. “Sammy, I can’t utter the words ‘Go Fish’ one more time. I just can’t.”

The eleven-year old grinned. “So you forfeit?”

“Happily.”

He smiled. Peeped over his shoulder at the quartet of guards taking their lunch break. “I didn’t come here for the game anyway,” he whispered to Keelah.

Keelah’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to help you get out of here.”

“What?!” And when Keelah noticed the guards watching her, she lowered her voice. Picked her cards back up to appear occupied. “What are you talking about Sammy?”

“I found your guns. And your supply sack. I put ‘em in a covered crate by the vault door.”

“How in the world did you manage that?”

That toothy grin again. “With you locked up in here, there’s no one to keep me out of the ventilation shafts. It was easy peasy getting into the security office. Left, right, left, left and bam! I’m in the holding cell.”

Keelah shook her head. “Come on Sammy…” she said disapprovingly. Because she really didn’t want to involve a kid in all this.

But Sammy interrupted Keelah before she could chastise him. “Let me help you. It’s my fault that
Susie died. And that you got hurt.”

“No, it isn’t.”

But he wouldn’t listen. “I liked Susie. I want you to find her. Lamplighters…we have a lot of friends who got taken by scorpions and bears. Pulled down into caves. Too far for us to follow. There used to be four of us on the scavenge team. But a Mirelurk snatched Cass. Took her below the water.” His eyes wide and sad. “Cass is still down there. Susie too.”

Remains. People died became remains. A refrain stuck in Kealah’s head on an unforgiving loop.

“I still have to get past the guards,” she told him.

“Well, in about five minutes, the guards are going to forget all about you.” And he looked at the clock mounted on the wall. His eyes tracking the second hand.


“You know the garbage burner…?”

“Sammy. You can’t set a fire in the vault!” Keelah hissed.

“I wouldn’t do that Keelah.” And he looked almost amused that she would think him that devious. “But in about five minutes, Squirrel and Princess are going to toss all of the Lamplighters’ old shoes and clothes into the garbage burner. And those mats that the dogs sleep on. It’s going to absolutely reek. Those guards are going to run out of here to investigate.”

“Squirrel and Princess are helping you?”

Sammy nodded. “And don’t worry. It’s not dangerous what we’re doing. Just stinky. We have an expert who’s supervising the whole thing.”

“What expert?”

Another whisper. “The maintenance man. Stanley. He said he owed you a favor. Said you saved his daughter’s life a long time ago.”

*Beatrice.*

Keelah chuckled softly. Stressed and heartened at the same time.

Sammy studied Keelah. Suddenly serious. “After you escape…you plan on coming back?”

“Not this time kid.”

Too much had happened between her and Amata. Keelah didn’t feel safe in the vault anymore.

For a second, it looked like Sammy was going to object; going to cry. But then his eyes flicked back to the clock. “You might want to cover your nose,” he said. Before pulling a rag out of pocket. Wrapping it around his face.

He barely got the words out of his mouth before all hell broke loose.

... It was pandemonium. 101ers racing out of their bedrooms, the cafeteria. Gagging on the unpleasant
aroma of burning rubber; dog feces.

So many bodies in the hallways that no one noticed Keelah slip past. Even in a medical gown, leaning on a crutch; people were too fixated on the smell of smoke; the gray haze filtering through the vault.

Keelah navigated her way away from the crowd; eased through abandoned quarters; traversed back hallways. As quickly as she could manage.

She was sweating by the time she made it to the vault door. Her leg aching. The wound to her stomaching pulsating. Faint but sharp enough.

Amata had changed the vault password. But the Overseer must have forgotten that Keelah was a technician. The wastelander hacked the terminal in less than five minutes.

The screeching of the vault door would give her away. So loud. So Keelah grabbed her weapons and supply back (Quick! Quick!). Whistled for Dogmeat as she barreled through the tunnel.

She regretted it—not leaving a note behind for Red or Old Lady Palmer. Bittercup. All her friends. But there wasn’t time. And she’d already lost precious days, weeks confined to that hospital bed.

More than a month wasted while Susie languished.

Keelah stepped out into the wasteland. More stricken and brittle than she’d been her first time out of the vault.

She didn’t think about Amata this time as she trudge away from Vault 101. She didn’t bemoan the loss of her best friend.

Or maybe she did. Keelah couldn’t be sure. And what did it matter anyway, at this point?

. . .

Keelah couldn’t open her front door. She was too tired. Her arms weighed down by the crutch and supply sack.

She used her forehead to knock. One rap. Two. Then slumped against the splintered wood.

Charon let her in. Blinked twice at the figure she made. A scanty hospital gown; flushed skin. Her right side bandaged from ankle to hip.

Charon’s mouth twisted but he said nothing. He took the guns from her, the supply sack. Didn’t catch Keelah’s elbow as she limped inside. Didn’t throw an arm around her waist.

If Keelah wanted help, she would ask for it. Charon had learned that about her. But he did peruse Keelah silently. Made sure none of her injuries were life-threatening.

“I was wondering when you would return for me,” he said as he put her weapons away. Retreated to the kitchen for water.

What Charon didn’t say was “I was worried” or “What took you?” or even more revealing “I’m happy to see you.”

But he did hold the water bottle as Keelah drank from it (She tried to grip the plastic bottle and failed). And he did pull a chair out for her. And glared until she sat.
“You didn’t get the emergency broadcast?” Keelah asked him. Slurring the words because she could hardly breathe.

“I did.”

Keelah nodded.

Charon folded his arms.

And for twenty minutes the only the sound was Keelah’s harsh breathing; the rustle of the handybot, Wadsworth, cleaning upstairs.

“I left Dogmeat with Harden,” Keelah eventually said. “You’ll check on him later?”

“You going somewhere?”

“Yeah. I have a friend I need to find.”

And she climbed to her feet. Slow progress since she was relying on the crutch for stability. Charon stood too. Hovered while trying not to appear to.

“I’ll come with you,” he said. When Keelah moved to her storage locker and began to riffle through for armor.

“This isn’t a combat operation.”

“What kind of operation is it?”

Charon never asked follow up questions. Never solicited extra details. Keelah paused what she was doing. Fixed her companion with a curious look. “I have a bag of caps upstairs. Enough to pay off Nova’s debt. Maybe you can convince Moriarty to let her walk.”

“Why can’t you?”

Keelah had to let go of the crutch to remove her hospital gown. She balanced awkwardly on her good leg.

And she’d spent nearly five weeks railing against the security officers being present while she undressed. But this was Charon. So she disrobed without any qualms. Her movements jerky and awkward.

Charon could barely control his reaction when he saw the gouge in Keelah’s stomach. The crisscross of bandages.

She had trouble pulling the tight-fitting armor over her legs. Charon crossed over to her. Extended an arm so that she could lean against him.

“Where are you going?” he asked her.

“Not too far.”

“And when will you be back?”

“Soon.”

She was lying. She couldn’t look him in the eyes which meant she was lying. Something else
Charon had learned about Keelah in their five years together.

“I’ll come with you,” he said again. Reaching for his shotgun when Keelah was done using him as a crutch. Keelah buttoned her armor and pulled goggles over her eyes. Then the wastelander stuffed something in the pockets of her leathers. Something smooth and bulky. Charon couldn’t see what.

“I don’t need you this time,” Keelah told him. Re-securing her crutch. Hobbling towards the front door.

Then Keelah did two things that alarmed Charon.

When she got to the front door, she turned back around. Walked over to the mercenary. Hugged him tight. A first.

Then she left her Megaton home without taking a single weapon.

... 

She had to leave her crutch behind. It was already a tight squeeze through the dirt passage. She couldn’t fit the crutch in the opening. There was barely enough room for her. Keelah tossed the wooden support to the side; shimmied her way into the chute and began to writhe, face first, towards the radscorpion den.

This was where the scorpions had taken Susie, Keelah could tell. There were bits of armor near the entrance. Susie’s recon mask torn completely in half. And blood stains against rock. Faded by time, a rusted hue.

Keelah tucked the tattered mask into her armor—a memento—and continued to push her way through crumbling dirt. Closer. Closer. A winding circuit that seemed to have no end. More twists and turns and mounds of dirt. Tiny insects skittering; a dozen diminutive legs against her fingers. Flecks of dirt coating her hair.

She scrabbled her fingers in dirt and pulled until her fingernails cracked; the stitches in her stomach reopened; released blood. She crawled down, down, to get to the scorpion pit. The hidden depths where the mutated insects took their prey.


Until she dropped into a sunken channel. Dirt on all sides. Gleaming moss on stone. Dark pools of water. Rustling sounds.

A sharp white against the dirt floor. Bone. More bones than she could count.

Keelah kneeled. Took a deep breath. Observed.

What she thought was stone were scorpions. Still like rock. Slumbering. Hunger temporarily sated.

Two. Four. Twelve of them total. More scorpions than Keelah could fend off. But she hadn’t come here to fight.

She was here to bury Susie.

How could a person identify bone? How could she name it? Claim it? There were so many skeletons. Too many.

But Keelah had counted on this. And she still intended to bury her friend.
She would bury every unfortunate soul that had been dragged down to this hellhole. She’d turn this lair into a grave.

Keelah reached into her pockets. Removed the fistful of explosives she’d bought from home. Enough charges to collapse this entire cave.

She had to work quickly and quietly.

She’d set the second charge when she heard a rustle behind her. Soft pressure against her back. A large figure.

She hadn’t been quiet enough.

Keelah turned around expecting a pincer. A stinger full of venom.

It was Charon. Dirt-stained and perspiring. His combat shotgun slung across his back.

“What are you doing here?” Keelah hissed. Looking around. Making sure the radscorpions hadn’t stirred.

Charon looked pissed. “I know people underestimate ghouls, but do you think I’m an idiot?”

And beneath the anger was hurt. Keelah could see it. And it was strange (unexpected) that Charon was letting Keelah see it. His disappointment.

“What are you planning?” he asked Keelah. But the wastelander didn’t answer. “You didn’t bring any weapons with you,” he accused.

Keelah looked away. Readied her third charge, intending to set it. But Charon grabbed her arm. “You have a busted leg. How do you plan to crawl out of this cave?”


“You’re not the only person in this desert who’s had shitty things happen to them,” he told Keelah. “Friends die. Family. You deal with it.”

“I am dealing with it.”

And Keelah set the third charge. Crawled over to sunken boulder. Began to position the fourth explosive beneath the massive rock.

Charon followed her. Glancing over his shoulder at the radscorpions. Some of them were already moving. Their claws making scratching sounds against the muddy floor.

“Keelah…” Charon attempted.

“Leave Charon.”

And she twisted the wire expertly. Yellow and green. Soft colors that would trigger widespread devastation.

On to the fifth charge. There were only three more after that.

“What about Amata?” Charon asked her. Evoking the woman whose memory had pulled Keelah off the side of that railing in Rivet City.
“Give her my Pip-Boy,” Keelah answered. Loosening the device from her arm. Extending it towards Charon.

But the mercenary ignored it. “And what do I get?” Charon asked.

And his tone—the breathlessness—astounded Keelah. She dropped the compact grenade that was in her other hand. Watched the explosive roll across a patch of dirt. But Keelah’s eyes didn’t linger on the bomb. She turned to Charon.

Charon’s eyes—the only part of his body unaffected by war and radiation—had always fascinated Keelah. Made her blink uncontrollably. Made her feel.

“You don’t need me Charon.” And she laughed weakly. “Most days we don’t even like each other.”

“Bullshit.”

She couldn’t look at him. Because she was lying. Charon knew this about her. Just like he knew a hundred other things. Like how Keelah never put her water bottles in the refrigerator because she liked her drinks room temperature. Or how she needed to hear music before she could fall asleep. He knew that she scratched ribbons into her arms when her emotions became too much. He knew that she cried when she was drunk. Cried and mumbled about her father.

A lifetime’s worth of details he’d memorized as they shared a campfire; a house; a winding road. Five years together.

And now Keelah was walking away from all of that. Leaving him behind like he was an employee she could terminate.

Charon reached down inside himself. Touched an emotion he hadn’t acknowledged in more than 200 years.

“I told you about my sister, right?” he whispered. His voice throaty and rough.

And Keelah shook her head. ‘Cause, no, Charon hadn’t told her about his sister. Charon never talked to Keelah about anything. He never shared personal details. Didn’t mention his past. Most of the times the mercenary didn’t even use complete sentences.

“You mentioned her once. In passing,” Keelah answered. Dropping the Pip-Boy in Charon’s lap.

And, really, they shouldn’t even be having this conversation. Not when Keelah had explosives to set. Not when there were radscorpions stirring about, newly hungry.

But that look in Charon’s eyes—something far off and haunted—arrested Keelah. Kept her rooted to the spot.

“My sister’s name was Caroline,” Charon continued. “You remind me of her.” His eyes lowered. Reopened. Sharp. “She was a singer. A dancer. Up and coming. She had limited success on Broadway. But did well with smaller companies.” He smiled. The first time Keelah had ever seen it. “Some of her billboards are still up. You can see her. You know that billboard outside the Moonbeam Theater? The woman holding the lasso?”

Keelah nodded. She did know. The faded visage of a red-headed starlet. A forty foot cardboard face. Cracked and tearing.

“She was going to be big time. Everybody knew it. She had the talent and looks. And she was so
charming.” Another muted smile. Affection. “I was her brat brother always underfoot. Keeping the autograph hounds away. She got me a job with her security. I got paid to follow her around. Keep her safe. Sort of like what I do for you.” His eyes glinted. Morose. “We were together when the bombs dropped. All of a sudden. Across the sky. I couldn’t protect her from that. The smoke and radiation. People dropping like flies. So many bodies and crying children.”

Charon had lived through it all. Had seen hell begin on earth. Two hundred years of living in the wasteland and the mercenary hadn’t gone feral. Hadn’t gone insane.

“The radiation was even worse back then. Felt like being on fire at all times. Flames licking your insides. Out.” He gestured at his body; his mutated face. “It doesn’t happen all at once. The radiation sickness. Your hair goes first. A strand at a time. Then the next day your voice is different than you remember. Your skin starts to peel. . . Caroline couldn’t handle it. She’d spent her entire life being beautiful. And being celebrated for that beauty. And then all of a sudden people were running away from her. Scared of her. Calling her a monster. Ugly.” His eyes narrowed. Remembered pain. “Her hair was so red. I’ll never forget it. Then she woke up one day and it was all over her pillow…” A grimace. “She was special. A natural performer. And when she smiled…” He shook his head. The newly released emotion choking him. “She was still beautiful, she just couldn’t see it…No one could.”

He cleared his throat. “We were living in this abandoned house by the sea. I thought it’d be good for her, ‘cause she always liked the water. And we were the only people for miles. No one around to look at her. Point. Just me and Caroline for two years in our shack. I thought she was happy. Then one day she didn’t come back from her morning walk. I followed her tracks to the water’s edge. She’d taken off her shoes. Had them sitting there in the sand. So neat. As if she planned to return for them. But of course she didn’t.”

And Keelah knew that Charon would have cried if he remembered how. But it had been so long since the man exhibited emotion. And the pain had aged with him. Had fossilized.

Still he stared at Keelah with shimmering eyes. “My sister didn’t give me the opportunity to talk her out of it. I’m not sure I could have, but I would have tried.”

Keelah stared back at him. Her eyes deep and wide. Fathomless pools of brown. Charon wanted something from her. Something that Keelah didn’t think she could provide. He wanted permanence. He wanted interdependence. He wanted her to live.

“I’m tired Charon.”

Three words. A simple statement. But weighted with so much fatigue and hopelessness that Charon’s mouth quivered. His hands twitched toward Keelah.

“I’ll help you,” he promised.

He’d be guard. He’d be friend. Employee. Whatever Keelah needed. Whatever it took to help the troubled woman survive another day.

Keelah exploded the cavern. Killing all of the radscorpions; subsuming the corpses inside: insect and human alike.

But she let Charon pull her out of the den first. Didn’t activate the charges until they were a safe distance away.
Charon reclaimed Keelah’s crutch. Watched as she balanced her weight against the flimsy wood. Then he took her other side. Used his shoulder as support. Helped her walk towards Megaton.

And when Keelah said: “Tell me more about your sister. Happy memories,” Charon obliged.

Talking for a longer period of time than he’d ever had before.

And it was good for both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Hints of Nikki Wade/Helen Stewart (BBC Bad Girls) in this chapter. And if you have no idea who Nikki Wade and Helen Stewart are, remedy that immediately! Easily the most electric F/F love story I've ever seen on television.

Purposeful juxtaposition of Keelah's interaction with Amata and Charon.
Chapter Summary

The owner of the Pip-Boy revealed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 37 – Farewell to a Princess

Keelah spent another week in Megaton recovering from her injuries. The wound to her stomach eventually scabbed over; left behind an uneven tangle of skin that would never completely heal or fade. Keelah could walk now, without the crutch, and she’d resumed most physical activities. But the limp remained. Would probably linger indefinitely. And it took Keelah much longer now to do even the most basic things. Like walk up the stairs and down; move across a room; stretch her arms.

The wasteland had taken a toll on the woman’s body like it did most its inhabitants. Her mind and spirit were similarly damaged.

She didn’t discuss with Charon what had transpired in the radscorpion lair. The mistake she almost made. Setting off a bomb; staying behind to experience it.

Keelah moved on from it.

She hung Susie’s recon helmet on a post in her bedroom. Stared at it each night before bed. Quietly despaired before falling into sleep.

Keelah scaled back her wasteland duties. Jettisoned all of her work except the supply runs to Arefu and Rivet City. She continued to invest in the merchant caravans.

It was just enough work to keep her doldrums away; to keep her mind off Vault 101 and Amata.

But not nearly enough.

It was as she was making a return trip from Canterbury Commons that Keelah remembered the Springvale store. It had been six weeks since the radscorpion attack and Keelah hadn’t returned to the area. Hadn’t checked in with Silver.

Keelah and Susie had dropped electronics and caps during the melee with the radscorpions. They’d lost over half their supplies. Left computer chips and caps in the sand. Silver was probably wondering what had happened to her business partners. Perhaps even assumed that they were dead.

“Let’s make a quick stop,” Keelah directed to Charon. Crisscrossing across the parking lot of the Super Duper Mart so that they could make it to Springvale more quickly; avoid any roving bands of raiders.

Charon nodded his assent as he trailed behind Keelah. He kicked disinterestedly at the debris that
blew across his path as he cast an occasional glance at Keelah. Deliberating.

Keelah had been antsy as of late. Silent and glum. Fiddling endlessly with that bracelet on her wrist. Poking at her Pip-Boy as if she were composing a message of some sort.

Charon knew what was aggravating his friend. Keelah had received an emergency broadcast several days ago. A message from Vault 101 that had caught her by surprise. Made her face go white.

Amata’s voice cackling across the air waves:

*If you're able to hear this message, please come back to the vault. I need to speak to you. Explain some things... I can't say much over this transmission, but it's imperative that you return as quickly as you can. I changed the vault password back to your mother's name. I'll wait for you as long as I can. I...I want to work things out between us. So, please, come home.*

Keelah and Charon had been headed towards Arefu when the emergency broadcast pinged on Keelah's Pip-Boy. They were a hundred yards away from Vault 101. Close enough that they could see the outcrop of rock that hid the vault's entrance.

Keelah had played the message three times; her eyes shuttered; her fingers trembling against the device’s interface.

Charon had expected his friend to turn towards her old home, and he’d walked on ahead in the direction of the vault.

But Keelah had ignored the message. She’d played it a fourth time, her mouth stretched into a thin line as she memorized Amata’s words. Then the wastelander had switched the transmission off; changed the station to GNR. Began to hum along to some peppy prewar song.

Charon had been stunned by Keelah’s nonchalance. He had tried to find some answer in the woman’s eyes. Had tilted his head. *Don’t you want to go back?*

But Keelah had turned away from him. Continued towards Arefu.

And the music played on. A discordant clash of bass and violins. A sound too violent to be music. Too loud.

And Vault 101 got smaller in the distance. Forgotten.

... And now here they were, nearly a week later; moving towards Springvale. Vault 101 just a stone’s throw away.

“Did you want to stop by the vault?” Charon asked quietly.

A *week* since Amata's impassioned message.

But Keelah shook her head. “I need to go to Springvale. Let Silver know what happened.”

Keelah was avoiding. Charon knew that. He also knew that Keelah had saved Amata’s message. The wastelander played it every evening. Again and again, right before bed, as if she were committing Amata’s voice to her memory.

It reminded Charon of those long nights when Keelah would listen to her father’s holotapes one after another as she sipped stale beer. Keelah kept company with a dead man for more than a year. Now
she was doing the same thing with Amata.

But Amata was alive. And waiting. Charon couldn't understand why Keelah didn’t return to her.

...  

Keelah knocked on the door of the small ranch house. Four knocks total. One short. Three long.

She expected Silver to answer the door with revolver in hand like she usually did. Instead the silver-haired woman nearly sprang at Keelah when the door opened. Silver made some awkward motion towards Keelah that could have been an aborted hug or a slap.

A flutter of hands near Keelah’s face. Frenzied. Then Silver dragged her nails across Keelah’s chest plate. “Where the hell have you been?!” Silver demanded. “I thought you were dead.”

Giddiness. That was the emotion that was fueling Silver’s odd behavior. Giddiness and anxiety.

“I nearly was dead,” Keelah responded. Her eyes wide with surprise as Silver squirmed a finger beneath her chest plate. The cold pad of Silver’s index finger measuring the pulse at Keelah’s throat.

Keelah goggled. Was this Silver’s version of a hug?

“We got attacked by radscorpions,” Keelah told her. Pulling back a bit from Silver’s grasp. “Things went to hell.”

Silver peered around Keelah’s shoulder. Eyes searching the city’s thoroughfares. “Get in here quick before someone sees.”

And Silver removed her hand from Keelah’s armor; tugged the wastelander inside the small house. Silver glared at Charon distrustfully before waving him in too. Then the peculiar woman slammed closed the door and secured it with her series of complicated locks.

“Sorry that it’s taken me so long to get back to you,” Keelah said. “But I was laid up for a while, injured. The store’s done for anyway. I left the vault. And Susie—”

But Silver silenced Keelah with a manic gesture. “Close it for a second, will you? I got something to show you.”

Silver stomped off to one of her back rooms without any further explanation. Keelah followed behind, curious. Charon trailing her. Stoic as always.

They had to step over vault supplies—the electronics they’d never gotten around to selling; dented boxes that had been stacked haphazardly. So many empty liquor bottles and Jet casings scattered about that Keelah could barely see the floor.

The clutter evidenced how little housekeeping Silver did. And how profound the woman’s chem addiction was.

Keelah and Charon stepped into a small bedroom. Lit only be a crack in a venetian blind; a sliver of sunshine filtering through.

Silver waved Keelah over to a dusty mattress. To a rumpled figure swaddled in a thin blanket.

“What the—?” Keelah murmured. Eyes widening at the straw-colored hair; the combat armor, frayed but recognizable. “Susie!”
And Keelah was kneeling on the floor in seconds. Her ailing leg and hip be damned.

Susie!

But the blonde was so still and ashen. Keelah put a hand out, trembling. Afraid that what she was staring at was a corpse.

Susie’s eyes flickered open the moment Keelah touched her; soft fingers tracing a line down the pallid cheek.

“Susie,” Keelah murmured. Her voice whisper-soft; her eyes watering.

“Keelah.”

And both women burst into tears. Cried out at the same time: “I thought you were dead.”

Then Keelah was hugging Susie, and Susie was hugging her back. Clumsily and with a great deal of groaning because apparently Susie’s left arm was broken or at least not working correctly.

And when Keelah pulled back she could see more injuries. An ugly slash across Susie’s throat. Still red and healing. And the blonde’s legs were unnaturally still. Limp and unmoving even though the blonde practically vibrated with energy.

“What happened Suze?” Keelah asked her. “How’d you get away from the radscorpions?”

Susie managed a small smile. “I used those frag grenades like you recommended. Those creepy crawlies ambushed me. Started to drag me to their lair. But I eased a grenade into their shells. Blew them sky high. But the explosion threw me too. For a second I thought I was flying.” And the woman actually laughed. Scratchy and weak. “I don’t know how many bones there are in the human body, but I’m pretty sure I broke all of them.”

Keelah passed her hands over Susie’s body. Touching and kneading. Gauging the extent of the damage. The left arm was definitely broken. The right leg too.


Keelah stopped her ministrations. Pressed gentler fingers against the slash across Susie’s throat.

Keelah was overcome with emotion. “Your Pip-Boy said you were dead.”

“My Pip-Boy’s been saying I was dead for six months. You were supposed to fix it, remember? Jerk.”

Susie’s laughter was wobbly—paper thin because of her extensive injuries—but it was arguably the most beautiful thing Keelah had ever heard. The wastelander leaned forward. Tried to better capture the pleasant sound; imprint it in her memory.

It was surreal. Finding Susie here like this. Alive. Alive! Keelah’s hands spasmed against Susie’s skin. Every part of the wastelander rejoicing at this unexpected development.

“There was so much blood Suze. And your recon mask was torn to bits. Your parents had a memorial service and everything…”

“I felt dead.” Susie’s hand came up. Covered Keelah’s. Two hands now circling the blonde’s throat. “I would have choked to death on the blood had not Silver found me.”
Keelah stared in shock at the silver-haired recluse who was still standing in the doorway; stock still and quiet.

“You went out to get Susie?” Keelah asked with some surprise.

Silver hadn’t stepped a foot outside her house in years. The woman was a hermit. As afraid of the outside as any lifelong vaulter.

Silver flushed. Ran a hand through her wispy tresses. “I heard all that gunfire and shouting. At first I thought it was raiders passing through. Or Moriarty and his men, finally tracking me down. But when the three of you never came back to drop off the supplies….”

Silver coughed. The gravely hacking of a chem addict. “I found your friend in a ravine. She was all tore up. More blood than anything really. I looked for you too. And Sammy. When I didn’t find you, I figured those scorpions had eaten the two of you up.”

Silver looked distressed at the thought. Then she shrugged. Tried to make light of her heroism. “I drug Susie back here. Patched her up as best I could. She’s doing better after a month of rest, but I’m all out of Stimpacks. Don’t have much food left either. It’s a good thing you showed up today. I’m not sure she woulda made it through the night.”

“Thank you Silver,” Keelah breathed. ‘Cause she knew how hard it must have been for the woman. Venturing out into the wasteland when she was so terrified of running into Moriarty.

And Silver had spent more than a month nursing Susie back to health.

“I owe you big time,” Keelah stressed.

Silver coughed again. This round of hacking intentional so that the woman could excuse herself. Get away from Keelah’s bright eyes; Susie’s crooked smile.

Keelah turned her attention back to Susie. “We have to get you back to the vault Susie Q. Get your leg and arm set before you suffer permanent damage.”

Susie was staring up at Keelah. Her blue eyes focused and serene. “I like your hair like that,” she told Keelah.

“Like what?”

“Pulled back where I can see your face.”

“You’re feverish.” And Keelah put a hand against Susie’s forehead; checked the woman’s temperature. The blonde was warm. Too warm. And her lips were blue.

“And thank God you’re not wearing those goggles,” Susie complained. “You look like a centipede when you wear those things. I ever tell you that?”

“No.”

“Well you do. Like a fashion conscious centipede.”

Keelah twisted around; eyes tracking the room for items she could use as an emergency stretcher. They’d have to carry Susie back to the vault since one of the woman’s legs was broken. And they’d have to move slowly so as not to jostle Susie; cause any more damage to the blonde’s body.

“Charon, will you grab that board over there? See if you can’t jury rig some handles on it?”
Charon went to work on the stretcher while Keelah fumbled in her supply pack for Med-X. Susie would have to be properly medicated in order to survive this transport.

Susie passed a thumb over Keelah’s cheek. Made a soft circle against flesh. Again and again. “Your skin’s so smooth,” Susie murmured. “You been using moisturizer?”

Keelah’s head snapped up from her task. The wastelander raised an eyebrow at her affectionate friend. “What gives Susie? Why all the sweet talk and PDA?”

Susie laughed again. That mesmerizing contralto. “I don’t know… It’s just…the last time I saw you, you had a hole in your stomach. And you weren’t breathing.”

There was a fresh sheen to Susie’s eyes. The blonde’s trademark joviality breaking up, leaving behind sadness. Solemnity.

For six weeks both of them had thought the other was dead.

Keelah’s mouth twisted in sympathy. She knew what Susie was really saying. “I love you too Suze.”

And Keelah pressed a kiss to her friend’s cheek. Lent Susie some of her warmth. Both women’s eyelids heavy with tears.

Keelah exclaimed loudly not even a second later. “You pinched me!” she accused Susie.

And the wastelander clasped her arm to her chest protectively. Rubbed moodily at the puckered groove on her forearm as she glared daggers at her friend.

Susie grinned. “I just wanted to make sure you were really here, is all. That I wasn’t dreaming.”

“That’s good and all, but aren’t you supposed to pinch yourself?”

. . .

Susie was strapped down to the emergency stretcher. And blissfully drowsy after a couple of doses of Med-X.

The convoy should make it to the vault in less than an hour. Even more quickly if they didn’t encounter any raiders or savage animals.

There was only one problem. Silver refused to accompany them.

Keelah released her hold on the stretcher. Gestured for Charon to put his end down. Keelah walked over to Silver. Tried to reason with the uncooperative woman.

“Come on Silver. It’s going to take all three of us to make it to the vault safely. Two of us have to carry Susie and the third person needs to cover our backs. That’s a wide stretch of desert we have to cross.”

“I know and that’s exactly why I’m not going.” Silver clenched the side panel of her front door. Clearly eager for her guests to leave her house so that she could shut herself in again. “I already stuck my neck out once for your friend. You can’t seriously expect me to go back outside.”

“Silver… Moriarty’s not hiding behind some bush waiting to pounce on you. He thinks you’re dead.”

“Good. And I want to stay dead to him. I walk out in that wasteland and I’m taking a chance that
someone sees me. That bastard has eyes everywhere.”

Keelah huffed beneath her breath. She didn’t look forward to going to the vault herself, but Susie needed medical treatment and fast. And she and Charon would be an easy target moving so slowly across the wasteland with a stretcher between them; their guns strapped to their backs and out of reach.

“Please?” Keelah asked again. Her eyes iridescent and wide. “Please?”

Silver shuffled from side to side. Wavering. ‘Keelah was the closest thing to a friend the reclusive woman had. The only face she saw on the regular. It was hard for Silver to say no to her.

Plus, the silver-haired woman had developed an affection for Susie; like most people were wont to do.

“Fine,” Silver finally huffed. “But I’m only walking as far as the vault. Once we make it there, I’m hightailing it back to Springvale.”

“You’re the best Silver,” Keelah gushed. Squeezing the woman’s shoulder happily.

And Silver did that weird thing again with her hand. Where she scrabbled her fingers over Keelah’s armor.

Keelah pressed her rifle into the woman’s hands. “This’ll provide a bit more punch than that revolver.”

Then the three of them were walking out into the sunlight. Down the porch steps of the ranch house and through the deserted streets of Springvale.

Silver was scared. Eyes flitting about. Picturing a bandit behind every vehicle, every structure. But the woman kept the rifle pointed forward—reasonably steady—and she marched a straight line towards Vault 101, following Keelah’s directions.

Susie breathed evenly between them. Her soft snoring interrupted by the occasional cough; the whimper of a nightmare.

Keelah stopped every few minutes; put a hand out. Two fingers against skin as she checked her friend’s pulse.

Susie was still breathing. Eyes closed. Lips blue. But she was breathing.

.

They stopped outside the vault’s wooden outer door; Charon fumbling with the door handle as he shifted the stretcher to his hip.

Silver had never seen a vault before. The woman stared at the concealed structure; murmuring beneath her breath. “So these things are real. Moriarty was always prattling on about Vault-Tec and their secret vaults. Said these things were all over the wasteland and ripe for the picking. But he never knew where to look. The moron. There was one in his backyard the entire time.”

Keelah cast a worried glance at Silver as she adjusted her grip on the stretcher. “It goes without saying Silver, that I need you to keep this location secret.”

Silver responded with a shrug. “Who am I going to tell?” And the reclusive woman stared across the
desert at the wire-tipped buildings of Megaton. Her old home; right out of view. “This is the closest I’ve been to Nova in five years,” she whispered.

And the woman bit into her bottom lip, ferociously, and searched her pockets for the syringe of Jet she’d absentmindedly left at home.

Keelah paused in the entryway. Stared at Silver with some concern. “Why don’t you come inside and take a breather? Enjoy a hot meal for a change?”

But Silver shook her head. “I gotta get back before dark. Gotta get my place locked up. Have to hide.”

She was close to hysterical already, and Keelah shook her head when the woman tried to return her assault rifle. “Keep it,” Keelah told her. “As a thanks for your kindness to Susie.”

Silver smiled. Grateful. “So no more store, huh?” She asked Keelah. As she turned towards the downslope of rock; preparing to take her exit.

“No. We’re officially out of business.”

Keelah stared down at her slumbering friend. At the jagged slash across Susie’s pale throat that had replaced the bite mark from months before.

“I’ll keep hold of your merchandise,” Silver responded. “Just in case you change your mind.”

And Silver tiptoed down the rugged path. Disappeared behind a row of cars that hadn’t moved in more than two hundred years.

Keelah followed Charon through the wooden door. Boomeranging—once again—back to Vault 101.

. . .

Red gasped when Keelah and Charon stumbled into the clinic. “My goodness! Susie!” And the doctor rushed to Susie’s side. “She’s alive,” Red exclaimed breathlessly.

“Just barely.”

And Keelah and Charon gently lifted Susie onto the examination table.

Keelah began to strip off the tattered armor. Red began to prepare her medical equipment. And Charon waited by the door. A sentry. A calming presence.

“Her parents will be so relieved,” Red told Keelah. As she used scissors to cut through Susie’s undershirt. “They’ve been devastated since the memorial. And her mother’s taken sick.”

With Susie’s underclothes and armor removed, they could see the assortment of gashes to the blonde’s body. Some of them still bloody even after all this time. And more than a few of the cuts infected.

“Shit!” Red exclaimed. Using a towel to wipe away green and gray ooze. “She’s not out of the woods yet.”

And she shouted instructions to Keelah. Even waved Charon over to hold together bits of skin while she sewed, disinfected.
Keelah’s eyes kept drifting to the scar across Susie’s neck. So wide and jagged. Like a second smile.

“She’ll pull through, won’t she?” Keelah couldn’t help but ask the doctor.

But Red didn’t answer. The physician focused on cutting; sewing.

Red was someone who dealt in facts not conjecture. And she wouldn’t guarantee Susie’s survival. Not even for Keelah.

“Get me a Stimpack,” she told Keelah instead.

And Red amended it to *two* Stimpacks when Susie’s eyes rolled into the back of her head and the blonde began to shake wildly.

“Hurry!” Red shouted. "She’s seizing!"

... 

Two hours.

It took them two hours to stabilize Susie.

They used so much Med-X and Stimpacks that Red had to find an alternate vein to pump the medicine through.

Susie looked a wreck. Stringy hair covering her face. Dozens of bruises across her body; scabbed over skin and neat lines of thread; sutures.

But she was breathing normally (Thank god) and her color had returned. By this time, Susie’s parents had heard of her arrival. And her friends, Mr. and Mrs. Mack huddled beside the exam table. Allen Mack clenching his hands tightly. Unclenching. Gloria Mack sobbing loudly; looking no better than her sickly daughter with her bloodshot eyes and sunken cheeks.

Keelah stood a respectable distance away with the other onlookers (Freddie and Christine Kendall. Pepper Gomez. A handful of wide-eyed Lamp/Towners).

“Susie’s a tough one,” Freddie said out loud. His fourth time saying it. The lanky 101er wanted to convince the entire room as well as himself that Susie would be alright.

Pepper patted her son on his back—a rare display of affection from the stern cook—before heading for the exit. Pepper murmured something about making tea for the family; then she left the clinic.

Keelah made her way to Red’s side. The vault doctor was cleaning her hands at her tiny sink. Washing away blood and mucus. Turning the basin pink with the viscous fluids.

Red noticed the strain on Keelah’s face. Smiled encouragingly at her friend. “The worst is over,” the doctor assured Keelah. “Susie’s going to need a crutch and an arm brace and a whole hell of a lot of rest, but there’s no major damage to her body. Just bones that need to heal. And more than a few scars.”

*A jumble of welts against sallow skin. A U-shaped abrasion on Susie’s neck that would never diminish in color.*

Keelah released a heavy breath. “Charon headed over to the ranger compound to get Donovan. I think Susie would want him to be here.”
Red nodded. Reached into a locker for a fresh lab coat.

“Someone should let Amata know that Susie is back.” Keelah said. “I’m surprised she hasn’t come down already.”

Red made a face. “Um… Keelah…”

“Should I go up? I know Amata's upset with me. For sneaking out of the vault like I did—”

“We were all upset. That was a poor decision on your part. And incredibly selfish.”

Keelah jerked at the criticism. Flushed under Red’s intense gaze.

And for a moment, Red looked annoyed with Keelah. Livid. But then the doctor’s face smoothed out. Became sympathetic. “But that doesn’t matter anymore. There’s something you should know…”

Herman Gomez strode into the medical clinic. Made a beeline towards the Macks, Susie. The security guard wasn’t dressed in his usual guard attire: the heavy armor, the plastic helmet and visor. He was wearing a vault uniform. Neatly pressed. And there was an officer’s button pressed into his lapel.

“Keelah…” Red tried to get Keelah’s attention. Tried to tug the wastelander into the back office. “I need to talk to you. Real quick…”

But Keelah was too focused on the interaction between Officer Gomez and Susie’s parents. The Macks were giving Officer Gomez an update on Susie but, for some reason, Allen Mack kept addressing Officer Gomez as “Overseer.”

Keelah shook her head, confused. Took a step forward. I must have misheard.

But there it was again: Overseer Gomez.

"Why is he calling Officer Mack Overseer?” Keelah asked. Confused and scared in equal measure.

Red grabbed Keelah’s elbow. Spun the wastelander around until they were face to face.

“That’s what I was trying to tell you.” Red exhaled. Found it hard to look Keelah in the eyes. "Amata left the vault.”

A roaring sound in Keelah's head. “No…”

But Red nodded. Somberly. “About a week ago. I tried to talk her out of it. We all did. Ms. Palmer threw a fit. But Amata wouldn’t be deterred. She made Officer Gomez interim Overseer. Then she packed a bag and left.”

“No,” Keelah said again. The sound in her head piercing now. Ear-splitting and tearing her to shreds.

And Red caught the wastelander before she could fall. Guided Keelah to a chair and fanned her face. Talked low and slowly to get Keelah’s attention.

“Amata waited for you. After she sent that broadcast. She waited an entire week by the vault door thinking you would return.”

Hadin’t Keelah heard that before? Amata waiting for her by the vault door. Amata waiting for her… Amata waiting… Amata…
The repetition floored Keelah. The wastelander trembled. Leaned forward until her forehead touched her knees. “Amata wouldn’t leave the vault. She was terrified of the wasteland. She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t…”

“She did. I don’t why she left. I asked and she wouldn’t tell me. I just figured she went out looking for you.” And for a moment Red looked reproachful. She levied a sharp look on Keelah. Accusing. But then the doctor blinked it away. “Amata told me to give this to you. If you ever came back.”

And Red removed a folded piece of paper from the crease in her vault jumpsuit. Handed the letter over. Her face tight with sadness and concern.

Keelah could only clutch the paper with tremoring hands. She couldn’t read Amata’s letter. Not yet. She couldn’t even wrap her mind around this…that Amata would leave the vault.

“She didn’t say anything else?” Keelah asked Red. “Didn’t say where she was going?”

“No. But the talked to her father before she left. And she was upset afterwards. I think they argued.”

Where would Amata go?

Keelah wracked her brain.

Amata had no combat experience. Had never even held a gun for longer than five minutes. And she’d been out into the wasteland only twice. And never on her own.

I should have come back! Keelah raged at herself. The moment I got her emergency broadcast, I should have returned like she asked.

And Keelah fretfully recalled a line from Amata’s transmission:

I’ll wait for you as long as I can.

Amata had already decided to leave the vault when she sent the emergency message. But she’d wanted to wait for Keelah to return first.

I want us to work things out.

Keelah’s fingernails dug into her palms. She banged her head against her knees. She was so stupid! She’d ignored Amata. For an entire week. Left her girlfriend in suspense.

And Amata had grown tired of waiting for her. Had assumed Keelah wouldn’t return, and she’d stepped out into the wasteland on her own.

“I have to find her.” Keelah declared. Jumping to her feet. Her mind already overcome with sickening thoughts. Raider and slavers. Deathclaws and Yao Guis.

Amata didn’t own sturdy armor. Didn’t even know how to fire a gun.

Why would she go outside? Keelah thought miserably. Pacing back and forth across the metal flooring. What possible reason could she have to leave the safety of the vault?

Did Amata go to Megaton to track down Keelah?

But surely I would have run into her on my way out of town.

It didn’t make any sense. And Keelah was close to panic.
Then she remembered. “Alphonse.”

She growled it.

Amata’s father would know. He was one of the last people to speak to Amata. And the oily politician always had his hands in things; stirring the pot. Starting shit.

Keelah’s hands clenched around Amata’s letter. She was afraid to open the missive. To read Amata’s perfect handwriting. A farewell.

Keelah choked back a sob.

What a role reversal it was. Keelah: back home, inside the vault.

Amata in the wasteland.

The former Overseer, Alphonse, was reclining in a chair reading a book. His reading glasses perched on his nose almost like a decoration. Perfect and neat like a window dressing.

Everything about Alphonse Almodovar was composed. Premeditated. His well-groomed mustache; his sharply creased uniform; the tilt of his eyes. His appearance and actions were painstakingly deliberate. Rehearsed.

So when Keelah burst into his living quarters, loudly and violently; her hand slamming against the sliding door and fracturing glass, Alphonse only smiled. One gray eyebrow lifted in amusement. It was as if the lifelong politician had been expecting Keelah’s arrival.

Keelah forewent the pleasantries. “Where’s Amata?” she snarled. Stomping towards Alphonse until she was towering over him. Her face stretched sharply, resembling a mask.

Alphonse turned down the page of his book, creating a bookmark. The man smiled civilly at Keelah before placing his novel on the bedside table. Crossing his legs demurely.

“So you’ve decided to grace us with your presence again, hmmm?” And Alphonse steepled his fingers beneath his chin as if he were deep in thought. “I must say, it’s a sad day when a vault door becomes a turnstile.”

“Tell me where Amata is.”

Keelah’s eyes flashed dangerously. Her hands curling into fists at her sides. If this oily bastard had something to do with Amata leaving the vault, god help him...

Alphonse was unfazed by Keelah’s aggressive posture. The politician’s lips curled into a smile. “Still solving disputes with your fists, I see.”

Keelah banged her hand down on the table. So hard that Alphonse’s book flew off the nightstand. Landed with a loud crash against the metal floor.

“Don’t fuck around with me,” Keelah warned. “I’ve been in a bad mood for months. And I won’t hesitate to take it out on you.”

“You’ve always been a violent one,” Alphonse rejoined. “I blame it on inferior breeding.”

Keelah punched him. So hard in the nose that blood spurted from Alphonse’s nostrils like a leaky
faucet. Stained the pristine officer uniform. Red against blue. A ghastly purple.

Alphonse howled with rage. Shot to his feet and threw a hand towards Keelah. Attempting to choke her.

But Keelah knocked his hand away. Pushed against the man’s thin shoulders until she’d backed him into the wall. “I’ll kill you,” she threatened.

She’d had the opportunity to. Five years ago when she first escaped Vault 101. She could have attacked Overseer Almodovar with the baseball bat. Injured him like she did Stevie Mack. Or did worse. Pierced his heart with the jagged wood.

Keelah had spared Alphonse because he was Amata’s father (and because Keelah wasn’t a murderer. Not yet). But the wastelander had no such misgivings now. Amata was missing. And it stood to reason that this evil fucker had something to do with it! Keelah would hurt him if she had to.

She dug her elbow into Alphonse’s throat. Felt a perverse satisfaction when the man began to wheeze.

“Where’s Amata?” Keelah asked again. Applying a little more pressure. A move she’d learned from Charon. (Your entire body is a weapon. See? Charon had taught).

And Keelah could see. The red rim of Alphonse’s eyes as the air fleeced from his lungs. Warm pants against Keelah’s cheeks. Bits of spittle against the man’s bottom lip. Stuttering exhalations.

“Tell me,” Keelah hissed.

Alphonse gasped around the obstruction at his throat. His eyelids fluttering wildly. “She went outside,” he gasped. “She went outside to find her mother.”

... The admission was so unexpected that Keelah stumbled backwards. Released her hold on Alphonse. Damn near fainted.

“What did you say?” Keelah sputtered.


“But her mother is dead. She died when Amata was a little girl.”

“Well, yes... that’s what I told everyone.”

And Alphonse sank back into his chair. Calmly. Gingerly. As if he hadn’t just unveiled the most earth-shattering secret.

Alphonse removed a water bottle from a drawer in his desk. Took a delicate sip. Two. Worked a trembling hand over his bruised throat. Tried to regulate his breathing.

Keelah closed her eyes. Had to command her nerves to settle so that she wouldn’t keel over.

Alphonse smirked at her disquiet.Produced a handkerchief from his pockets and blotted at his bloody nose.

“Perhaps I should explain before you stoop to your base instincts and attack me again.” And
Alphonse sniffled into the white cloth. Captured as much blood as he could before folding the kerchief back into his pocket. “It seems I wasn’t completely thorough when I wiped my computer terminal at the end of my tenure as Overseer. A week or so ago, Amata stumbled upon some of my old journals. Files I kept on her mother and her grandfather, the old Overseer. Elijah.”

Keelah had suspected it all along. She shook her head disapprovingly. “You killed Overseer Elijah, didn’t you?”

Alphonse’s eyes narrowed. “No. It’s like I told you before. The old man went out into the wasteland looking for Anne Palmer and the scouting party. He never came back. I had nothing to do with his death.”

“But Amata’s mother? What did you do to her?”

“Nothing. What happened to my wife…” And he waved his hand dismissively. Contemptuously. “It was of her own doing.”

“And Keelah still couldn’t believe it. Even as Alphonse smiled. His eyes cold and hard. An indulgent smirk on his face.

“Marian. That was my wife’s name. Marian. She was a fearless woman. It was what attracted me to her in the first place. But too often that fearlessness became impetuousness. She was willful. She got it from her father really. Elijah filled Marian’s head with frivolities. These outlandish notions of raising a family outside. Having a garden. Seeing the ocean. I thought Anne’s demise would rid them of those fancies once and for all. Get them to focus on the things that were happening inside the vault. But the Overseer couldn’t let it go. He left the vault. Wanted to find the scouts. Wanted to prove that vaulters could survive the wasteland. He was an old fool. Didn’t even take a guard with him. He never made it back.”

Alphonse studied his fingernails. Checked to see if they required filing. “When Elijah didn’t return after some months, Marian demanded that I send a team out to find him. Of course I refused. We’d already lost Anne Palmer and the scouts. Elijah was gone. I wasn’t going to risk any more lives. I was the new Overseer, and I took my position seriously. I sealed the vault. And I forbade any mention of Anne Palmer and the scouting expedition. I expunged Overseer Elijah from the records.”

“Let me guess, Marian didn’t take too kindly to you leaving her father out in the wasteland.”

“No, she didn’t. She petitioned day and night that we reopen the vault and look for Elijah and the scouts. Anne had already been missing for 18 years. And Elijah hadn’t returned after six months. It was obvious that they were all dead. But Marian wouldn’t relent. She was popular. The charismatic sort. She got more than a few of the 101ers to side with her. Riled them up so that they threatened to storm the vault door. My own wife inciting insurrection!”

And Alphonse wasn’t so composed anymore. His body shook with a long festering rage. His eyes gleaming with malice.

“I told her…I told them all… they could leave the vault. I wouldn’t stop them. But they wouldn’t get back in. I would seal the door behind them. Change the password. As Overseer, I couldn’t allow the taint of the wasteland to get in here.” He pointed a finger at Keelah. Long and bony and hostile. Like the barrel of a gun. “You can leave but you can never come back. I told them that.”

His Adam’s apple moved up and down as he ranted. Momentarily distracting Keelah.
“The other 101ers changed their minds then. Too afraid of the radiation and mutants. Worried that dragons roamed the sky. Without her supporters, Marian quieted down. Seemed to accept the fact that her father was dead. I was glad that she’d come to her senses. And chosen her family over… misguided sentimentality.” Keelah scowled at the word choice. At the insinuation that searching for one’s parent was emotional excess.

Alphonse folded his arm across his stomach. Sat back in his chair. “I relaxed my guard around Marian. I shouldn’t have.”

Alphonse paused his reminiscence, but it didn’t matter. Keelah already knew how this story ended. It had already become clear to her: who had owned the outdated Pip-Boy that was weighing down her supply pack.

Amata’s mother.

It’s hard to believe that soon I will be outside of Vault 101. Outdoors in the old world. I hope there are no monsters, and that the helmet I got from the med clinic will be sturdy enough to withstand the radiation. I am afraid, but I’ve learned that there are things more powerful than fear. Like love. And family. I take this next step for my sweet baby. A.

Keelah had been misreading the Pip-Boy notes all along. The ‘A’ at the end of the memo was an initial. But it wasn’t the initial of the note writer. The ‘A’ signified a child’s name: Amata.

My sweet baby A.

Keelah felt sick. Had to hunch over. Put her hand on her knees. Dear god.

Alphonse continued his spiel; recounting his final hours with Amata’s mother.

“Marian snuck out of the vault. Hacked the terminal and left in the dead of night. I think she was heading to that town that was a little ways away from here. The one that Anne and the scouts visited during their expedition.”

“Megaton.”

“Yes, Megaton. Marian must have thought her father was there. I think she figured she’d collect Elijah and return with him to the vault.” He snorted. “But I told her what I would do. When I realized that she’d left, I changed the vault password. I made it so that she could never get back in.”

And Alphonse’s mustache vibrated above his lip like a taut snake. A curling line of hair. Tiny and neat. Like him.

Marian’s second note. A more frantic tone as the woman withered outside the vault door:

I can’t believe he locked the vault door. I survived the trip to Megaton and made it back home only to discover that the password had been changed. I intend to wait by this door in hope that he’ll change his mind and let me back in. I’ll wait forever if I have to. I simply cannot be separated from my precious baby A.

Marian hadn’t found her father in Megaton. She hadn't found him at all. She’d rushed back to the vault (too late!) only to discover that she’d been locked out. Forever.

Keelah felt a sudden dampness in her eyes. Had to blink back tears. “She was outside the door, you know that right?”
“I warned her what would happen, didn’t I?”

“She was your wife!”

“She was tainted.”

“She wasn’t! And what does it matter if she’d been in the wasteland for an hour? Or a day? You let me and my father into the vault.”

Alphonse guffawed. “No, I didn’t. Elijah was Overseer when your father requested entrance into 101. He’s the one who let the two of you in here. I voted to leave you and your good-for-nothing father on the stoop.”


“The older vaulters agreed to keep silent about Overseer Elijah and the scouts. As for Marian…no one knew she left the vault. I told everyone that she’d fallen ill and died in her sleep. I fired up the incinerator. Shed a few tears…” He waved his hand again.

He was a bastard. A sick and twisted bastard. And Keelah suddenly wished that she hadn’t given Silver her assault rifle.

“You lied to Amata for more than twenty years. You took her mother away from her!”

“No! Marian removed herself. She chose the wasteland over her daughter. Over her family.”

“She was looking for her family. Her father.”

“And I’m sure you can empathize, right? Considering how deeply ingrained your abandonment issues are.”

That was it. Keelah was going to shoot him. The wastelander reached for her sidearm.

But Alphonse interrupted her. “You do realize that it’s your fault Amata left the vault?”

Keelah fumbled the weapon. “You said Amata went out to find her mother.”

“And that much is true. Amata found the journals about her mother and confronted me about it. And she was interested in following her mother’s footsteps. Seeing if she could track her down. But Amata was only going to leave the vault after she’d discussed the issue with you.” He smiled evilly. “I think she wanted you to accompany her. Since you’d had so much success finding your father. It’s kind of poetic isn’t it?” And he chuckled. So very amused by it all. ”Oh, but then you got injured and Amata changed her mind about the whole thing. She decided that it would be best if the two of you stayed inside the vault. Where you’d be safe. I think she was afraid that she’d lose you to the wasteland like she’d lost her mother and grandfather.”

Keelah’s face fell at his words, and Alphonse smiled at her reaction. Triumphant. “She tried so hard to protect you. Assigning you all those guards. Waiting on you hand and foot. She came to me, did you know that? Asking me about password overrides. Ways she could secure the vault door. She was afraid you would hack the terminal and force your way out. And she was right. You abandoned her the first chance you got.”

Alphonse’s eyes twinkled. He was enjoying this—hurting Keelah. Highlighting how foolish and shortsighted the wastelander had been. “Amata thought you would come back for her. She sent you
that emergency broadcast. Waited by the door like a good little pup. But you never showed up…”

He shrugged. “She cried of course. Didn’t even hide it from me, which was surprising. She left after that. Went into the desert. I guess she figured that if she couldn’t have you, she’d find the other woman who’d abandoned her.”

Marian Almodovar.

Keelah swallowed down a lump in her throat. Damn near feverish with emotion. “Where did Amata go?” she asked hoarsely.

“I have no idea. She came to tell me goodbye and that was the extent of it.”

“You should have talked her out of it!”

“I tried. But I will admit that I haven’t had much success convincing Almodovar women to heed good advice.”

It didn’t seem to bother him enough. That Amata was in the wasteland. Alone. Then again, the evil fucker had expelled his own wife.


“Is this the part where we duel?”

“Something like that. Now move.”

Alphonse stood. Slowly. Brushing imaginary lint from his clothing as he stared Keelah down. “Amata will never forgive you if you hurt me,” he reminded her.

A muscle ticked in Keelah’s jaw and the young woman’s eyes gleamed. “I’m aware. And don’t worry. I’m not going to kill you.”

Alphonse smiled. Relieved and cocksure.

So it came as a surprise when Keelah struck him across the face with her pistol. Alphonse crumbled to the ground. Immediately lost consciousness.

. . .

Alphonse came to in stages. First there was taste. The metallic tang of blood filling his mouth.

His tongue wormed out. Massaged his bottom lip. The tender flesh was split. Sour with spittle and grime.

What he felt next was the pounding of his skull. Vicious and close. A jackhammer set to high.

He was lying on something hard. Gravelly. Alphonse barely managed to push himself to his elbows. Could see through ebbing sunlight that he was sprawled across a cement floor. Some small storage room with little in it besides him and a few empty boxes.

The smell of wet and dank was strong. As if the room had housed many before him; reeking bodies that had sweated, died.

Alphonse stumbled to his knees, his feet. Stared confusedly at the solid steel door across from him. Metal bars on the window, old and strong.
“Rise and shine,” he heard. Some woman outside the bars. A blonde. Tall and lean. Wearing a hideous excuse for armor.

“Where am I?” Alphonse croaked. Coughing on the blood. Reaching for a handkerchief that wasn’t there.

Sarah Lyons smiled. “You’re at Brotherhood of Steel headquarters. Our holding cell. I hope you’re comfy. You’re going to be here a long time.”

Alphonse’s eyes flashed, and he limped towards the tiny window. Peered out at the lieutenant. “I demand to be released at once!”

"No dice."

You can’t hold me here against my will."

“Who’s going to stop me?”

There was no law in the Capital Wasteland. No cavalry. No hope for rescue. Only violence and retribution. An eye for an eye. Tooth and bone.

Sarah pushed something through the metal bars. A sack of food. Bottled water. She let the items drop to the dirty floor. Curled her mouth at Alphonse distastefully.

“If you ask me, you got off easy,” Sarah told the apprehensive man. “Keelah told me what you did. If I were her, I’d have tied you to a post. Let the Deathclaws have you.”

Alphonse scowled. Pointed a finger at Sarah. “Now see here! You let me out of this cell right this instance or—”

“Oh what? No one’s coming to save you Almodovar. The way Keelah tells it, not a single vaultie even raised a fuss when she dragged your sorry carcass out of there.”

Alphonse blinked. Licked his lips nervously as he thought of all the vaulters he’d slighted during his long tenure as Overseer. The Brotherhood soldier was right. No one would come for him. Or even mourn his absence. The only person who would care even a little bit about his well-being was Amata. And she was gone.


“How long do you plan to keep me here?” he asked Sarah weakly.

“Well, let’s see… You locked a woman out of her home for twenty years, right? I think it’s only fair that you serve a similar sentence.”

“No…” And his hands clenched around the metal bars. “Please.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll make sure you’re comfortable. You’ll have food and water. Exercise. And if you’re really good, we may even give you a book or two. Maybe even a deck of cards. I hear Solitaire’s pretty fun.”

And Sarah turned away. Began to walk towards the Citadel’s A-Ring.

“You can’t do this to me!” Alphonse shouted. His hands pulling at the steel door as if he could claw his way out of the cell. “Where’s Keelah?! Get me Keelah! She can’t do this to me! I’m needed in
the vault! I can’t survive out here…”

And Alphonse continued to shout and bellow even though the noise of the courtyard drowned him out: the combat training; the rhythmic firing of assault rifles; the sound of hand meeting skin; loud grunts and roars.

Alphonse had been imprisoned in a military compound. He was surrounded by dozens of soldiers. All friends of Keelah.

There was no getting out.

. . .

Sarah found Keelah sitting on a cot in the common room; her head in her hands. The wastelander looked utterly dejected.

Sarah lingered in the doorway. Unsure of how to proceed. What to say. “He’s a piece of work that one. Almodovar.”

Keelah didn’t even look up. “Yes, he is.”

“How’d you even get him all this way by yourself?”

“I bought a Brahmin off a merchant. Strapped him to it.”

Keelah looked and sounded so listless that Sarah searched her mind for a proverb; some pick-me-up that would bolster the troubled woman.

She’d read something, somewhere, a long time ago, about courage during adversity. Mounting up on eagle’s wings. That was nice sounding enough. Might inspire Keelah.

Sarah bit her bottom lip. There was also that axiom about giving sorrow words and not bottling things up. Would that help? But Sarah, herself, was a fan of suppressing emotions. She didn’t want to give any advice that she wouldn't take herself. That would be hypocritical.

Or what about that prewar scripture her father was always repeating? How’d it go? *Thy rod and thy staff comfort me.*

Yeah. Keelah would appreciate words such as those. Keelah was a warrior. And rods and staffs were combat weapons. Right?

Sarah cleared her throat.

But by the time the Brotherhood soldier found the nerve (and vocabulary) to address Keelah, the wastelander was already speaking aloud.

“I don’t know where she is,” Keelah mumbled. Wiping at her face; at the tears that were collecting, falling in steady rivulets. “I don’t even know where to look.”

If Amata had traveled to Megaton, Keelah would have run into her. Would have passed her at the city gate.

Where had Amata gone?

Keelah buried her head in her hands. Made a choking sound. Sobs and rage. Internalized anger.
The wasteland was vast. Dangerous. And Amata had been gone a week. Where to? What direction? And why?

Why Amata? Why?

“You’ll find her,” Sarah promised.

And the lie was so easily proffered (so earnest) that Keelah held on to it like it was a lifeline. She accepted it. Believed it.

And Sarah recalled the perfect words then. When the lines of Keelah’s face reappeared; made the wastelander look so fragile, so soft. Beatable. Beaten.

Sarah recited in the voice she reserved for battle speeches:

If you no longer live,
if you, beloved, my love,
if you have died,
all the leaves will fall in my breast,
it will rain on my soul night and day,
the snow will burn my heart,
I shall walk with frost and fire and death and snow,
my feet will want to walk to where you are sleeping…**

It only made Keelah cry harder.

Chapter End Notes

I love Susie a little too much to let her die.

*Reference to bible verse and William Shakespeare

**Portion of Pablo Neruda poem “The Dead Woman”

Chapter title a reference to Simon Daum song.
The Saddest Lines

Chapter Summary

Amata is missing. Keelah searches for her.

Chapter Notes

It took so long to get this chapter out because my laptop hates me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Desperate Ones

Chapter 38 – The Saddest Lines

Amata was searching for her mother, Marian Almodovar.

Marian had been in the wasteland for more than twenty years now. There was a good chance that the woman was dead. Or that she resided presently in some far-off part of the Capital Wastes. Out east beyond the mountains. Or up north where snow still fell in steady rivulets and buried struggling towns.

Wherever Marian was, Amata was attempting to follow her. Without weapons; without fighting experience; without a single companion to guide her path.

She’s in danger.

The preeminent thought in Keelah’s head as she bounded down the stone pathway, away from the Brotherhood compound. Keelah was in a frenzied state. Had refused the Brotherhood’s hospitality (Sorry Sarah, but I can’t stay any longer) and an offer of assistance (Thanks Star Paladin Cross, but this is a mission I need to accomplish on my own).

Not that she couldn’t use the extra gun and battle expertise, but Keelah was so heavyhearted and restless that she feared she would come apart at any second. The wastelander didn’t want to take her frustrations out on a companion. Didn’t want to have a public meltdown; lash out. So she hastened across the desert on her own. Headed west towards the hub of metro stations.

She had a lot of ground to cover; a lot of time to make up if she wanted to track down Amata. She wasn’t sure where to begin her search (Would Amata follow highway signs and keep to the road? Or would she avoid other travelers, make her way to the coast?)

Keelah had no idea. And (truth be told) the wastelander didn’t feel very optimistic about her chances of finding her girlfriend. Keelah had only found her father after a series of tips and lucky breaks. She
had no leads concerning Amata’s whereabouts. No clues. And Marian Almodovar’s trail was decades cold.

Keelah did her best to keep moodier thoughts at bay (Amata ambushed by an Enclave attack; or taken by slavers. Assaulted by raiders who preyed on women who traveled alone).

The wastelander moved swiftly in the direction of another Brotherhood outpost: Galaxy News Radio.

She had a favor to cash in. One she hoped would help her locate at least one Almodovar woman.

... Three Dog whooped happily when he saw Keelah. The garrulous broadcaster had been enjoying an afternoon meal when Keelah trooped up the stairs to his quarters, and he immediately abandoned his food when Keelah entered the large sitting room. Pushed away a plate of soft noodles before easing out of his chair; sidling over to Keelah with his trademark grin.

“Well lookey here…if it ain’t the radical rabble-rouser from Vault 101 herself. It’s been a long time since you ventured to these parts kid. Did you come to give Three Dog an update on your escapades?”

“Not exactly.”

And Keelah sank down onto a wooden chair. Wobbled a bit, back and forth, before she found her balance. The chair was old and she was tired. There were only three good legs between them.

Three Dog frowned at Keelah’s muted response. Her strained face and disheveled appearance. “What’s shaking Wanderer? You haven’t given up on the Good Fight have you?”

Keelah shook her head. Used her arm to wipe her sweaty brow. She had a lot to say to Three Dog but needed time to catch her breath. It had been a long walk from the Citadel to the news station. And she was dehydrated.

Three Dog filled the silence with his own stream of consciousness. “Shit kid, you look like the bad end of a brahmin.”

And he moved back to his dining table. Threw Keelah a bottle of water before sitting and digging back into his meal. “And you haven’t given me much to talk about lately. Used to be you would eviscerate an entire battalion of Super Mutants. Or hunt down historical documents and whatnot. You even used ole Alistair TenPenny for target practice. These days I don’t hear a peep from you. Not unless’n you count all of your Nuka Cola and Sugar Bomb deliveries. And ain’t no way Three Dog is going to report on food drop-offs, you know? Even on my slowest news day. Where’s the dazzle kid? The intrigue?”

Keelah drained the bottle of water in one gulp. Clenched the plastic between her fingers before levying Three Dog with a pointed look. “How about a Missing Person story? That intriguing enough for you?”

Three Dog paused with a forkful of food near his mouth. “That depends. Folks go missing in the wasteland all the time. Sometimes on purpose. What’s so special about your runaway?”

“She’s a vaulter. And my friend.”

Keelah lobbed the empty bottle in the direction of the trash can. Walked over to Three Dog with
hunched shoulders; a shuffling gait. “I need you to broadcast a message for me. Every half hour, every single day until I find her.”

Three Dog frowned at the unusual request. Swallowed a mouthful of noodles too fast and nearly choked. “That’s a whole lot of radio time kid. And you’re not exactly sponsoring my station, you know?”

Keelah’s eyes narrowed. “You owe me. GNR wouldn’t even be broadcasting had I not hunted down that satellite dish for you. And if its caps you want, I can get ‘em for you. But I’ll have to deliver them some other time. I’m on a bit of a time crunch at the moment.”

_There was so much desert to traverse. And Keelah was running out of time._

Three Dog nodded slowly. Studied Keelah surreptitiously. Taking in the woman’s red-rimmed eyes; her stooped shoulders.

“I don’t need caps,” he amended. His voice soft and apologetic. “I’m sure whatever quest you’re on will give me news material for months to come. That’ll make us even. Just jot down your message on that notepad over there and I’ll do my part.”

And he immediately made for his broadcast booth: a rickety microphone held together with masking tape. A set of prewar headphones; brown with age; and frayed wires.

Three Dog pressed a few buttons; adjusted the headphones against his scalp.

“This is Three Doooggg,” he howled into the microphone. “Jockey of discs and teller of truths. Lord and master of the greatest radio station to grace the wastes: Galaxy News Radio. Listen up children, GNR has a special public announcement.”

He glanced down at Keelah’s hastily written note. “Marian and Amata Almodovar, if you’re out there in the ‘land, the Lone Wanderer says to meet her back at the homefront as soon as possible.”

He raised an eyebrow at the obscure wording, but Keelah only blinked at him. Didn’t elaborate.

Three Dog shrugged; continued to croon in that gravelly voice of his: “Again, Marian and Amata Almodovar, you’re wanted back on the homefront ASAP. Be sure to step lightly dearies and avoid anything with claws or camo.”

Keelah’s lips twitched. A growing tension. And Three Dog ended his segment.

“That’s Three Dog signing off until next time children. Whooooo!”

The radio jockey removed the headphones and greeted Keelah with a serious look. “My broadcast only goes so far, you know? Your friends will never hear it if they’re outside the Capital Wastes.”

“I know.”

But it was better than nothing, and Keelah had no other options.

She left the scribbled note on the table so that Three Dog could reference it when he rebroadcast a half hour from now. Then Keelah turned towards the stairs. Intent on continuing her pursuit.

“Hey,” Three Dog called out. His voice hoarse and low. Keelah turned around. “You want me to offer a reward for information? We can turn GNR into a tip line. Have folks message us if they see your friends out there on the road.”
But Keelah had already thought of that, and the woman shook her head. “No, thanks. We put a reward on Amata and Marian, and that’ll give every lowlife and raider in the wasteland an excuse to snatch them. Hold them for ransom.”

Three Dog nodded. The carefree smile slipping from his face. Because of course Keelah was right. Out in the Capital Wastes, people didn’t do things out of charity and goodwill.

It was what made the Lone Wanderer so exceptional. Worthy of regular mention on his daily broadcast. The vaultie was the hero type. A do-gooder who was predisposed to sticking her neck out for others.

And that unchecked benevolence had clearly taken a toll on the young woman. Three Dog barely recognized her. She was fresh-faced and giggly when they first met all those years ago. Now Keelah seemed worn down. Scrawny. With bruises peeking from every opening in her armor.

Three Dog watched Keelah as she trotted down the stairs. Lifted a hand in farewell when the wastelander waved at him.

A damn shame, he thought to himself as Keelah disappeared through the doorway.

He was surprised the young woman had survived this long. Five years in the Capital Wasteland. Vault-bred and friendly. She had a killer’s accuracy but no survivor instinct. Didn’t know how to say no. How to shoot first and ask questions later.

Won’t be long yet… the disk jockey thought somberly. Imagining the day he’d have to give a final report on the Lone Wanderer. A heartfelt eulogy.

He locked the door to his studio. No more visitors today. And as Three Dog returned to his noodles, he began to draw up the mournful words in his head.

... Keelah decided to return to Megaton. She would drop in just in case Amata had detoured to the walled city.

Maybe I missed her while I was at Canterbury Commons. Perhaps we passed each other in the dark and didn’t recognize each other.

It was a long walk from GNR to Megaton. Keelah had a lot of time to think; to speculate. She kept her Pip-Boy tuned to Galaxy News Radio. Heard Three Dog’s broadcast seven times.

“Marian and Amata Almodovar, if you’re out there, the Lone Wanderer says to meet her back at the homefront…”

Keelah felt a pang of guilt every time the message blared from her left wrist.

I hope you get this message Amata, she thought. Again and again. And I’m so sorry for ignoring yours.

Dozens of miles disappearing beneath her boots.

She took short breaks beneath the shells of ancient trees. Downed mouthfuls of water, dried food.

Move on Keelah. Keep moving. Until her bones ached from the frenetic pace. Until the sweat and grime became second skin.
During one break—her hips perched on a rusted truck bumper—she read Amata’s goodbye letter. Finally mustered the nerve to open the crumpled paper. Used the glow of her Pip-Boy to read the small print:

Keelah,

If you’re reading this, then you know I’ve left the vault. I’ve gone to find my mother. Can you believe it? My mother! So many years. So many lies. And yet a part of me never accepted the fact that she was dead.

I waited for you. But I cannot afford to wait any longer. Too much time has passed already. And my mother’s out there somewhere…

And there was a smudge of ink here. As if Amata had been overtaken with tears. Stained the paper.

I love you.

Years ago I wrote you poetry that you attributed to someone else. So many words and verses shoved beneath your pillow that you never acknowledged. I tried to write one last poem but couldn’t manage it. You’ll forgive me for borrowing the words of another this time around.

A second piece of paper pressed against the first. A lengthy poem. Transcribed in Amata’s neat handwriting:

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

Write, for example, The night is shattered and the blue stars shiver in the distance.’

The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

Through nights like this one I held her in my arms
I kissed her again and again under the endless sky.

She loved me sometimes, and I loved her too.

How could one not have loved her great still eyes.
Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, still more immense without her.

And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture.

What does it matter that my love could not keep her.

The night is shattered and she is not with me.

This is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.
My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.
My sight searches for her as though to go to her.

My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.

The same night whitening the same trees.
We, of that time, are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, that’s certain, but how I loved her.

My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.

Another’s. She will be another’s. Like my kisses before.

Her void. Her bright body. Her infinite eyes.
I no longer love her, that’s certain, but maybe I love her.

Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms
my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer
and these the last verses that I write for her.**

It ended there. No ‘goodbye.’ No final passage. Amata hadn’t even concluded the letter with her name.

Keelah cried softly. A prelude. Like a branch breaking. Or falling sand. Or like the first few drops of condensation before a storm.

... 

Sheriff Simms spat into the dirt. Snatched the cowboy hat off his head and pounded it against his thigh, loosening dirt.

“Nope. Don’t recollect seeing anyone of that sort around here,” he told Keelah. “And anyone wearing a vault suit woulda stuck out like a sore thumb.”

Keelah released the breath she’d been holding. Angled her head away so that the sheriff wouldn’t see her mottled features.

But Sheriff Simms noticed anyway and he clasped a hand around Keelah’s shoulder. Firm and encouraging. “Maybe check the Brass Lantern and Moriarty’s bar. Sometimes folks wander in at night looking for a hot meal. I could have missed your friend.”

Keelah nodded. Shifted her supply pack to a more comfortable position on her back. Then the wastelander began the steep climb to Moriarty’s. She’d save the Brass Lantern for last. That way she could sit a spell on one of the restaurant’s bar stools. Talk a bit with Jenny Stahl. Recover some of her energy.

Moriarty’s saloon was crowded at this time of day. Patrons falling all over each other for cheap liquor and the latest town gossip. Not one available seat left in the entire place.

Keelah made her way to the bar. Smiled tightly at Nova; a quick wave to Gob. But it was Moriarty
she needed to talk to. If Amata had ventured into Megaton, the sleazy bartender would know. He had eyes and ears everywhere. Monitored the goings-on of the small town.

Moriarty was working behind the bar. Stacking bottles of alcohol on the metal shelves, one after the other; higher and higher. Keelah’s mouth watered at the sight of the liquor (it had been too long and she craved it), but she refocused her attentions. Drifted closer to Moriarty and cleared her throat to alert the man to her presence.

The bar owner looked up from his ministrations. Smiled in that slow, careful way of his. A jagged smile that was mostly teeth. Not an ounce genuine. But hungry and fierce.

“Come back to tempt me with more caps, eh?” he chuckled. Positioning the final bottle. Whiskey. Keelah’s favorite.

Then he gestured the wastelander towards his back room. As if he anticipated their conversation would need to be private.

Moriarty flopped down onto his pristine bed. Nodded for Keelah to take the chair across from him.

But Keelah refused. Stood there by the door; her arms folded across her chest. Her mind whirring with various scenarios. Amata in Rivet City. Or on a boat headed towards Point Outlook. Amata stumbling into a raider hideout. Amata drowning beneath toxic waves.

“What say you?” Moriarty asked. Interrupting Keelah’s musings. His brown eyes sparkling and wet from the tinge of dust and smoke that was always in the air.

“I’m looking for someone. A young woman in a vault jumpsuit. She might have come this way.”

Moriarty grinned. And, god, how could a smile be so terrifying?

“Another one of your lot has fled that place, huh?” he asked. “Just what the hell is going on in that vault of yours?”

“That’s not important. I just want to know if you’ve seen her.”

Moriarty leaned back in his chair. Exhaled loudly as if he was bored with Keelah already. Disinterested in this conversation. “There was a lass stopped through here not too long ago fitting that description.” Keelah's eyes widened in surprise. “She was wearing a vault suit and one of those there Pip-Boys. A real looker, she was.” And he smirked at the face Keelah made. Curling his lip until his smile more closely resembled a snarl. “Now that you mention it, she asked about you.”

Keelah’s voice was a dangerous baritone. “What did she want?”

“Just to know where you were. How long you’d be gone.” Moriarty shrugged. “I told her that I didn’t keep tabs on you.”

“You could have shown her where I live. Told her to wait there for me.”

“I could have. But information costs money. And your friend didn’t have any. She was pretty shocked to find that water is expensive out here.” And he laughed then. Wicked and long. Pushed the gray-streaked hair out of his eyes before rising to his feet. “Poor girl,” he said. Tsking beneath his breath as sauntered towards Keelah. “She looked so out of place.”

“Where did she go?” Keelah asked him.
“Don’t know. She didn’t say.”

Keelah clenched her teeth so hard that her jaw ached. “There’s nothing else you can tell me?” she asked the saloon owner. Her eyes narrowed. Because Moriarty was a bastard. And a conniving one at that. He treated even the smallest detail like currency. Refused to aid others unless he was compensated. “I’ll pay.”

One hundred caps. A thousand. Anything to help her find Amata.

Moriarty’s eyes went alight. And he stopped within a hair of Keelah. “I don’t know where your friend is,” he murmured. “She ran out of here as soon as she realized you weren’t in Megaton. I felt bad for her, really. All alone out here. Without a weapon. Without a friend. She reminded me of another sweet-faced vaulter who’d wandered in here all desperate and forlorn.”

Keelah’s agitation grew, and the wastelander’s hands clenched into fists by her side. Moriarty was so close that she could smell the bourbon on his breath; the rubbing alcohol he used on his skin.

Moriarty continued to talk to her. Her eyes lingering on her eyes, her face. “I felt bad for her. Your friend. She was so out of sorts. I offered her a job. Just like I offered you all those years ago.”

Moriarty had tried to make Keelah one of his working girls.

*If you don’t find daddy, I’ll give you some work, he’d purred. You can provide security or ass. I’ll let you choose which.*

Keelah put a hand on her pistol. Ready to shoot that smug look off of Moriarty’s face. He’d propositioned Amata, the sick fuck. Had tried to ensnare the inexperienced vaulter like he’d ensnared Nova and Silver.

Moriarty clucked his tongue when Keelah removed the gun from her holster. Put a hand up playfully. “Ah ah ah,” he said, grinning. Not intimidated in the least. “Not even the Lone Wanderer can get away with cold blooded murder. Besides, you shoot me and my men will tear you to pieces. How you gonna find your friend then?”

And he winked at Keelah, knowing that he’d won, before sauntering past. Just barely brushing against the woman’s stiff form as he exited the room.

“See yourself out,” he said. Before making his way back to the bar. Where he greeted his thirsty customers with false cheer. Sold them alcohol that was mostly water.

... 

Keelah spent days walking a thirty mile radius around Vault 101. She would walk to a nearby settlement then double back. Repeat.

Day after day. Another town then return. Keelah didn’t want to venture too far from the vault in case Amata came back.

Three Dog played her emergency message. Again and again. Multiple times a day.

But days passed with no word from Amata. And even though Charon joined the search and Reilly’s rangers pitched in as well, there was still no sign of the vaulter.

From Megaton to Girdershade. No one had seen Amata. Which was unusual since the appearance of vault dwellers usually caused a stir in the wasteland. Kept people whispering for days. Gawking and
pointing.

People should have remembered seeing Amata out in the wasteland. Should have recalled her with vivid clarity. But no one did except Moriarty. And the Megaton protectron, Deputy Weld.

The robot had waved his mechanical arms when Keelah approached him. *Oh yes, the little lady passed through here. Twice. Coming and going. All in less than an hour. According to my sensors, she was highly agitated.*

And when Keelah asked Deputy Weld about the direction Amata had walked, the robot had pointed southward.

*But I don’t think she knew where she was going,* he added. *She kept stopping her stride. Agitated, he kept repeating. She seemed agitated.*

More than likely Amata had been terrified. Anxious. Overwhelmed.

Keelah ran through a whole list of synonyms as she crouched in the rock crevice above the vault door.

It was Keelah’s favorite waiting spot. A cramped hideaway where she could camouflage her presence but still see out into the desert.

Keelah had been sitting in the same spot for hours. Numb and hungry. Needing to piss. She waited like this several times a day.

Walked back and forth from the vault. Miles and miles. Then returned to this spot above the door, waiting for Amata to return.

Charon was back in Megaton. Refilling their supplies. Bullying Moriarty for more information.

The rangers were spread out across the wasteland. Checking with contacts. Following leads (there weren’t many).

Still no Amata after twelve days of searching. Not even a *sighting* of the former Overseer.

Keelah’s friends interviewed everyone they could find. Scavengers and traders; raiders who could be bribed with a little bit of coin. Nothing. Not a damn thing.

No Amata. No. Amata.

The former Overseer had vanished in the same way Anne Palmer had. Silently. *Absolutely.* With no trail left behind; no trace.

Amata’s disappearance had sobered Keelah. Completely.

The wastelander had tried just once to get drunk and drown away her troubles. She’d lain out on a dirty floor in a gutted building. Had stared up at the bits of sky she could see through the broken ceiling. But just as she’d tilted the flask to her lips—tasted that first sip of firewater—she’d recalled Amata’s face. Thought about how much her girlfriend had disapproved of her addiction. How Amata’s eyes would darken with displeasure when Keelah imbibed indiscreetly.

Keelah had broken the liquor bottle against the cement floor. Had had to jump up from her sprawl, stomp away before she did something foolish. Like lick the spilled drink from the muddy floor. Or jab herself with splinters of glass.
She missed the intoxicating beverage. Even as she hunkered in the rocky alcove above the vault. She missed the mindlessness of it all. The pleasure pain. She satisfied her thirst with small sips of Aqua Pura. Kept her eyes trained outwards.

*Please Amata. Please. Don’t be lost. Don’t be too far. Don’t be…*

She couldn’t finish the rest. Continued drinking the warm water until she could no longer taste it. Until she couldn’t feel the flat liquid slide down her throat.

Her eyes shuttered. She hadn’t slept in days. And the warmth of the water, the sun, was getting to her.

She might have slept. Couldn’t be sure. But she jerked to wakefulness when she saw a body moving towards her. A slow-moving figure plodding across the sand. Closer and closer. Moving in a deliberate line towards Vault 101.

Keelah jumped down from her hideout. Caught a bit of her skin against the jagged rock. Left it behind. A smidgen of blood.

She scrambled down the incline, towards the brown patch of grass that marked the end of the vault’s sidewalk. Came face to face with a face so familiar. Hazel-flecked eyes. Honey skin. And a smattering of freckles across a wide-brimmed nose.

But not Amata. Definitely not Amata.

“Marian?” Keelah asked breathlessly.

...  

Amata’s mother. Marian.

The older woman stared back at Keelah. Nearly identical to her daughter. But taller; leaner; and some twenty years older. The beginnings of gray in her short cropped hair.

Marian was stunning. Even beneath the dust and grime. Curly ringlets of hair, like Amata. Only shorter. Jagged from self-grooming. And there was an aura about the woman—something radiant—that made Keelah want to run towards her. Or away. Hug her. Maybe bawl.


“Keelah,” the wastelander corrected.

“Where’s Amata?”

Marian had tired of introductions already. Was looking past Keelah towards the vault door. Marian studied the area around them when she didn’t immediately spy her daughter. Frantic motions that put Keelah even further on edge.

“Amata left the vault,” Keelah explained. “About two weeks ago. She went out looking for you.”

Marian’s head swung around. “She went out looking for me? Alphonse told her about me?”

“Yes.”

Marian’s eyes were razor sharp now. Fierce but not hostile. “And Alphonse let her leave?”
“Yeah.”

“Bastard.”

Keelah’s favorite slur for the slimy man. So the wastelander nodded again. “Yeah.”

Marian stormed up the incline towards the wooden door. As if she planned to confront the man she hadn’t seen in more than twenty years.

“He’s not there,” Keelah told her. Making Marian stop in her tracks. “I got rid of him.”

Marian turned on her heels. Levied Keelah with a look that was evaluative. Curious.

“Alphonse doesn’t matter though,” Keelah continued. “Not anymore. It’s Amata we need to be worried about. She’s not accustomed to the wasteland. We have to find her. And fast.”

“You sure.”

And Marian drifted closer. Bought the smell of sea and sand with her. Scents that Keelah recognized. That the wastelander carried herself.

Marian was a traveler herself then. Didn't stay long enough in one place to lose the smell of the outside.

The two women studied each other. Marian, with the air of a woman who had seen much and feared little.

Keelah with a similar pensiveness. But also awe; because Marian had been but a whisper for so many years. A buried mother. A reminiscence. And now she was here. Solid.

“Amata thought you were dead,” Keelah blurted out. “Her father told her…told us all…that you had died.”

And the revelation surprised Marian. Hurt her. The older woman stumbled back, just a step. Rubbed a hand across her forehead in a gesture that was piteous.

“I very nearly was,” Marian confessed. “Out here…” And she gestured at the expanse of desert. The rolling brown and greys of this leftover world. “Death is always a step behind. And only a step.”

Keelah nodded; jangling her dreadlocks in agreement. Marian took a good look at her then. Surveyed the young wastelander. The tilted body; the haunted eyes; a careworn face too lined for someone so young.

And the yellow bracelet. Plastic hearts circling a bony wrist.


“Amata.”

More surprise. “And who are you to Amata?”

“Her best friend.”

Her girlfriend. Her lover. The person who continued to underestimate the fearless leader. Who broke her heart.
And Marian read it all in Keelah’s eyes. Her finger now shifting from the bracelet to Keelah’s wrist. Testing the pulse.


And for the first time Keelah realized how strong the woman was; and that Marian carried more weapons than she did.

“Now how do we find my daughter?” Marian asked.

... The two women caught up during the walk to Megaton. Keelah needed to collect Charon and her sniper rifle. To pass the time she asked questions. And Marian answered.

Keelah learned that Marian had tried to hack her way back into the vault but had been unsuccessful.

“I tried for years,” Marian explained. “But my computer skills are limited. I knew just enough to hack the terminal on my way out, but I couldn’t override whatever protections Alphonse put in place after I left the vault.” And her face broke into a scowl, remembering her ex-husband. “I wanted more than anything to get back inside, to Amata. But it became too dangerous for me. Lingering out in the open like that.” And she pointed to a deep groove in her shoulder. Pencil-wide and dark. A timeworn wound.


Keelah nodded. Sympathetic.


Keelah spoke on the woman’s behalf. “Bastard.” And Keelah couldn’t help but ask. “What did you ever see in him?”

They were only thirty yards away from Megaton. Too short a walk for such a pointed question.

But Marian answered easily. “Alphonse was different when he was a boy. He was my best friend during grade school. And for many years after that.”

And that was answer enough apparently because Marian stopped speaking. The older woman adjusted the nail board in her hand. Her hands clenching around the burnished wood. The nail board was a slimmer version than the ones Keelah normally saw. It was shaped like a baseball bat but seemed deadlier. And the older woman had a Chinese officer’s sword strapped to her back.

“You like melee weapons, huh?” Keelah asked. As they traveled the final steps to the Megaton gate.

“Necessity,” was all Marian said. Her fingers sliding down the nail board; settling against the handle; a grip perfectly fitted for her hands.

And Keelah wondered briefly how the woman had taught herself to fight. Wondered if the nail board had once been a plank or chair that Marian had grabbed during a skirmish; modified to kill. An impromptu weapon.
There were so many things Keelah wanted to ask Amata’s mother. *What do you remember of Amata? Where have you been all this time? Do you have a home?*

Keelah settled for: “Did you ever find your father?”

Because it was important. The reason Marian had left Vault 101 in the first place.

“No.”

And then they were inside Megaton.

... 

“I think we should break up into teams. Fan out and walk the wasteland in three different directions until we find Amata.”

Keelah shook her head in disagreement. “We’ve already done that to a degree. And the rangers are out there right now covering every patch of land they know. We have to be more deliberate about this. Strategic. Even if we had an entire army at our disposal, we couldn’t cover the Capital Wastes in time.”

Charon leaned forward in his chair. “We do have an army at our disposal. At least you do. Won’t the Brotherhood help us search?”

Keelah shook her head again. “The Brotherhood soldiers are scattered in detachments all over the wasteland. Sarah offered to send a paladin or two, but it’s not enough. Besides, it doesn’t matter how many people we have searching for Amata if we’re looking in the wrong places.”

“And do you know the right place?”

A question from Marian. Who had been mostly silent up until this point. Quietly devastated as Keelah bought her up to speed on her daughter’s disappearance. Their lack of progress in finding her.

“No.” Keelah licked her lips. Wanted to tear into the soft flesh with her teeth. “I don’t know where to look.”

Charon huffed. Jumped to his feet in irritation. He was a man of action. The incessant talking grated him. “It doesn’t make any sense,” he asserted. “Amata has no wasteland experience. No weapons. Even with a week’s head start, she couldn’t have made it very far. She should be within this perimeter. Maybe hiding out. If nothing else, we should have stumbled upon her body—”

He realized too late that he was speaking inappropriately. And he stared contritely at the floor. Then apologized by picking up Marian’s weapon. Sharpening the nail edges with his combat knife.

“You speak out of turn but you speak astutely.” Marian’s face was drawn so tight that her eyes disappeared for a second. “My first month out of the vault, I didn’t venture past the Super Duper Mart. I slept behind a dumpster. Jumped at every noise. Amata has to be close by.”

“But I’ve walked this entire area,” Keelah protested. “Regular rotations back and forth.”

“She could be traveling with a caravan,” Charon suggested.

“Could be lying low in any number of buildings between here and the Potomac,” Marian added. *She could be dead.*
No one said it, but they were all thinking it.

There was a reason why wastelanders marveled at the sight of vaulters. It wasn’t just the shiny blue jumpsuits; the curious Pip-Boys; the palpable greenness of a vaultie who had never seen sunlight or sky.

No, wastelanders goggled at vaulters because few of the sheltered novices survived their first day out of the vault.

There were god-knows how many vaults across the wasteland. Most of them open. Their inhabitants expelled. Yet, most wastelanders could count on one hand how many vaulters they’d encountered in their lifetimes.

They never got a chance to meet them.

The heat got the vaulters first. The dogs. The radiation.

In an ironic twist, the Vault-Tec vaults—those lauded, protective cocoons—conditioned their inhabitants for death. Made them soft; sickly; susceptible to the barest touch.

Vault-Tec had promised its residents that it would protect them from the world. But the vaults only shielded them temporarily. The world would get them two hundred years later.

Perhaps it had already gotten Amata.

Charon returned Marian’s nail board to her. “You got Keelah’s message and returned to the vault,” he told Marian. “Maybe Amata will return as well. We just have to wait for her.”

Marian shook her head. The thick tangles of her hair shaking back and forth, offering their dissent. “I don’t do well with waiting.”

Keelah shook her head. “Neither do I.”

She’d been waiting long enough.

A look passed between the two women. Understanding. And Keelah strode to her supply locker. Studied her cache of weapons; the heavy explosives. She would set fire to the wasteland. Raze it to the ground if she had to. But she didn’t know where to start. Who to target.

Where are you Amata?

“I used to sing to Amata. Every night when she was a baby.”

Marian’s voice so soft. Incongruous with her battle-hardened appearance. Those large mournful eyes.

“She would hold onto my fingers. Her hands so small and chubby. And I would sing to her until she fell asleep. And her breathing...how steady it was...how close...it was a song all its own. One I never thought I’d hear again.”

A sheen to her eyes. Wet on top of wet. A sorrowfulness so similar to Amata’s that Keelah quaked from the look of it. Had to press her face into the cold steel of her locker so that she didn’t faint.

What if I never see her again? Keelah thought.

“Let’s go back to the vault,” Keelah stated. When she’d recovered her voice; could speak again.
Clear and strong. “See if Amata is there. If she isn’t, we’ll split up. Take off in three different directions.”

Charon’s initial suggestion. A Plan B because there was no Plan A.

... 

More chit chat as they made the return trip. Talking amongst themselves because it was easier to do than stewing; worrying. Staring at the trodden path, expecting to see blue cloth amid the stone.

“What have you been doing for the past twenty years? Where do you live?” Keelah asked. Breathing loudly because she’d brought along too many weapons. Had more metal attached to her body than a Brotherhood soldier.

And Marian helped the wastelander out. Unhooked an assault rifle from Keelah’s back; added the heavy gun to her cargo.

“I live all over,” Marian finally answered. “Move every year or so when the feeling overtakes me. Sometimes I settle down in a settlement. Other times I camp out in the wastes. I even lived for a time in this abandoned movie theater. It was nice because one of the projectors still worked and there was a handful of black and white films I used to watch. Some of the same pictures we would watch in the vault.” A faint smile on her lips. Immediately followed by a frown. “But I moved on from there after a while. Too many raiders nosing around. Too many for me to handle on my own.” A quick glance at Keelah. Don’t ask for details. “I survived all this time by never staying still for very long. No roots. No attachments. No risks.”

No friends. No companion. No one.

Keelah read between the lines.

Marian smiled sadly at the look on the Keelah’s face—the earnest wistfulness of a person accustomed to soothing other’s hurts. Marian reached to pat the young woman on the back. Ended up patting the sniper rifle. Her hand bumping against steel.

Marian took a moment to appreciate the symbolism.

Look at what the wasteland does to us, the older woman thought to herself. It takes our softness, makes it hard. Permanently attaches firearms to our limbs. And it turns our children into killers. Then turns them back again.

‘Cause wasn’t this just a child walking beside her? A lost girl straddled between two worlds that would never appreciate her? That would get her killed? Then move on like she never existed?

And my baby…

The thought of Amata, lost and alone, cut Marian to the quick. A pain, vicious and deep, burning through her chest. My father all over again. Lost to the wasteland.

And it would have startled Keelah and Marian (had they spoken out loud) that they shared identical thoughts: recollection of a father. Gross betrayal. Lost Amata.

I can't lose her again.

One of them muttered it out loud. Charon couldn't tell which.
There was a note fluttering on the vault’s outer door. Pressed into the wood with a pearl-handled dagger.

And before she even read the words, Keelah knew….She knew.

Keelah read aloud so that Marian and Charon could hear.

**We have the girl. No caps this time. You let us into the vault and she’s yours.**

That was it. Three sentences. Scrawled and choppy letters.

The Fisher of Men returned.

Chapter End Notes

**Poem is "The Saddest Lines" by Pablo Neruda. My favorite poem of his.**

Only one or two more chapters after this. And maybe an epilogue.
“We killed them,” Keelah said bewilderedly. As the ransom note fluttered in her hands, stirred by brisk wind. “We killed them all.”

Marian snatched the note from Keelah’s clasp. Read it frantically. “So you’ve encountered this group before?” she asked Keelah.

Keelah nodded. Feeling sick to her stomach. “Yes. Not long ago. But we finished them...”

Unbidden memories stole over Keelah:

Agatha’s burnt body stuffed into the trunk of a car. The teenager, Lawrence, absent an arm; pale and dying. Spent explosives; a room full of limbs; rust-colored blood. So much death.

“We killed them,” Keelah said again. Walking a few steps forward because she needed to be doing something. Motion. Exertion. Otherwise she would shriek in unending loops.

Marian scanned the short note; searching for clues. Anything. Then the older woman pushed the paper back into Keelah’s hands.

“So they want inside the vault?” Marian asked. Her voice steady even as her eyes betrayed her anxiety. “We have one card to play then. They won’t hurt Amata until they get what they want.”

“Not true,” Charon interjected. His shadow blanketing the two women. Momentarily blotting out the sun. “These slavers don’t care about ransom or caps. They’re in it for the torture. I hate to say it…but your daughter’s already dea—”

“Shut it Charon.” And Keelah’s eyes were fire hot. Warning.

Charon looked away. And Marian’s nostrils flared.

Keelah turned the ransom note over. Studied the right corner of the parchment. Some type of symbol at the edge of the paper. Faded but familiar. The wastelander breathed deeply and her eyes flickered out across the wasteland. A sudden revelation.
“We killed the snake but not the head. That’s why these fuckers keep coming back.”

Keelah crunched the paper between her fingers. Pretended it was bone; a beating heart. Crushed.

“There’s a boss out there,” she murmured. “Pulling the strings. Someone we haven’t uncovered. Haven’t touched yet.”

Charon was suddenly by her side. His eyes narrow slits as he studied his friend. “Anyone we know?”

Keelah’s eyes returned to the ransom note. She unfurled the paper.

A curled symbol. Small and faint like a watermark.

“Yeah,” she finally said.

.

Keelah slapped the ransom note down on the table, sending specks of dust flying. Tiny microbes of dirt that danced briefly before falling. And for a second all three of them coughed. Rubbed at their reddened eyes.

The trio was back in Megaton. Keelah’s home. They huddled around the small tabletop; stared down at the ransom note. A square-shaped strip of paper. Brown and wrinkled with choppy writing.

Agatha’s ransom note. Recovered from a drawer in Keelah’s desk.

Keelah placed Agatha’s ransom beside Amata’s. Two strips of paper. A string of words.

“Look familiar?” she asked Charon.

The notes were nearly identical. Same colored paper. Same style of writing.

“We already know that it’s the same group of slavers,” Charon responded flatly.

“That’s not it.” And Keelah jabbed a finger at Agatha’s note. The right corner. Near the bottom. A small, circular symbol at the edge.

“The symbol? It’s the same symbol that’s on Amata’s letter. And I saw the same mark on the ransom note Grandma Sparkle had.”

Marian rubbed a hand across her forehead. The older woman was growing increasingly frustrated with their lack of progress. They were wasting time with all this sleuthing. This deliberating. Examining symbols!

Amata was out there somewhere in the wastes. Bound and captive. Possibly injured.

“How does this help us find Amata?” Marian asked. Her hands clenched tight around the nail-board. Ready to fight. Ready to defend her daughter.

But Keelah didn’t answer. The wastelander was too busy studying the ransom notes. Brown strips of parchment that had been repurposed as writing paper.

Keelah mumbled to herself. “I didn’t notice it at first because I’ve seen this paper so many times before. When I make supply runs across the wasteland, delivering chems. I completely overlooked this detail.” She rubbed a finger across the tiny symbol. Turned to Charon, her eyes gleaming with
emotion. “This brown paper? It’s an insert. They use it in Jet packages. And that circular symbol there? It’s a picture of a Jet cartridge. See?”

Charon nodded indulgently but then exchanged a worried glance with Marian.

He cleared his throat. “You’re telling me that the slavers used leftover paper to make ransom notes. But um…How does that help us find Amata? Or identify this…boss?”

Keelah grinned. An almost maniacal slash of her mouth. The fatigue and worry and adrenaline finally overtaking the wastelander.

Keelah paced back and forth. Began to gesticulate wildly. “It all makes sense now. The person who’s heading this operation, they’re the subtle type. Lying low, pulling all the strings, while the slavers do the dirty work. The Fisher of Men…they do all the kidnapping. The torture.” Keelah waved the ransom note animatedly. “While the boss selects the targets. Collects the caps. The head of the snake but *backgrounded*…Disguised like an ordinary citizen to remain undetected.”

Keelah locked eyes with Charon. “We were looking for a compound. For an army. When this motherfucker’s been under our nose the entire time.”

“Who?” Marian asked. Her voice high and strained as she stared back and forth between Keelah and Charon.

The unnatural gleam returned to Keelah’s eyes. And the wastelander placed the ransom notes back on the table before unholstering her weapon. Checking the chambers. “The person who stuck this ransom note on the vault door knew where the vault is. How many people know that information outside the three of us, Butch, and the rangers?”

Keelah stared down the rifle scope. Eyes squinted. Imagining a target. “This person also has a sizeable supply of Jet on hand. Uses the empty packaging as writing paper.”

Charon frowned. The wheels turning in his head. It was so inane that the mercenary nearly chuckled. *Unbelievable!*

“Who?!” Marian shouted it this time.

Keelah turned to her. “We have one more trip to make. Up the road a ways. That’ll take us to Amata.”

Keelah scooped up the ransom notes; stuffed the crumpled paper into her pockets before leading her two companions to the front door.

Megaton residents startled at the sight of them: three wide-eyed wastelanders armed to the teeth and radiating violence.

Sheriff Simms stared after the three travelers as they marched by. A long, hard look. Simms looked worried. Hooked a finger through a belt loop and swallowed down his trepidation. But he didn’t stop Keelah. No one did.

Keelah and crew continued on their way. Weapons pointed forward as they navigated the twisting ramps.

“Someone’s going to die,” a passerby commented. A murmur that was picked up. Carried swiftly through the crowd.
Someone was going to die indeed. Slowly. Painfully. Finally.

... 

Keelah knocked on the door of the small ranch house. Four knocks total. One short. Three long.

She would have kicked the door down. Or fired through it. Splintered the wood. But she knew Silver carried a revolver. And the woman was now in possession of a military-grade rifle. Courtesy of Keelah.

Keelah scowled. Tasting bile at the back of her throat. Regret.

She’d escorted Silver to Vault 101. Had gifted the woman an assault weapon. And Silver had been playing her this entire time.

*Has to be Silver,* Keelah thought moodily. *No one else knows about the vault. And Silver’s seen all the technology we have inside. She got greedy. Snatched Amata so that she could get her hands on more supplies.*

Keelah still hadn’t pieced it all together. If Silver was working for the Fisher of Men… (Scratch that) …if Silver was the head of operations for this slave ring, why did she rescue Susie? Why did she help out with the caravan in first place? Was her fear of the wasteland a ruse? A way for Silver to dispel suspicion? And where had she stashed Amata?

So many questions that were still unanswered; pounding incessantly against Keelah’s skull.

But Keelah would get to the bottom of it if it was the last thing she did. She would interrogate Silver. She would—

Keelah’s hands clenched around her rifle. A full clip ready.

She would do whatever it took to get Amata back. Even if it meant…

The front door opened a sliver. Light spilling out. Catching Keelah in the eye.

“You’re back.”

Silver’s voice. Frail and crackling from years of chem abuse and practiced reticence.

Silver glared like she always did at Charon. And at the new face: Marian. But Silver knew Keelah. Trusted her. So the woman opened her front door. Beckoned the three travelers inside. Quick! Quick!

Silver slammed the door closed the moment Keelah and her companions crossed the threshold. Quickly bolted it. One lock after another. Fumbling with the oversized locks.

Keelah signaled Charon and Marian. Surreptitiously. Motioned them to opposite sides of the room. They formed a perimeter around Silver. An angry patrol.

Silver didn’t even notice. Too busy fiddling with the final lock. Her hands shaking from her sickness. From her overwhelming need to inject more carcinogens into her body.

Keelah waited for Silver to finish. Studied the squalid living area. The rotted food on the warped dining table; the disassembled toilet that served as a chair. Boxes and boxes of Jet scattered about. Opened and unopened. Dozens of syringes. Brown packaging.
When Silver turned to her, Keelah sighed. Sad and disappointed.

Silver didn’t qualify as a friend. Not exactly. But she and Keelah had known each other for years. Shared a common enemy.

So though Keelah had a litany of questions to ask the recluse woman, she started with the simplest.

“Why Silver?”

The question—the despondent tone—confused Silver. “Why what?” she asked.

And the silver-haired woman stumbled back to the dining table—moving jerkily; a tortured shuffle. Silver poked at a brown glob of food. Passed a finger across a waiting syringe.

It was clear that the woman wanted to shoot up. Now. Right now. But she had company. And she had manners. Even after all this time; after everything she’d endured.

“You can have a seat,” she directed at Charon and Marian. Gesturing at the uncovered toilet seat. The overturned crock pot.

She blinked in confusion when Charon and Marian only stared back at her. And Marian glared at her—so viciously—that Silver inhaled sharply. Sudden realized that she was in mortal danger.

Silver whirled on Keelah. “He finally got to you, didn’t he? Sent you here to kill me. Made you turn on me.”

“You’re the one who’s turned Silver.” And Keelah’s voice was so embittered that Silver flinched at the sound of it.

“What do you mean?” Silver asked.

“Enough with the act Silver. Just tell me where Amata is and we’ll go easy on you.”

“No. We won’t,” Marian retorted.

And when had the woman moved from her position at the wall?

All of a sudden the older woman was standing beside Silver. Close enough to touch.

“You have my daughter,” Marian hissed. “Tell me where she is.”

“Your daughter?”

And Silver needed the Jet now. Etiquette be damned. The recluse woman reached for the syringe. Had the glass tip pointed at the soft flesh of her upper arm in seconds. But Marian slapped the needle away. Circled a hand around Silver’s wrist. Wrenched hard.

“Tell me now, little girl,” Marian growled. “Or so help me, I’ll put a different sort of puncture in your body.”

And Marian tugged the woman towards her; until Silver could see the heat in Marian’s eyes; the barely-restrained violence.

“Marian,” Keelah warned.

But the older woman ignored Keelah. Yanked Silver’s arm down until the woman’s elbow twisted at
an unnatural angle. A second away from breaking.

Silver howled in pain.

“I’ve seen people like her in the wastes,” Marian told Keelah. Voice dangerous and low. “Hedonists. No morals. They’ll sell their own children for a hit of Psycho. They’ll do worse than that.”

Silver cried out again when the pressure increased on her arm. That bit of skin was already so sensitive from the drug abuse, track marks.

“Marian…” Keelah admonished again.

And Keelah angled her body between the two women. Separated them. She pulled the ransom notes out of her pocket. Slapped them down on the littered dining table.

“Explain that!” she said to Silver. “And quickly before Marian makes good on her promise.”

Silver clasped her newly freed arm to her chest. Stared accusingly at Keelah. Hurt by the wastelander’s betrayal. But Silver blanched when she saw the ransom notes. The brown paper. The clunky writing.

Her tongue came out. Silver licked her lips. “Where’d you get those?” she husked. Staring guiltily at Keelah. Then back to the ransom notes. Biting into her bottom lip now.

“Found that one pinned to the door of my vault. But you already know that, don’t you? Since you’re the one who put it there?”

“No.”

But Silver’s denial wasn’t very convincing. It was clear that the woman recognized the ransom notes. The way she fidgeted and mauled at her own skin—teeth and fingernails tearing tiny red lines into her flesh—made it clear that she was involved somehow with the Fisher of Men. The kidnappings; the torture.

“I’m running out of patience.” And Marian shifted her nail board from one hand to another. Underscoring her agitation.

“I need my medicine,” Silver babbled. A non sequitur. And she reached again for a syringe of Jet. And once again Marian batted the drugs away.

“Tell me Silver,” Keelah demanded.

“Just one dose,” Silver begged. “Or I’ll be sick…”

“Tell me where Amata is!”

Keelah roared this time. Her patience thinned as well.

And it scared Silver. Severely. The woman backpedaled until she hit the wall. Her arms went around her waist. Thin and ineffectual. And she clutched herself. Trembled wildly.

“Did you send that ransom note?” Keelah asked her. Stomping forward until she crowded Silver. Intimidation.

And, deep down, it pained Keelah to see Silver in such distress. But…no! Fuck that! Silver had something to do with Amata’s disappearance. With Agatha’s death. With the deaths of so many
wastelanders.

You can’t show her any mercy, Keelah reminded herself. She’s Fisher of Men, and they never showed any mercy.

Keelah removed her sidearm. The combat SMG that left plumes of smoke when it was fired. Keelah pointed the pistol at the floor. For now.

“Did you send that ransom note?” Keelah asked again. Softly. But it was a dangerous whisper. A prelude to something worse.

Silver quaked. “I can’t remember. I’ve written so many…”

A confession.

And Keelah nearly fainted. Had to put a hand against the dining table to steady herself.

Motherfucker!

The slaver boss had been right in front of her the entire time. Noiseless. Nondescript. Keelah still couldn’t wrap her mind around it. Silver of all people!

“I’ll allow you a moment to make peace with your god,” Marian stated.

The older woman had Silver cornered. Her nail board poised in the air; ready to strike.

“Marian, no!” Keelah shouted. “We still don’t know where Amata is.”

“We will soon enough.”

Marian levied Silver with a sharp look. Tilted her head until they could see eye-to-eye. “Tell me child. Where’s my daughter?”

Silver trembled. Shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s been so long…”

“It hasn’t been long at all. Think hard. And tell me where you’re hiding her.”

Marian’s hand came up. A thumb pressed against Silver’s collarbone while the nail board slumbered. Awaited its chance.

Silver closed her eyes beneath the pressure of Marian’s finger. Gasped weakly. “What does it matter? She’s nothing but bone by now.”

Marian’s hand clenched around Silver’s throat. And even Keelah growled. Sprang forward “She’d better not be!” Keelah barked.

Silver’s eyes flickered open. Dusty brown orbs tinged with yellow.

When she saw the look on Keelah’s face, Silver’s mouth turned down. Sadness. Regret. “I’m sorry. But your friend…” A glance at Marian. “Your daughter …she’s long dead.”

Marian struck her. Sent Slver sliding down the wall, moaning loudly. Hacking coughs.

And Marian would have killed Silver. Struck a fatal blow with the nail board had not Keelah stepped in the way. Caught the wooden weapon around the handle. Pushed gently against Marian.
“We have to find Amata,” Keelah reminded Marian. “Only she can tell us.”

Restraint. Even though her heart was breaking. Composure. Even though her blood was on fire.

Keelah pushed down the rage and sadness. Because whatever state Amata was in… wherever she was… however… Keelah had to find her. Had to bring her girlfriend home. Just like she’d found Agatha. Like she’d found Susie. Her father. She couldn’t just leave Amata out there alone.

Keelah towered over Silver’s slumped form. Spoke in a tone that was uncompromising. “I’ll only ask you once more Silver. Where are you hiding Amata?”

Tears leaked from Silver’s eyes. The woman banged her head against the wall. Steady taps. “It’s been a while, but there’s a base camp out west,” she whispered. “That’s where the slavers take their cargo.”

“Out west?” And Keelah’s brow furrowed. Newly confused.

Silver nodded. “It’s not easy to get to. It’s hidden near the mountains. They made it that way so that no one could hear…” And Silver gulped. Fresh tears spilling from her eyes. “A bunch of evil bastards, they are.” More coughing. “But she’s all bone at this point. All bone…”

“Stop saying that!” Marian exclaimed.

Charon had been quiet to this point. Spectating. But now he moved to Keelah’s side. “What she’s describing…it sounds like the place I used to work. That compound where you found my knife.”

Keelah nodded slowly. “But that place has been vacant for years. You saw that yourself.”

“I know.”

Keelah closed her eyes. Opened them. Felt a prickle in her subconscious. What in the actual fuck was going on here?

Keelah grabbed the ransom note. Amata’s. Positioned it in Silver’s line of sight. “You wrote this note, right?” she asked Silver.

Silver hiccupped. Fixed her eyes on the paper before looking away. “I’ve written dozens. Maybe more. I can’t remember them all.”

“Focus on this one. When did you write this note?!” Keelah demanded.

“I don’t know. It’s been so long.”

“She’s drugged out of her mind,” Marian hissed. “Doesn’t even have a concept of time anymore.”

“I don’t think that’s what this is,” Keelah countered.

And Keelah snatched a syringe of Jet off the table. Kneeled beside Silver on the dirty floor and pressed the cold needle into the woman’s palm. “I need you to focus Silver. I need you to focus and try to remember. Speak as plainly as you can.”

Silver eagerly accepted the syringe of medicine. Positioned the needle expertly against her skin. Pushed.

She sighed at the harsh contact. Licked her lips gratefully as her eyes fluttered. Once. Twice.

The Jet energized her. Immediately. The drug was engineered to do just that. Silver’s eyes cleared.
And the woman’s breathing smoothed out, became steady.

When Silver’s eyes opened again, the woman was calmer. Subdued but still wary.

“I found this ransom note on the vault door this morning,” Keelah told Silver. “Did you do put it there?”

“This morning? No. I haven’t written any ransom notes in some time.”

“She’s lying,” Marian said sharply. “She admitted not even five seconds ago that she sent dozens of notes. She’s the mastermind behind this entire operation.”

Silver shook her head. “I just wrote the notes. That’s all.”

The denial reminded Keelah of Egg. The bumbling raider at the Fisher of Men carpark who had declared again and again that he was only the bookkeeper, not a slaver. Please don’t kill me, I’m just a bookkeeper. I promise!

Marian wasn’t moved by Silver’s earnest words. “You only wrote the ransom notes,” the older woman said sarcastically. “You think that makes you innocent?”

“No.” And Silver’s eyes watered. The woman gulped. Already coming down from her artificial high. “But I didn’t have a choice. Back then…I was a slave myself. He made me.”

“Oh my god…” Keelah uttered weakly. ‘Cause now it all made sense.

The wastelander climbed unsteadily to her feet. Had to be helped by Charon.

“What is it?” he asked. Noticeably concerned as he watched all the color drain from Keelah’s face.

But Keelah didn’t have time to answer because Silver continued to speak.

“He’s an evil bastard...” Silver whispered. Clutching the empty syringe in her hand like an infant would clutch a bottle. “He snatched me off the roads when I was kid. Killed my parents. He was just a punk raider then. Was going to sell me to the highest bidder, but then he took a liking to me. Used me all up. Introduced me to Jet.”

And Marian realized too that something was amiss. By the way Silver’s eyes shone with tears. And the way Keelah’s entire body quaked.

Silver’s eyes dimmed. “Even after he made a name for himself and opened a shop, he kept taking people. Had his raider friends carry out the abductions while he played the part of business man. They got to torture innocents. He kept the caps. It was a profitable arrangement for him. Made him filthy rich. And even more depraved. And I…”

The breath Silver released was tear-soaked and Keelah felt an answering emotion flare in her chest. Couldn’t breathe for a second.

“I was his pet at first,” Silver confessed. “Then his whore. And when the chems took my looks, I became his secretary. He would dope me up. So much Jet…” And her eyes widened at even the mention of the drug. “He would take the leftover paper. Tell me what to write. Ransom notes, week after week.” She shook her head back and forth. So weary. "They abducted so many…”

“Moriarty,” Keelah breathed.

The name thick and disgusting in her mouth. She had to spit it out.
“Yes.” And Silver turned anguished eyes on Keelah. “I didn’t want to help him. Didn’t want to be a part of anything he did. But he owned me. Ever since I was a little girl. Sometimes I think he still owns me. And always will…”

And Silver’s eyes moved across her untidy living quarters. The open Jet canisters; the boarded up windows; the barricaded door.

“I ran from him,” she continued. “The first chance I got. Didn’t take nothing but the clothes on my back. I hightailed it out of there.”

“We’ll kill him,” Charon said forcefully. And Keelah nodded. ‘Cause that was a given. But first…

“When was it that you fled Megaton?” Keelah asked Silver.

“I don’t know. Five years ago? Six maybe? The hideout I told you about? Where they would take their pets?” Silver grimaced at the word. Swallowed deeply. “It was raided some years back. Every slaver killed. Moriarty got wind of it and left town to investigate. The moment he walked out of the bar, I seized the opportunity. I ran.”

Keelah thought things through. Piecing together the timeline.

Silver escaped Moriarty’s clutches six years ago. Six years ago when Charon destroyed the Fisher of Men base and slaughtered all the slavers.

“That’s why you said Amata was all bone,” Keelah murmured. “You thought she was taken six years ago when you were still writing the ransom notes.”

Silver nodded.

“Moriarty posted this note to the vault,” Keelah concluded.

“But how?” Charon asked. “He doesn’t know where the vault is.”

“He’s still taking people?” Silver asked. Her dusty eyes crestfallen and weak. “I had hoped he’d given up. After his base was destroyed. Or that he’d die finally. Just keel over…”

And Silver’s foot nudged the scrap of brown paper that had fallen nearby. Her eyes tracing the words she’d penned once upon a time.

“Moriarty may have slowed down his operations, but he never stopped,” Keelah answered. “One base gets shut down and he starts another.”

It was genius really. Moriarty used his saloon as a front, but the popular establishment was also his hunting ground. Moriarty had a steady stream of raiders and victims. Served his customers drinks even as he plotted their downfall. He had them abducted the moment they stepped outside the Megaton walls.

“Moriarty doesn’t know where the vault is,” Charon repeated. “How’d he send the note?”

And Keelah knew the answer. Bit her bottom lip before responding. “Amata.”

Marian’s eyes widened and a sound escaped the older woman. High-pitched and desperate.

Keelah tasted blood. Swallowed it. “They’ve had Amata for days now. They tortured her for the information. That’s how they know where the vault is.”
Marian put a hole in the wall. Her fist meeting plaster.

“She’s still alive,” Keelah told the distressed woman. “She gave up the location of the vault but not the password.”

Hence the ransom note.

“Let’s go,” Keelah commanded.

And she led Marian and Charon to the front door. Moving at a near run because she was frantic to get to Megaton. To get Moriarty within her sights.

“What about her?” Marian asked. Pointing to Silver as Keelah worked on the series of locks securing the front door. Marian studied Silver through heavy-lidded eyes. “She was a part of it.”

“Against her will,” Keelah responded. “And she hasn’t been involved for more than six years.”

“That doesn’t excuse it.”

And Marian took a step forward. An executioner.

“She’s been punished enough,” Keelah said swiftly.

And Silver had been. Abducted as a child. Brutalized. Gang raped. Still running for her life after all these years. Afraid to venture outside. Her only companion the vicious tranquillizers that had helped steal her innocence.

Marian seemed to agree with Keelah’s assessment. The older woman stopped in her tracks; her jaw tight with emotion. Marian studied the pitiful woman. The chalky skin; the cluttered living space; the plentiful drugs.

Marian put her weapon away. Hesitated at the threshold of the small ranch house. Her face softening. “Shame,” she murmured.

A comment that could have meant anything.

“Shame.”

Then they left Silver alone.

. . .

Moriarty was cleaning his bar. Humming along to some peppy tune when Keelah stomped into the saloon, Charon and Marian right behind.

Most of the evening crowd had dispersed already. Gone on their way to dinner; their families; a nighttime lover. But a handful of customers remained. Tossing cards and shooting the breeze. Yelling at Gob to bang the radio when the static became too loud.

Moriarty smiled when Keelah entered the bar. That wily grin of his. Sharp and sure. And the barkeep sat three glasses out. One after another. As if Keelah were just another customer. And he was a cheerful host.

“Whiskey, right?” he asked Keelah. His voice smooth and low.

And he’d already reached for the oversized bottle. Began to pour. Even though Keelah and her
companions continued to stand. Even though the three of them were carrying weapons and looked fit to kill.

Moriarty filled the glasses to the brim. An excess he rarely deployed. He pushed the first drink towards Keelah. “On the house,” he purred. “Since you bought friends.”

Keelah ignored the alcohol. Tossed a heavy item onto the countertop. “You lost something,” she told the saloon owner.


Marian stepped forward angrily. “Keelah, I can’t abide another lengthy conversation. Give me five minutes alone with this bastard. I’ll get the truth out of him.”

Moriarty cackled. Waved away the beefy guards who had quickly encircled Keelah and her friends.

Moriarty winked at Marian. “I would welcome five minutes alone with you, love. You seem the type who could help me loosen my tongue.”

And he licked his teeth suggestively.

Keelah and Marian reached for the detestable man at the same time.

Keelah got to him first. Landed a blow against Moriarty’s cheek.

A fight broke out immediately. Moriarty’s goons throwing punches and pulling out their firearms when Charon and Marian proved too much for them.

Patrons dove for cover. Hiding behind furniture and running out of the saloon shouting as bullets ricocheted off the walls, and Marian’s nail board cut furious swaths from side to side.

Keelah let Charon and Marian handle the mercenaries. She concentrated on Moriarty. Leapt over the countertop at the barkeep. Awkwardly and ineffectively because of her bum leg.

She and Moriarty landed in a tangle of arms and legs; hard against the cement floor. They tussled for control. One gaining the advantage briefly before the other took over. Again and again. Fingers, nails, teeth. Whatever they could use to damage the other.

A thumb in the eye. Hand against windpipe. Squeeze.

Keelah head-butted Moriarty. A practiced move. Made the man wince; falter. She scrambled from beneath him. Rolled him over. Rained down blows against the plush face.

Again and again until Moriarty’s nose softened. His right eye bulged. Mucus. Red.

Moriarty didn’t concede. He reached up and choked Keelah. Tight. His gnarled hands a vice around the wastelander’s throat.

He would kill her. She would kill him. Simultaneous victory and defeat.

Keelah could barely breathe. Moriarty couldn’t see. His face a gory bowl of red.

Keelah head-butted him again. Until her eyes watered. Until his hands loosened.

“You son of a bitch,” she sneered. Paying little attention to the turmoil surrounding her. Not sure if
Marian and Charon were winning or losing. “You son of a bitch,” she said again. Digging an elbow into Moriarty’s jugular. Wishing it was a knife. Wishing she could cut and cut. Payback for what he’d done to Amata; to Silver; to the countless wastelanders he’d had carted to torture factories.

She inhaled sharply when she felt the blade enter her. A loud hiss of pain escaping her mouth. She’d forgotten that Moriarty had the pearl-handled dagger. Could feel the steel make contact with her skin; the blade buried deep into her side.

Moriarty pulled the dagger out; pushed it in again. Agony. Until Keelah bit a hole into her bottom lip.

But she didn’t loosen her hold on him. Used one hand to hold him down. The other to grip the wrist holding the dagger. She couldn’t let him stab her again.


She slashed an elbow across Moriarty’s face. Cracked his eye socket.

They would have killed each other. And enjoyed doing it. But Charon pulled Keelah away. Yanked the wastelander off of Moriarty with a terrible fierceness.

Charon pushed Keelah towards Marian. “You can’t kill him yet!” Charon reminded Keelah. Breathing heavily from his own intense fighting.

Then he turned towards Moriarty; who was still sprawled on the ground bleeding. Charon stomped Moriarty in the face. Once. Twice more. Because he hated the son-of-a-bitch too.

And Moriarty went cold.

... Moriarty slumped forward in the chair. Wheezed loudly. His nose broken. Something lodged in his throat. Maybe a tooth.

He spit onto the floor. Blood and phlegm. A rotted molar.

“He’s awake.”

Charon slapped him just to be sure, and Moriarty opened his eyes. Scowled against the harsh light.

The barkeep was tied to a chair with nylon rope. They were still in the bar. But the saloon was deserted save Keelah, Charon and Marian.

Gob and Nova hovered nearby; anxious. And Moriarty spied the corpses of his hired men. Bullet-ridden; some with holes dotting their bodies from Marian’s nail board.

Moriarty spat again. A waste of caps hiring those fools!

Keelah pulled a chair up. Sat across from Moriarty. The wastelander was badly wounded herself. A deep gash to her side and a worked-over face. But she blinked through the pain. Gritted her teeth and fixed Moriarty with a stony look.

“Where’s Amata?” she asked evenly.

Moriarty chuckled. Turned his head, this way and that. Looking for what? Before glancing sidelong
at Keelah. “The pretty lass? Oh…she’s around.”

Marian punched him in the face. “Where?!“ the woman demanded.

Another blow. Directly to his bulbous nose, making Moriarty wince. But the man laughed again; immediately afterwards. Smiled wide with teeth that had been stained with blood.

“That’s the wrong approach with me, dearie,” he told Marian. In a sing-song voice. “I’m a person who appreciates a good bollocking.”

And of course he enjoyed the torture. He was someone who courted violence. Who cultivated it. He sported as many scars as Keelah did. Even more. And he clearly reveled in the brutality. Sucked on his fang-like teeth and chuckled loudly.

He turned his head again. Squinted with the one eye that still worked. Nodded at his bar. “Think you could pour me a drink?” he asked Keelah. “I’m feeling a bit parched.”

Keelah slapped him. Grabbed the barkeep by the throat. Pressed forward. “I’ll carve you up Moriarty. I swear it. Now tell me where Amata is.”

But it only made him laugh. Full-throated chuckles that pushed more blood from his mouth. Splashed flecks of pink against Keelah’s face.

The wastelander pulled back. Wiped her face on her arm. Glared savagely.

“Simms won’t be too happy with the ruckus you’ve caused,” Moriarty goaded. “You wrecked my bar. Killed my men. And assaulted the wealthiest man in town. The sheriff will have you tried and hung.”

“I don’t think so.”

And Keelah nodded at the window. Where Sheriff Simms stood guard outside the bar. The officer was on lookout for any more of Moriarty’s men.

It was Keelah’s turn to smirk. “Sheriff Simms and the Regulators have been hunting the Fisher of Men for years now. It really pissed him off to learn that you’ve been right here all this time. I’m pretty sure he wants a shot at you after we’re done.”

Moriarty twisted against the heavy rope. Tried to ease his discomfort. He stared back at Keelah with ancient, evil eyes.

He let his gaze travel from Keelah to Charon to Marian. Stopped on Gob. A tiny smile at his employee.

“What are you waiting for?” Moriarty asked Gob.

Keelah raised an eyebrow. What?

And Gob whipped a pistol from the small of his back. Aimed at Keelah’s head. Fired.

The bullet barely missed Keelah. A line of fire grazing her neck. Gob fired again. Struck Marian in the shoulder.

“Shit!”

“—the fuck?!”

In the melee, Nova recovered the pistol. Stood with the gun. Held it shakily.

“Shoot them!” Moriarty demanded. “Kill them all!”

Keelah hobbled from the chair, clutching her neck. Marian was bloody too. Moving slowly with her nail board. Charon still on the floor, subduing Gob.

“Shoot them!” Moriarty roared.

Nova’s mouth opened and closed. The gun slick in her hand. Unfamiliar. The redhead swung the weapon around. So many targets. Then she steadied it. Pointed it at Moriarty. “I’m not the religious type,” Nova said softly. “But I’ve prayed for such an opportunity.”

And she went to pull the trigger.

“Don’t!” Keelah cried. Reaching for the gun. Holding her neck with the other hand. “He has information we need.”

And Nova hesitated only a second before handing the weapon over.

“Don’t hurt Gob,” the redhead said to Keelah with watery eyes. “He’s conditioned to do what Moriarty tells him. But he didn’t want to.”

Charon hauled the spindly ghoul to his feet. Fixed his shotgun on Gob. Awaited word from Keelah. “Please,” Nova entreated.

And Gob cowered in Charon’s grasp. His mottled facial features full of sweat. His mouth moving rapidly as he recited gibberish.

“Take him to Sheriff Simms,” Keelah told Charon. As she reached into her supply pack for a bandage to treat her neck wound.

Charon narrowed his eyes at Keelah. “Exactly how many people do you plan to pardon today?” he asked Keelah. Cleary annoyed with his friend’s leniency. “He tried to kill you.”

Keelah glared back. “He’s only a puppet.”

“A puppet with shit aim. Otherwise you’d be dead.”

And Charon clocked Gob. Twice in the mouth. Retaliation. Then the mercenary dragged the ghoul outside to be handed over to the sheriff.

“You’re a saint,” Moriarty crowed. Needling Keelah. Enjoying how pissed the wastelander was.

Nova helped Keelah treat her wound. The redhead applied the sticky bandage to Keelah’s neck before crossing the room to assist Marian with her injury.

“Let me,” Nova scolded. When Marian tried to pull away from her.

Behind Keelah, Moriarty chortled. “Nova, I got a boo-boo that needs patching up. Think you can fit me in next?”
Keelah stalked back over to the bound man. Leaned down until her breath rustled his hair.

Moriarty was expecting another question. And he smiled up at Keelah, preparing his retort.

Keelah sunk her combat knife into the man’s right leg.

“Son of a bitc—!” Moriarty yowled. But he soon quelled the outburst. Laughed between the gasping breaths. “You missed all the major veins,” he teased. “I can teach you a thing or two about torture, wee one. I certainly taught your friend.”

Keelah twisted the knife. Created a spout of blood. Hypnotically red.

Moriarty wobbled in his seat. Inhaled. Exhaled. Opened and closed his functioning eye. “Even if you kill me, I’ve won. I beat you. For years I’d been looking for ways to fix you, girl. Fantasized about it. At first I was going to kill that ghoul of yours. Or that ranger bitch who comes to town to visit Jenny Stahl. But both of them are too well-armed. Too much for my men. So I decided to slit Leo Stahl’s throat instead. Since he fancies you. I knew that would wound your delicate sensibilities. But then I remembered how important an asset Leo is. It won’t be long until I have the boy back on Jet, buying out my supply. So I decided to give him a pass.”

He grinned. The blood on his teeth blinding.

“I had to bide my time. Wait for a better target. And what do you know? One day Gob’s messing around with the radio and this little old biddy comes on, playing the violin. Dedicating a sweet song to the Lone Wanderer.”

This bout of laughter was softer. Muted by his pain.

“I had my boys snatch her. And I put that ransom note on your door. Waited for you to find it. It was delicious.” His eye sparkled. Mirth. “It’s not new to me, of course. Taking people. Toying with them…I’ve been doing it since before you were born. When you were just a thought in your mother’s mind. A speck. But I must admit, I’ve found new joy in this game now that you’re involved. I suppose I should thank you for that.”

And Keelah wanted to cut that damnable smile off his face. So she tried. Pulled the knife from Moriarty’s leg. Lunged for his face.

But Marian intervened. Disarmed Keelah expertly.

“Amata first,” Marian reminded. “We can’t hurt him too badly.” But the older woman was a hypocrite. ‘Cause she immediately returned the knife to Moriarty’s leg. Stabbed the man so viciously that his knee buckled.

“Why’d you do it?” Keelah asked Moriarty. When the man had stopped jerking in his seat. “Why involve me? My friends? What’d I ever do to you?”

Moriarty struggled to stay alert. The injuries to his body catching up with him. Making him almost delirious. “You’re smug. You and your bastard father. Traipsing into the wasteland with your big ideas. Your self-righteousness. You disrupted things. Tried to bring your vaultie ways to the wasteland. At least your dad knew when to get out of town. You…you stuck around like a thorn in my side. Detoxing my customers. Scaring off raiders. You even deactivated that damn atomic bomb outside when I could have used that explosion to my advantage.”

He shook his head. Embittered. Furious.
“I’ve wanted to kill you for years. And I tried. I sent you out there to find Silver. You weren’t supposed to make it back, you know that? I had my men waiting in ambush for you. But you survived their attack. Killed my mercs.” He laughed again. “Every time you stepped foot outside these walls, I had raiders waiting for you. But you’re damn good with a gun. I’ll give you that. And since I couldn’t kill you, I figured I’d play with you instead.”

He’d decided to attack Keelah indirectly. Kidnapped Agatha. Then Amata. Would have continued to torment her for god knows how long.

“Where’s Amata?” Keelah asked.

Moriarty smiled. The blood drying on his face like a rust-colored mustache. “Why…she’s riding the rocket, my dear.”

“Where is she?!”

He leaned back in his seat as best he could. “I tell you what…you give me the passcode to the vault, and I’ll tell you where she is. I’ve never seen a vault before. I’ve always been curious…”

Marian choked him. Dissolved the rest of Moriarty’s words into wet pants. “Tell us!” Marian shouted.


Nova stared in confusion. Not quite understanding what was going on. Who Amata was. What Moriarty had done to provoke such uncharacteristic anger from Keelah.

“Check his computer,” Nova volunteered. “He keeps records of everything.”

Moriarty glared at the redhead. Tried to sink his teeth into Marian’s hand. Gave up when Marian increased the pressure on his throat. Made his eyes water.

And Keelah had already sprinted to the back room.


And when she could move again, she made her way to Moriarty’s computer. Didn’t bother sitting. Began pressing on the keys. A stream of letters. Done!

A treasure trove of files on his desktop.

Incriminating information on Megatowners. Receipts. Supply lists.

And a folder oddly titled ‘File’.

Keelah clicked on it.

A series of short sentences.

- *Another teenager. Blonde. Only lasted four minutes. Cried for his mother before expiring.*
- *This one’s pretty. Keep.*
- *It’s always better when you get family members. Or a couple. They’ll do anything to keep their loved one alive for a few more seconds. Even hold a grenade. Fools!*

Keelah skimmed through the lengthy document. Not wanting to read fully. To add more images to
the already fucked up kaleidoscope she carried inside her head.

Something caught her eye:

- **The old lady’s a fighter. Bunk said she almost chewed his ear off. Could sell the violin for a pretty penny or keep it as a memento. Undecided.**
- **The old buzzard actually thinks the Lone Wanderer is coming for her. Ha! She’ll be dead before we even send the ransom note.**

Tears spilled from Keelah’s eyes. Momentarily blurring her vision. Fucking Moriarty! And poor Agatha…

Something else:

- **Good fortune. Had a vaultie walk into the bar today looking for the Lone Wanderer. A pretty thing she was. Could probably replace Nova.**
- **Took the vaultie underground. Will have the boys play until she gives up the password.**

Keelah stepped back from the computer. Hands trembling. This was it. Moriarty indicated that he’d taken Amata underground.

*Underground?*

Where was that? A sewer system? Some patchwork of hidden tunnels?

And then it hit her. The favorite location for raider gangs. Those areas of the wasteland where dirt festooned and bandits held sway.

“The metro tunnels,” Keelah said out loud.

Deputy Weld had seen Amata walking southward. Keelah would start with the south metro station.

Keelah dashed back into the bar.

“I know where Amata is,” she told Marian.

Charon reentered the bar at that moment. Perked up when he heard Keelah’s declaration.

“Is that so?” Moriarty drawled. “Truth be told, your friend could be in a lot of places, love. The human body doesn’t hold up well when dynamite’s attached to it. You might want to look all over.”

Keelah would have slapped him. But her anger had cooled. Transmogrified from fiery rage to ice cold resolve.

“Let’s go,” she directed to Charon and Marian.

And she made sure her weapons were secure; her supply pack firmly in place. Then she injected a Stimpack into her injured side.

Charon turned towards the front door. Moriarty wiggled restlessly in his seat.

“Which one of you is going to deliver me to Sheriff Simms?” the saloon keeper asked.

“I am.”

And Keelah removed the knife from Moriarty’s leg. Used the bloody dagger to cut the rope from his
“That’s a good lass,” Moriarty said. Stretching unhurriedly. Smirking, as usual.

And Keelah jammed the knife into his throat.

He gagged. Clutched at her hands desperately. His roughened fingers against hers would be a sensation Keelah would never forget.

She held on to the knife. A tight grip. Didn't stop pushing until Moriarty stilled. His blood warm against her hands.

His eye stayed open. Seemed to be watching as Keelah cleaned the blade against her pants leg. Returned the knife to her boot. Exhaled. Felt nothing.

“Let’s go,” Charon encouraged.

And the three of them moved towards the front door. A unit.

“What should I do?” Nova asked hesitantly. Still standing there beside the bar. Gaping at her former employer. The ghostly eye. The lolling head.

“You can do whatever you want Nova,” Keelah responded calmly. “The bar is yours now. You might want to change the sign above the door.”

And she left Nova with quite the mess to clean up. Spoke briefly with Sherriff Simms—a summary; a few questions—than she, Charon, and Marian headed down the ramp towards the city gates.

On to the south metro tunnels.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title inspired by Leon Bridges song "Better Man."
Sweet Chariot

Chapter Summary

The LW and her companions venture into the metro tunnels where they find Amata.

Chapter Notes

Coming forth to carry me home...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Desperate Ones

Chapter 40 – Sweet Chariot

The south metro tunnels were a tangle of broken tracks, rusted over train cars, exposed wiring, and radroaches. It was a subterranean hell. Treacherous to all who entered.

Most wastelanders avoided the underground stations. Left the darkened tunnels to the raiders and ghouls.

Traveling merchants would scurry past the splintered entryways—the gates broad and wide like an open mouth—and close their ears to the sounds they could discern from inside. A rustle of feet; guns firing; muted screams.

But Keelah and Charon had navigated these tunnels many times before. Even Marian didn’t balk at the murkiness that loomed before them. She just followed Keelah inside the train station. Her nail-board heavy in her hands. Secure.

Keelah squinted in the dark. Needing a lantern desperately but not wanting to alert anyone to their presence. The wastelander flicked her Pip-boy light on, the lowest setting. Then she tiptoed through the dark passageway. Eyes peeled, searching for movement. Ears primed.

What was that sound? A cough? A laugh?

The tunnels were long and dark. Some passages inaccessible because of the mountainous debris. It would take them hours to search the entire station. And god only knew how many raiders were inside. Those leftover Fisher of Men who had been commissioned to abduct and torture Amata.

Even the thought of Amata’s captivity put Keelah on edge. Made the wastelander grind her teeth in panic and switch from her combat pistol to her heavy gun.

She would kill every slaver she found in this place. She would kill them and make it hurt.

It alarmed Keelah—just a bit—how much she looked forward to this reckoning.
There would be blood. So much of it. And she would lose herself in it. *No mercy.*

There was a skittering nearby. A soft sound, there and gone. Radroaches rooting around in the rubbish for bits of food.

Keelah and her companions paid the insects no mind. The trio continued forward. Deeper into the gutted station. Until they reached the lobby area where they paused for a second, kneeled. Surveyed their surroundings with tight eyes.

So quiet. Too quiet. Not even a feral ghoul yet.

“We should split up,” Keelah suggested. “We’ll cover more ground that way.”

Charon nodded and Marian pursed her lips.

It was a bad idea. Going off alone when there could be an army of raiders waiting for them. But they had little choice. Amata was living on borrowed time. *If* she was living at all. They had to find the vaulter as quickly as possible. And that meant separating for the time being. Moving through the dark on their own.

“Whoever finds Amata first, fire two rounds into the ceiling. Short bursts. The other two of us will come running.”

And Keelah gave Marian the combat pistol. Waited until the older woman had secured the gun to her hip before taking off towards the darkest part of the train station.

Charon moved in the opposite direction; to where the train cars slumbered, choking the tracks. And Marian headed for the stairs; to explore the second floor of the sprawling structure.

There was rustling in the dark. A dog; a rat; passing wind.

Whatever it was stilled immediately. Gone.

Until the tunnel was noiseless again. An absence of sound that was foreboding.

. . .

Marian almost lost an arm to a feral ghoul.

The older woman had been ambushed near the public restrooms. Attacked by a small horde of snarling ghouls; their mouths wide with missing teeth as they grabbed at her; gnawed.

The green glow of the lead ghoul sparked a painful glint in Marian’s eye; made the woman falter.

The ghouls had Marian pressed into one of the cramped bathroom stalls. Four or five of them crowding her in the enclosed space. Another handful reaching for her from the floorboards.

And when an emaciated hand grabbed her ankle and tugged, Marian lost her footing, fell. The battle-hardened warrior couldn’t help but think but how inglorious it would be for her to survive twenty years in the Capital Wasteland only to die in a public bathroom, pressed against a toilet.

Marian landed on her side. Used her nail board to keep the groundlings at bay while she shot at the other ghouls. Projectiles that missed their mark because she was firing with her non-dominant hand.

Then she was out of bullets. The glowing ghoul pulling at her arm; trying to claw it off, trying to eat it. Hissing loudly when it encountered leather instead of the flesh it craved.

She would have died. Bloodily. Pitiably. Ripped to shreds; devoured lustily.

But then Marian heard something. Faint booms from somewhere close by. The sound of a gun firing twice. Short bursts. The signal.

Someone had found Amata.

Marian stared directly into the jowls of the glowing ghoul. The smell of dank overwhelming her senses. So close.

She swung the combat pistol. Used it as a mallet. Punched a hole in the ghoul’s face.

The older woman created just enough space for her to scramble to her feet. Where she swung confidently with her nail board. Made contact with the throng of undead. Satisfying cracks against ruined faces until the ghouls howled in anger; their sinewy limbs disintegrating into nothingness.

Amata.

The preeminent thought as Marian fought her way out of the bathroom stall.

She hadn’t seen her daughter in twenty years. She’d be damned to get this close only to die on a bathroom floor.

Six ghouls between her and the exit. Now five. Four.

Marian was preternaturally calm. Stately.

“Momma’s coming,” she murmured. Swinging wildly.

A sunken head soaring through the air. Bodies collapsing. Green ooze.

And the racket the woman made (defending herself) was so loud that it drew the attention of other ghouls who had been lurking nearby. A fresh wave of them rushing into the lavatory, screeching. Until Marian had a roomful of them clamoring for her. Hungry. Determined.

. . .

Keelah crouched beneath the overhang. Still and quiet as she waited for reinforcements. The wastelander was tired and anxious and she bit into her bottom lip worriedly as she studied the scene playing out in front of her.

There was a handful of raiders huddled around a burning trash can. Warming their fingers as they cackled at bawdy jokes; ate gelatinous food from rusted cans; flicked cigarette ash into the flaming waste bin.

Keelah scowled at them.

They would be easy targets. They were lax and unprepared. A careful round of headshots would finish them.

But Keelah had to wait. Couldn’t risk discovery just yet when there could be more slavers just out of view.
She focused her attention on the locked gate the men were guarding. Behind that gate was a door, also locked.

A holding cell, no doubt. Where the slavers kept their captives. Amata.

Keelah had already passed some of the hostages. As she’d made her way through the tunnels to this location. She’d stepped over dozens of corpses. Dismembered pieces of victims who’d failed to outrun their bomb collars. A hand here; a bone there. A mandible picked clean and glistening atop a folding chair.

There were blood spatters against the station walls. Some splashes redder than others. Fresh.

This metro tunnel was yet another Fisher of Men dungeon. Hopefully it would be the last.

Sudden movement behind Keelah. A hand against her elbow. Charon.

Keelah turned to her friend; nodded. Two fingers pointed upward. A series of hand gestures.

*Stealth kill the guards. I’ll check for tripwires and disable any locks.*

Charon mouthed. “Where’s Marian?” And Keelah shook her head.

Maybe Marian hadn’t heard the gunshots. Or maybe she’d gotten lost in the tunnels. But they didn’t have time to wait for the woman. Had to continue on without her.

Keelah and Charon’s eyes locked. Agreement.

Then Keelah tiptoed along the edge of the platform. Searching for mines, traps, explosives.

Charon bore right, combat knife in hand. Four raiders to kill in a manner of seconds.

The mercenary breathed in and out, concentrating. And when the raiders tipped back their heads to laugh at another joke, he sprang. Two raiders dead before their friends could even fathom it.

The third’s neck broken beneath Charon’s gnarled hands. Keelah dusted the fourth. Her knife sinking into the raider’s side as she clenched him from behind; twisting the blade into supple flesh. A killing blow.

Keelah dropped the limp raider to the ground. Scowled down at him as his blood stained her boot.

Charon stared at Keelah speculatively. His olive eyes shining; approving of her ruthlessness.

And when Keelah made her way to the gate—removing a bobby pin so that she could disengage the complicated lock—Charon stood watch. His eyes scanning the tracks for any threats.

The fire cackled in the trash can; sending orange embers floating. A constellation of ashes surrounding them.

Then Keelah was inside the gate. Charon behind her.

They entered a darkened room. The Pip-Boy guiding them; and Keelah gasped.

. . .

A pair of eyes stared back at her. Dull and lifeless. And *only* eyes.
Two bloody ovals absent a face, pinned to a bulletin board. The irises a muddy brown. Red tendrils hanging from them like soggy streamers; grotesque.

Keelah gagged. Immediately looked away.

And when her gaze shifted to the floor, she found the owner. A body slumped near a desk. Two holes where eyes should have been. Identical grooves, circular and neat. As if the man’s eyes had been lovingly plucked out; a careful excavation.

“Let’s move,” Charon whispered. When Keelah lingered near the mutilated body. Overcome with emotion.

_I should cover him, _she thought to herself. _I should lie him down. Close what’s left of his eyes._

It was monstrous what these slavers did to people. It wasn’t enough that they kidnapped; plundered; tortured. These slavers—cruel and sick, the _lot _of them—savored the bloodletting.

They nursed it. Prolonged it.

Keelah’s attention strayed to the bulletin board.

They _perfected _it.

And Keelah wondered briefly if she’d killed Moriarty too quickly.

_It didn’t hurt him enough, _she lamented. _He didn’t scream._

But there was little time for regrets. Morbidity. Amata was waiting.

Keelah left the dead man behind. Crept down an unlit hallway.

A row of doors greeted them. All of them shut; bolted.

Keelah picked every lock.

And behind each door, a new horror.

A cage full of bones. Yellow and plentiful.

A woman suspended from twisted rope. Her feet curled around each other; permanently locked in her final rictus of pain.

Another body. Burned and blackened. Made small by fire. Or perhaps that victim had been a child.

A survivor in the fourth room. Mewling softly. Seconds from death. The woman was naked and shivering. Dozens of gashes marked her body; shallow _and_ deep. As if she’d been disfigured just for the hell of it. Some sort of game or exercise. A human carving post.

Keelah rushed to the woman’s side. Kneeled in the pool of blood; began applying first aid to the dribbling wounds.

“We don’t have time for this,” Charon said sharply. Pausing in the doorway. Staring out into the hallway. More rooms to explore. More slavers. “She’d dead anyway.”

“She’s not.”
And Keelah checked the woman’s pulse. It was faint but there. And the woman’s eyes fluttered. Still seeing. Still conscious.

“We’re here for Amata,” Charon reminded. “You can’t save them all.”

And he moved on without Keelah. Back out into the hallway with his shotgun in hand.

Charon would leave the captives to Keelah. He was hunting slavers.

He opened the door to the adjacent room. Found a small collection of slavers counting caps.

Charon grinned triumphantly. Swung his shotgun around. Shot the nearest one in the face.

He was pleased when the slaver’s head exploded like an overripe melon. Then he moved on to the next. Firing calmly. The sound of buckshot so loud that Keelah startled in the next room. Nearly lost her grip on the stimpack she was pushing into the mutilated woman’s arm.

Keelah apologized unnecessarily; frowned down at the bruise she’d left on the woman’s skin.

The woman had been injured so many times already. The flat plane of her stomach disappeared beneath dissecting lines of red.

So much bruised flesh. Red and puckered, from her shoulders down to the soles of her feet.

“You’ll be okay,” Keelah murmured to the woman. Injecting Med-X now. And quick. Because Amata was close by and needed her.

*Dear god, don’t let me find Amata like this.*

And when she’d done all she could—medicine and sticky bandages to as many gashes as she could cover—Keelah fled the room. Joined the fray next door. Her rifle joining Charon’s; filling the small room with smoke and sound.

They killed.

... .

They found another survivor who hadn’t yet been tortured. A teenager who was chained to a water fountain. He was tear-streaked and babbling. Keelah released the boy; told him to run.

The wide-eyed teen barreled down the hallway, shrieking, and Keelah and Charon turned towards the final door.

Amata had to be here. She *had* to be.

Keelah and Charon had kept a single slaver alive. Had pinned the man against the wall and questioned him.

The slaver had spoken around a mouthful of blood. *The vaultie’s in the back. The boss liked her, so she got special treatment.*

And he’d laughed. Even though he knew he was going to die. He’d chuckled madly as if he was in on some great joke and Keelah and Charon were the fools.

Charon killed him.
Firing a round into the slaver’s stomach. And then another. Until he’d emptied his entire chamber. Excessive brutality. Like when he’d killed Ahzrukhal. Recompense.

... 

And now here they were. The final door. Not even locked. Ajar. As if Keelah and Charon were expected. Welcome guests.

Keelah exchanged a glance with Charon. Swallowed deeply. Please Amata... Then she pushed open the door. Entered.

A large room. Some sort of converted storage area. Wooden crates, this way and that. And dozens of folding chairs lined neatly as if this was an area where the slavers convened regularly.

And perhaps it was. Perhaps this area of the dungeon was an arena because there were four cages. Nearly as tall as the ceiling. And the chairs were lined in rows in front of the holding pens. As if the slavers sat there often and spectated.


Someone decomposing in the second cage.

The third cage was empty. Would have probably housed the teenager they’d released.

And then the fourth. The largest cage.

Amata.

The blue of her jumpsuit darkened a deep brown from dirt, dried blood. The yellow stitching of the 101 invisible.

Amata was sitting. Legs straight out front and stiff. And her face was so ashen; her eyes closed.

Keelah couldn’t tell if Amata was alive or dead, and the wastelander’s eyes watered. She inched forward. “Mata?”

The longest second of Keelah’s life.


But Keelah had already wrenched open the cage door. It wasn’t even locked. She rushed forward on trembling legs. “Amata!”

Amata’s eyes snapped open. Flashing. “Don’t come any closer!”

Keelah hesitated. Kneeled down. Centimeters away. Her hands outstretched, placating. “Sweetheart, it’s me.” Because Amata appreciated pet names. And because it was so damn good to see her. And talk to her. And touch. “It’s me.”

And Keelah crept a bit closer. Her eyes traveling over her girlfriend’s form. Examining.

Tiny ovals of gray against honeyed skin. Cigarette burns. Parallel lines on each arm.
And Amata was thin. As if she’d been starved. Her shapely body shrunken and small; so unlike her. Tears spilled from Keelah’s eyes as she reached for her girlfriend. A quivering hand.

“Please Keelah!” Amata implored. “Don’t come any closer. There’s a mine beneath me.”

Oh.

Oh.

And Keelah looked down. Saw the barest bit of metal beneath Amata’s thigh. Red and green wiring. A cylindrical charge that would explode at the slightest movement.

How long had Amata been sitting like this? Riding the rocket?

Keelah met her girlfriend’s eyes. That hazel-flecked gaze she loved so much.

“I knew you would come,” Amata whispered. Her voice scratchy and low from advanced dehydration, fatigue. “I wanted you to. But I also didn’t want you to.”

Keelah’s face contorted. Pain and confusion marking her features. “I didn’t want you to be hurt,” Amata explained. “Like what they did to the others.” And her eyes flicked to the other cages. “Like what they did to me.”

“What did they do?” Keelah asked weakly. Afraid to ask but needing to know.

Amata closed her eyes. Exhaled so sadly that it seemed like a whimper. “They wanted to know where the vault was. They took turns…cutting into a woman’s body until I told them.”

The survivor, out front, who was covered in knife cuts, bleeding.

“And when I refused to give them the password, they started on me. With fire.”

And Keelah knew without asking that there were more burns beneath Amata’s jump suit. The slavers had started with cigarette burns but they’d progressed to something even more fiendish.

Keelah bit back a sob. Put on a brave face. “I’m going to get you out of here,” she declared. Already fumbling in her pack for the tools she would need to disarm the mine.

“You can’t. I heard them talking…This mine has a specific design. Any tinkering with the wiring and it explodes. I move too far to the left or right, and it explodes.” Amata’s chest heaved. Panic and sadness mounting. “None of the others made it. They couldn’t sit still long enough…I saw them…”

Her voice broke.

And Keelah wanted to hug her girlfriend; comfort her; use her body as a shield like she’d been doing since she was eight years old.

“I’m getting you out of here,” Keelah avowed. And she craned her neck to get a better glimpse of the bomb’s wiring.

“What type of fuse did the slavers use? Was there an ARM switch that she could deactivate? Or a delay function that would allow them a few precious seconds to run before the mine exploded?

“I’ve deactivated hundreds of mines in the Capital Wastes,” Keelah explained. “Even had to make my way through a town that was nothing but landmines. I was tricked into that, of course. But I
made a cool thousand caps off of all the mines I collected.”

She was saying it all casually and conversationally. Rambling inanely about anything so that she didn’t get distracted by those burns on Amata’s arms; the hurt in the vaulter’s eyes. The fucking risk she was taking (!) with Amata’s life.

Keelah cleared her throat. *Don’t you fucking cry Keelah!* “I even deactivated an atomic bomb. Took me six hours and I had to chug a shit ton of Mentats, but I did it.”

Keelah took the metal pincers from her sewing kit. Tested them in her hand. Open and closed. “I can do this,” she whispered. Inhaling until her lungs were full. Exhaling. Her eyes flickering from the colorful wiring to those earth-colored eyes she loved so much. “I can do it.”

“I’ve never seen anyone escape these mines,” Charon commented from behind her.

The mercenary was so tall that he stood even with the cage. He paused on the threshold of the pen. His mossy eyes somber as he surveyed Amata’s predicament.

Keelah threw a glance his way. Reproachful.

“I worked for them, remember?” Charon reminded her. “I’ve seen these mines get triggered by a stiff breeze.”

Keelah turned back to Amata. To the mine hidden beneath the cotton-covered leg. “I can do this,” she repeated forcefully. Needing to convince herself.

“I don’t want you to.”

Keelah’s head snapped up. She met Amata’s eyes. “What?!”

“You’ll only get yourself killed,” Amata told her. “Like the others.” And her mouth twisted into an unhappy bow. “Just leave me.”

"No."

"Do it Keelah."

“Shhhh Amata. Conserve your energy.”

And Keelah placed a hand atop Amata’s knee. She did that to keep her girlfriend still while she worked on the mine. But she also needed to touch the other woman. To comfort her. Reconnect.

“So stubborn,” Amata muttered darkly. Visibly distraught. Her eyelids heavy with tears.

“I know. And you can fuss at me all you want about it when we get home, okay?”

And Keelah smiled at her girlfriend. Wide and sure. ‘Cause if these were their last moments together, then…fuck it!...she was going to enjoy them. If only she could coax free a smile…

Amata’s eyes cleared, and the vaulter managed a small grin of her own. “I’m going to read you the riot act,” she murmured. “In high volume.”

“I look forward to it.”
And Keelah pushed against Amata’s leg. Just a bit. Enough so that she could see the side panel of the landmine.

A crisscross of plastic wires; the glowing charge; a pressure plate that was being held down by Amata’s weight.

A more complicated model than Keelah was accustomed to.

And it came to Keelah suddenly. The warning Bloomsee Poplar had given her all those months ago:

*Be careful with that bomb. Or you could lose the one you love.*

The Oasis oracle had been talking about Amata the entire time.

Keelah’s hands shook then. And sweat beaded on her brow. *I can’t fuck this up. I can’t…*

She spoke to Charon from the side of her mouth. “You’ve been a good friend to me Charon, but you can leave now. Wait for me outside.”

No need for there to be three casualties if this thing went bad.

Charon sucked his teeth in annoyance. “No.”

He was just as stubborn as Keelah.

But just in case Keelah *did* botch things and got them all killed, Amata needed to know:

“Your mother is alive,” Keelah told her girlfriend. Her fingers moving from the green wire to the red. Back again.

“I know dear. I told *you* that. In my letter.”

Amata breathed softly. The warm tufts of air settling atop Keelah’s head.

A tiny smile graced Keelah’s face. “No. I’ve met your mother. And she’s pretty badass.”

“What?!”

“Don’t move Amata!” And Keelah realized with some chagrin that it was a bad idea to surprise someone when they were sitting on an explosive. “I’ll tell you all about that later,” she promised. “But try to stay still sweetness. For the love of Pete!”

“My mother…” A faraway look on Amata’s face. A glimmer of hope after two weeks of blinding pain; torture. “Is she here?”

“Yeah.” And Keelah took a second from wire-watching to smile softly at her girlfriend. “Just give me a few more minutes and I’ll take you to her.”

If she stared any longer at Amata, she would cry, and Keelah needed clear eyes, so she turned back to the landmine. Gritted her teeth as she cut into the red wire. If she could remove the bomb’s battery, it would disrupt the circuitry; thereby diffusing the explosive. But it was such a delicate process. And the slavers had made this mine especially sensitive. *I just have to…*

“I need more light Charon,” she husked.

And Charon’s footsteps receded; came back. He was carrying a small flashlight now. And he shined
the yellow orb on Keelah’s hands. Was privately proud at how steady the woman’s hands were even as she sweated profusely; breathed heavily.

“The slavers designed these mines to maim not kill,” Keelah commented. As she wiggled the fuse loose. Her tongue poking out between her teeth. So focused. “They wanted the blast to cripple their hostages so that they could watch them bleed to death.”

Those rows of chairs outside the cages. This place was an arena.

Amata’s body shook; a sudden paroxysm overtaking her.

“Be still ‘Mata,” Keelah commanded softly.

“I can’t help it. I feel so disconnected from my body. I can’t feel much of anything anymore.”

And the vaulter’s leg shook; sent one of Keelah’s work tools sliding across the floor.

Amata’s body was shutting down. Overwrought and exhausted. Deprived of regular sustenance; burned repeatedly; forced to crouch for days.

The vaulter’s body was failing her at the most inopportune time.

“Just a few more minutes,” Keelah pleaded. Scrabbling for the lost tool. *Almost there. Just have to disconnect a few more wires. Loosen the battery.*

“The mine beeped,” Charon said suddenly.

“No, it didn’t.”

“It did.”

And there it was again. A metallic sound emanating from the bomb. Some mechanism shifting inside the device.

“It’s going to go off,” Charon said.

“I only need a few more seconds.”

“It’ll explode in a few more seconds.”

“Get out of here,” Amata begged. Her eyes wide and frightened. “Please Keelah. I don’t want you to die.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Just go.”

“Shhh!”

The battery was almost loose. And the landmine was beeping louder. At a faster pace.

Charon swore. Folded his arms behind his back. A warrior’s pose. Awaiting death.

“Keelah!” Amata cried. Because why wouldn’t Keelah listen? Save herself?!

“I love you,” Keelah said simply. As she tugged on the battery.
It was tape-wrapped and smooth. Heavy for its size. It’s removal would spell relief. Or doom.

And it was out.

Keelah surged forward to kiss Amata. A press of lips. Strong and fierce. In case it was the last.

Amata trembled against her. A sob escaping.

Bated breath and clenched eyes.

Then nothing.

The beeping stopped.

.

Keelah opened her eyes.

Amata exhaled tremulously.

Nothing.

“Good,” Charon commented.

Then he left the cage; the room. To do one final sweep of the perimeter.

Keelah threw her arms around Amata. Sobbed into her girlfriend’s neck. So relieved.

Amata tried to hug Keelah back, but the vaulter was so weak. She could only curl her fingers into the leather of Keelah’s armor and breathe in and out. Sharp pants that took considerable effort.

“I’m so sorry,” Keelah murmured into slick skin. “For being an ass. For leaving the vault. For taking so long to find you.”

Amata didn’t require apology. She breathed in Keelah’s scent before pulling away, gingerly. “What happened to your face?” the vaulter asked.

Oh, right. The fight with Moriarty. Keelah probably looked a mess. She certainly felt it.

The wastelander shrugged. “Doesn’t matter now.”

Amata would have cupped Keelah’s face. Kissed her again. But the vaulter couldn’t move. “You need treatment.”

“So do you.”

And Keelah placed tentative fingers against Amata’s forearm. “Amata…”

Another apology forthcoming. And questions.


“Of course.”

But first Keelah administered a stimpack to Amata’s arm. Followed by a dose of Med-X.
Then she helped her girlfriend to her feet.

It was a struggle. Amata’s legs were jelly, uncoordinated. She had to lean against Keelah’s shoulder. Wrap an arm around her; hold on tight.

Amata sagged against Keelah’s side. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk,” she apologized.

“I’ll help you.”

And they shuffled, slowly, from the cage to the room outside. Stopped a moment to let Amata catch her breath. Then more painful steps toward the exit.

A figure moved towards them from the hall. A behemoth of a person. At least six feet.

Keelah sighed in relief. “Just in time Charon. We’ll need to jury rig an emergency stretcher for Amata.”

She loosened her grip on Amata. Gestured with her free hand for Charon to help carry Amata outside.

But when Keelah looked up—What’s the holdup Charon?—she realized her mistake.

The person bearing down on her wasn’t Charon. But another raider. A man so tall that he towered over Keelah. Broad-shouldered and big.

The raider was carrying Charon’s shotgun, and he sported a fresh wound to his cheek.

“Shit!” Keelah exclaimed. Before the raider struck her across the face with the gun.

Keelah and Amata fell in opposite directions.

Keelah jerking backwards from the contact, skidding across the floor.

Amata slumping forward on debilitated legs, crumbling to the ground with an audible groan.

The raider pounced. Stomped a boot into Keelah’s side, fracturing a rib. The wastelander groaned; tried to climb to her feet.

She was at disadvantage. The raider kneed her in the face. Blood spattered from Keelah’s nose and the wastelander lost the ability to see for a second. Could only distinguish distorted shapes; blurred colors as she pushed weakly against the ground. Tried to push herself up.

She saw the punch coming. Sidestepped it. Threw an elbow at the raider. Landed a solid blow against his neck.

But he was so big and strong. He absorbed the contact easily. Then he ran at her. A locomotive. Until he had Keelah pressed against the wall.

He put mammoth hands around her throat. Choked Keelah. Lifted her up. As if she were a rag doll or a plaything. Suspended the woman several feet above the ground.

Keelah’s legs dangled helplessly. And she tried to kick the raider. But he tightened his grip. Slammed her into the wall again and again until her vision clouded again. And a buzzing sound ripped through her consciousness.

He was going to choke the life out of her. He was going to strangle her right in front of Amata.
But Keelah wouldn't go down without a fight.

She head butted the raider. Put a thumb in his eye. And when that didn’t work, she scratched twin lines across his cheek, made him bleed.

She was bleeding herself; from her nose and mouth. But she head butted the man again. Heard something crack. A facial bone. His or hers.

It was hard to tell when everything was spinning and excruciating.

Keelah tried desperately to breathe but couldn’t draw in enough oxygen. But if she was going to die, so was he. Her hands against his larynx now. Squeeze.

There was a jackhammer in Keelah’s head. So loud. Throbbing against her skull. Near fainting.

A harsh noise like a sonic boom making her teeth chatter; her eyes water.

The raider’s eyes went wide with shock. And he released his hold on Keelah. Stumbled backwards.

Keelah crashed to the floor. Landed dully on her side. Tried to breathe through a torrent of blood.

What happened?

She was so groggy and disoriented. Could barely see. Keelah turned blurry eyes on her attacker. Saw that the raider was lurching towards another target.

Amata.

The vaulter was leaning precariously against the far wall; holding Charon’s shotgun in unsteady hands.

Amata had shot the raider in the back.

Keelah could see the gunshot wounds. A pattern of holes, bloody and deep, against his waxen skin. The raider’s leather vest was charred around the edges; bits of fabric falling to the floor.

The raider stumbled forward. His arms extended towards Amata. Growling.

Keelah rolled over. Tried to recover her equilibrium. Get to her feet. But her head was so thick—swimming—and her body refused to cooperate.

Get up Keelah. Get up now!

She made it to one knee. Saw a twinkling that was her brain, concussed. Then she fell over again. Rapidly fading. Lights turning off inside of her. Darkening. Darkness. Gone.

And by the time the raider made it to Amata, the vaulter had taught herself how to reload.

Amata shot the raider again. Point blank range. Then she collapsed too.

. . .

Marian found them an hour later. It took the older woman that long to fight off the horde of feral ghouls and make her way through the twisting passageways of the metro station.

She found Charon face down in the hallway. A bulge in his head the size of a softball. The
mercenary was bleeding profusely, and he didn’t move. Not even when Marian called his name. Touched him.

A few steps further and she found Amata sprawled against the baseboards of the holding area. The vaulter’s eyes were closed, her body still. The blue jumpsuit covered in blood that wasn’t her own.

Marian exclaimed when she saw her daughter. Rushed to Amata’s side. Grappling; testing; pleading.

Amata’s didn’t respond to Marian’s entreaties. And the young woman’s eyes never opened. But she was breathing. Thank god. A steady rise and fall of her chest that was promising.

Marian surveyed her surroundings. The bloody cages; the smell of death; the felled raider.

“My god…” Marian breathed.

Then she saw Keelah.

There was a trail of blood on the floor—a garish red and smeared—from where Keelah had tried to drag herself to Amata.

The wastelander had failed to reach her destination.

Keelah had collapsed against the unswept floor. Her face pressed against concrete; her body twisted in an unnatural angle.

“My god…”

Again. As Marian’s eyes moved from Charon to Amata to Keelah.

Death.

So much of it that the room—the entire metro tunnel—reeked of it.

Chapter End Notes

This was was supposed to be the last chapter before the epilogue, but it ran a bit long. So one more then the epilogue.
Chapter 41 – I Am More Than These Bones

Marian flagged down a traveling merchant.

She had been standing outside the metro tunnel entrance for nearly an hour waiting for help. Someone—*anyone*—who could lend a hand with the crisis that was currently unfolding.

Keelah, Charon, Amata. All splayed out on the floor inside. Bloodied and nonresponsive.

A traveling merchant shuffled into sight. A stooped over man leading a small convoy across the sandy dunes.

He was followed by two brahmin saddled with goods. An armed mercenary close by, scowling and alert.

Both men’s skin was blistered from the heat and rigorous travel. And the two-headed cows grunted softly; needing water and respite.

Marian called out to the trader. Waved her hands wildly so that he could see.

The bearded man squinted his eyes suspiciously before tugging the reins on his cattle; leading his party over to Marian.

The trader lifted a sweat-stained fedora so that he could see Marian better. Then he spit onto the ground; wiped his mouth with a gnarled hand.

“If its water you’re after lady, I’m totally out of stock. Just got back from a supply run and I’m piss low on practically everything.”

And the trader squinted his eyes again. Taking note of Marian’s disheveled appearance. The blood that stained her armor; the gore-spattered nail board.

The trader threw a quick glance at his armed guard. *Keep an eye on her. Just in case.*

Marian recognized the secret communication, and the woman immediately fastened the nail board to her back. Held her hands up non-threateningly.

“I don’t mean you any harm,” she told the trader. “I’m just looking to make a purchase.”
The old man snorted. Dislodging phlegm from his aged throat. He spat onto the ground again before jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the brahmin.

“You can take a look at what I got left. But it’s mostly just ammo and jerky.”

And he gave Marian another once-over. Took note of the woman’s injuries. The patched shoulder and lacerated face. “I suppose I can give you a discount on some Stimpacks.”

Marian stopped the trader before he could fumble into his burlap sack. “That won’t be necessary,” she said quickly. “The only thing I need from you is one of those brahmin.”

“Say what now?”

And it was comical, almost, how the man’s mustache nearly crawled into his nose; he was that surprised by Marian’s request.

“I’d like to buy one of your brahmin,” Marian explained. “Maybe both if you’re willing.”

The man cackled merrily. His face breaking up into multitudinous lines. “I ain’t interested in selling one brahmin, lady. It took me more’n two years to save enough caps to buy these damn things. You think I’m fixin’ to let them go just ‘cause you ask?” He snorted amusedly. “Now do you want the Stimpacks or not?”

And he’d already turned his back on Marian. Began to re-secure his supply pack to the brahmin so that he could continue on his route.

“Please,” Marian persisted. And she gripped the trader’s elbow to regain his attention.

The mercenary frowned at her. Squeezed the handle on his rifle.

But the trader waved the mercenary off. *Hold tight son.*

The trader fixed pensive eyes on Marian. “What’s got you bedeviled so, ma'am?”

Genuine concern.

Marian exhaled tiredly. She was battered and bruised; beyond exhausted. And there were people depending on her. People who were inching closer to death as each second ticked by.

She spoke fervently. “I have friends inside who are badly injured. I need help transporting them to a doctor.”

The trader’s eyes flickered to the station entrance. To the swinging wire gate that barely hid the yawning darkness of the tunnels.

“Your friends are in there?” he asked slowly.

“Yes.”

The man huffed loudly. “Pity for you and your friends then, ‘cause ain’t no way in hell I’m going inside those there tunnels. I been on the road a piece and I hear things about that station.”

And the old man shuddered. Swallowed so deeply that Marian could see the man’s Adam’s apple bob up and down.

“What about you Paulie?” the trader asked his guard. “You going in there?”
And the mercenary shook his head. His eyes lost behind the heavy goggles he wore. “Fuck no Charlie.”

“There you have it,” the trader concluded.

“I’ll pay,” Marian entreated.

The old man shook his head. “What good does a handful of caps do me if I get eaten alive by the ghoulies? Or if’n some of those raiders get hold of me and play surgeon with my innards? Sorry lady, but you’re on your own with this.”

And he turned his back on Marian again. Firm in his convictions.

But the trader felt bad for Marian. He really did. There was a terrible sadness to the woman’s face. And the armored woman was breathing heavily as if there was a vice around her throat, preventing her from drawing a full breath.

The trader clucked his tongue in sympathy before lobbing a small package at Marian.

Marian caught the item. Stared down at it. It was a box of stimpacks.

“On the house,” the trader said. Before pulling the brahmin reins again. “Good luck to you dearie.”

Then he patted the cows on the rump; pulled them towards the road.

“You ever see inside a vault?” Marian asked him suddenly.

The trader stopped in his tracks. Turned back around. Slowly. “No.”

He was curious. One scraggly eyebrow raised in interest. “I always wanted to. Twenty-five years in this desert, selling my wares, and I never came ‘cross one of those bunkers.”

His eyes were alight with fascination.

There was a certain mystery to Vault-Tec vaults. Storied history and intrigue that could fuel a thousand tall tales.

“I’m headed to a vault,” Marian told him. And the woman straightened her shoulders. Finding a fresh reserve of energy. “You help me and my friends, and I’ll let you inside. I’ll do more than that. I’ll see to it that you leave the vault with a box of electronics that’ll set you up for life.”

The trader thought about it for a second. Then he chuckled. His mustache doing that wobbly thing again where it crept closer to his wide nose. “You had me with the tour, lady. But a box of goodies wouldn’t hurt none, I s’pose.” And he smiled warmly. “I reckon I can help you after all.”

Marian’s lips thinned and she stuffed the box of stimpacks into the pockets of her leathers. There was a long walk ahead of them. They would need the medicine.

“So what exactly do you need me to do?” the trader asked. And the old man actually stretched his arms above his head as if he were limbering up for some gargantuan task.

Marian walked a quick circle around the caravan. Taking note of the cargo; the brahmins’ health; the quality of weapons the trader and mercenary carried.

“We have three people who need moving,” Marian finally said. Coming to a stop in front of the trader. “We should be able to rig emergency stretchers to your brahmin and transport my friends that
way. So long as we don’t run into any raiders or bad weather, we should make it to the vault within the week.”

The trader pursed his lips. “A week? That’s a hell of a detour you’re asking me to make…”

And Marian expected the merchant to revoke his offer of help. But the old man eventually smiled. His eyes wide again. Full of wonder. “Is it true that those vaults have indoor pools? You take a swim in the Capital Wasteland and you’re liable to get radiation poisoning and vomit up your intestine. But if I could swim in clean water…? In a temperature-controlled vault…? Whoo wee! I could die a happy man.”

He was enthusiastic and willing to help, so Marian didn’t bother to correct the man’s misassumption. Besides, she was too busy calculating. The number of miles to the vault. The safest route. The materials she would need to construct three emergency stretchers.

The mercenary shuffled his feet in irritation. Sent dust flying in the air, cascading over the three of them; making the brahmin snort.

“How do we even know there’s a vault, boss?” the mercenary asked the trader. “This lady could be pulling a fast one on us. These so-called friends of hers could be raiders. Hiding inside those tunnels, waiting to ambush us and run off with our goods.”

A scowl stretched across Marian’s face. The woman didn’t appreciate being called a liar, and she opened her mouth to tell the mercenary just that.

But the trader only smiled; patted the jittery guard on the shoulder.

“Naw…I believe her, Paulie. Twenty-five years, caravanning in this desert. One of the first skills I picked up was how to spot a liar. This lady’s telling the truth.”

"Marian," Marian corrected.

"Marian," the trader repeated.

And the old man’s grin widened. Revealing surprisingly flawless teeth. “Well Marian, how ‘bout you and Paulie go on inside and collect your friends? I’ll stay out here and look after the brahmin.”

Paulie grumbled loudly and he shot a disapproving glare at Marian. But the mercenary did what his boss instructed. Clenching his assault rifle between sweating palms before following Marian into the ghostly station.

The trader cooed his restless cattle; reaching into his pack for the oversized jug he would use to water them.

But the old man kept one eye on the station entrance.

You could never tell what was lurking in those metro tunnels; watching, ready to pounce. And the trader wasn’t lying when he said he’d heard stories about what happened in the subterranean station.

He patted the brahmin on the head. A soft tap for each head.

“What have we gotten ourselves into, hmmm?” he asked the two-headed cows.

And the wire gate swung back and forth. A warning. An invitation.
“I thought you said there were three of them?”

“What?”

Marian wiped sweat from her brow before turning to the merchant’s armed guard, Paulie.

She’d had been trying to drag Charon’s long frame onto one of the stretchers. But even with her height and strength, the woman found it near impossible to move the unconscious ghoul. Charon was so damn tall and gangly. And in his comatose state, it seemed like he weighed a ton of bricks.

“Grab his feet,” Marian instructed Paulie. Moving her hand to Charon’s mouth; checking once more that the ghoul was breathing.

There it was. Warm tufts of air against her palm. Charon was bleeding profusely and had a head wound that was substantial and unsightly, but at least he was alive.

With Paulie’s help, Marian managed to maneuver Charon onto the portable bed. She fastened the ghoul’s arms and legs down with torn cloth. Then she took a knee; closed her eyes for a few seconds; tried to catch her breath.

Keelah and Amata were already outside, hitched to the brahmin. Now that they had Charon, they could finally be on their way. Back to Vault 101.

Marian was eager to leave this foul place behind. The walls practically hummed with all the violence that had been committed here. And there were bodies in the hallways. Eyes mounted on a bulletin board. Sightless but still staring.

Marian knew they weren’t out of danger just yet. There were still feral ghouls skulking in these tunnels. Slinking and sliding in the darkness.

She ended her break prematurely. Ignored the pinch in her shoulder from her unhealed gunshot wound. Then she turned to Paulie. “What did you say before? About my friends?”

Paulie had removed his dark goggles. And he stared at Marian with panicked eyes. “I thought you said only three of your friends needed transporting?”

“I did.”

Paulie shook his head. “What about that other woman?”

“What other woman?”

And Paulie pointed to his left. At a room at the end of the hall, door slightly ajar. “There’s a woman in there, and she’s in a bad way.”

Marian glared at the man’s lack of description. Then she stomped past him to the lightless room.

She hadn’t explored this area of the dungeon. Hadn’t wanted to after seeing those dismembered bodies in the halls.

She pushed open the door; found the woman who had been butchered by the slavers. The cuts to the woman’s body were so severe that they’d already bled through the bandages Keelah had put on them.

Marian stared down at the mutilated body. Evaluating with her piercing eyes.
“We’re going to need another stretcher,” she finally said. When she’d determined that the woman was alive.

And Paulie grumbled behind her. Barely audible swears. The mercenary was pissed that they had to spend more time in the hellhole. *I don’t get paid enough for this!* 

. . .

The traveling merchant’s name was White Coat Charlie, and he liked to talk.

For five straight days he regaled Marian with stories of his exploits in the Capital Wasteland.

White Coat Charlie was ecstatic to have a new person to talk to (Paulie had learned to tune him out. And brahmin didn’t make for the best conversationalists).

The trader talked Marian’s ear off. Chirping from sunup to sundown about any and everything.

According to White Coat Charlie, he was an explorer of some renown in the Capital Wasteland. *Why,* he’d unearthed the Declaration of Independence. Had to fight a crazed robot and everything for that invaluable parchment!

He’d led a gaggle of slaves to freedom. Marched them right to Lincoln’s Memorial where the slaves built a statue in Charlie’s honor. *Put my statue right next to Lincoln’s, they did,* he boasted.

He’d even taken on the Enclave. Blew up the military faction’s headquarters and stole off with one of their helicopters.

*They call ‘em Vertibirdies. I flew off in one of ‘em just as the Enclave base was exploding. Whoo wee! I can fly with the best of them. But the dang Vertibirdy ran out of fuel, so I had to abandon it near Girdershade.*

Marian didn’t believe a word White Coat Charlie said. The man mixed up dates and facts. And he made up names then promptly forgot them.

Of course, Marian knew that the real hero of Charlie’s tales was Keelah. But she let the trader ramble on since she was too lost in her own thoughts to offer any rebuttal. And Charlie’s talking distracted Marian from those still bodies near the campfire. The emotionless faces. The pallid skin.

Besides, White Coat Charlie proved to be a valuable companion. It turned out that the trader was somewhat of an herbalist.

*I picked up a thing or two while traveling,* he told Marian.

And their first night out on the road, the chatty merchant whipped up a salve for their comatose charges. Some amalgam of tea leaves and juniper oil that he’d spread on the injured’s skin. A modified version that he’d poured down their throats.

Amata responded well to the poultice. Began to breath more smoothly; her eyelids fluttering encouragingly.

Even Charon regained a bit of color in his weathered face. And the fourth patient—the woman who had been cut—stirred a bit in her stretcher. Her knife wounds slowly fading to a dull pink.

But Keelah’s condition didn’t change. Not one bit. The wastelander maintained her smooth countenance; her ragged breathing. A gash to her face that refused to heal.
Marian was worried.

So she let White Coat Charlie prattle on. Nonsense and fabrications.

And when the merchant proclaimed that he’d had a portion of his brain removed by a dastardly ship captain (And I have the scar to prove it!), Marian only shook her head tiredly.

She put two fingers to Keelah’s throat, checking again for a pulse. And when she found it (It’s weak but there) Marian turned to White Coat Charlie. Asked him to show her the scar.

... Thank god Keelah had told Marian the vault password when they first met. Otherwise Marian would have found herself in the same position she’d been in the past twenty years—standing outside of Vault 101, unable to get in.

Marian left White Coat Charlie, the guard Paulie, and three of the injured behind in the vault tunnel. Then she headed towards the gigantic vault door. Careful steps because she was carrying Amata.

Marian didn’t want the sudden appearance of outsiders to startle vault security. She didn’t want to risk a firefight. Get someone injured or killed.

She anticipated that the 101ers wouldn’t recognize her. Maybe the guards would shoot her on sight. But if she had Amata…

If the 101ers saw their beloved Overseer in Marian’s arms; if they recognized the blue jumpsuit… Maybe, just maybe, the security officers would refrain.

It was a hell of a risk but the only option available to Marian.

She had to maneuver carefully to key the passcode into the terminal. Her daughter’s body so light and frail in her arms. Like an infant all over again. Closed eyes and whistling breath. So delicate.

The vault door screeched open. As loud and unnerving as the first time she heard it. Then Marian stepped inside.

She was home.

... Vault security pointed guns at her but didn’t shoot.

The officers who guarded the vault door stared in awe through their plastic visors.

Only two people had entered the vault during their lifetimes. The doctor, James, and his daughter Keelah. And now someone new had appeared. Out of the blue. Carrying inside dust and the smell of the outdoors. Carrying Amata.

Who was this woman? Tall and lean with fearsome armor and heavy weapons. And why did she have Amata? Their Overseer. So spindly and still.

Officer Wolfe radioed for Chief Officer Hannon. As the other officers stood their ground; their rifles pointed forward.

She looked familiar, this stranger did. With her sheared hair and olive-shaped eyes. Like someone
they had seen before, in passing. Or a picture that had been tucked away and forgotten.

She looked like…

The guards’ eyes drifted to Amata.

She looked like Amata.

The security officers exchanged glances. Questions on their lips. But then Chief Officer Hannon was there. Broad-shouldered and forceful. Pushing past the guards until he was within a hair of the interloper.

Hannon locked eyes with Marian.

The barest flicker in his eyes. Recognition.

“Marian,” he said softly. A small smile playing around his lips.

Hannon called the guards off. Asked a question with his eyes. And when Marian nodded her assent, the officer collected Amata from her arms.


Officer Hannon shouted instructions. Move it! Now! Alert the doctor!

The tunnel filled with sound.

Stampeding feet. The hum of cattle. A muffled groan (Charon finally awake).

An entire procession headed to the medical clinic.

Marian didn’t have time to appreciate her return. To bask in the familiar: the shiny floors. The crisp jumpsuits. The rhythmic drone of the air filtration system.

She followed the pack. Kept her eyes trained on the dusty brown of her daughter’s hair.

Please.

. . .

Charon woke to a fuss.

The clinic intern, Lucy, pressing soft cloth into the wound on his forehead while security guards hovered like flies. Getting in the way with their clunky armor and long-barreled weapons.

Red barked at the guards, and Marian glowered at their clumsiness. But the security officers refused to leave Amata’s side. They stood there, shuffling in place. Alternating between fetching items for Red and whispering amongst themselves: I thought Amata’s mother was dead?

Charon’s vision cleared.

The mercenary passed a tongue over his teeth; tasted blood; swallowed it. Then he patted Lucy’s hand. Careful but firm. Said in a gravelly voice that he was fine before swinging his legs over the hospital bed. Climbing gingerly to his feet.

He was a ghoul. Forged from nuclear fire.
He was capable of withstanding significant damage; could regenerate health over prolonged periods of time.

Charon touched his forehead. Felt the groove there that the raider had left after the blow from the tire iron. A stickiness beneath his fingers: lime-colored blood and flecks of skin.

He felt fine.

Charon saw his shotgun lying atop a countertop and collected it. Attached it to his back before joining the crowd in the middle of the room.

Red performing surgery on Keelah. *Again.*

Plastic tubing leading from his friend’s mouth. A clear liquid going in. Or out. Charon’s couldn’t tell which.

Keelah’s battle armor had been loosened, opened around her neck. Distinct handprints—fierce and red—dotting the earth-colored skin.

Blood seeping through fabric on the woman’s left side from the stab wound that had never healed. And Keelah’s eyes were closed—softly; completely—as if they’d never open again.

Charon exhaled. Had to turn his attention to the wall before he did something unseemly. Like bellow at the top of his lungs or break things. Or simply break.

It was *his* fault that this had happened to Keelah. If he’d stopped that raider. If he had been paying better attention when he made that final sweep of the dungeon…

Charon focused on one of the self-esteem posters that adorned the clinic wall. That cartooned vaulter that Keelah ranted about all the time.

*You have to survive this Keelah,* Charon thought to himself. *Just once more. Survive.*

Keelah had become part of his routine. His every day. Waking and sleeping. With her, he had learned the difference between belonging to someone and belonging with them.

*Just one more time. For me.*

And the cartooned vaulter blurred for a second when Charon’s eyes betrayed him.


And since Charon knew Keelah so well (and how could he *not* after five years of cohabitation and partnership?), he was the first person in the room to notice when Keelah stopped breathing.

Charon alerted the entire room a full five seconds before the respirators did.

He shouted. The machines beeped. And Keelah convulsed on the examining table.

Red’s hands flew across skin—tending, touching. Too much at once. Hold this. Now!

Two beds over, Amata slept.

Her girlfriend was dying, and the vaulter was none the wiser.

...
Amata woke three days later.

She was dressed in a hospital gown. Her long hair down around her shoulders, brushed and shimmering. Freed from its customary bun.

The young woman stretched. Felt a twinge of pain from where the starchy gown met naked skin. She bit back a groan.

There was pressure against her shoulder. A gentle hand.

Amata turned and met the eyes of her mother.

Marian. Seated in a chair next to the hospital bed. Hair-tousled; eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. Still Amata thought her mother was the most remarkable vision she’d ever seen.

Amata opened her mouth. Couldn’t find the words nor saliva to speak. The young woman’s eyes did the talking for her. So wide and brown and beginning to dampen.

Marian smiled at her daughter. Full and affectionate. She passed Amata a small glass of water. “Drink first, sweetheart. For days, all you’ve had are ice chips. You’re dehydrated.”

That voice!

Amata hadn’t heard it since she was a babe. Since she was a wee thing with chubby fingers reaching for that full-lipped smile.

“You used to sing to me,” Amata croaked. When she’d managed to take a sip of water; swallow it down. “I remember.”

And the tears fell then. Because there was so much that she remembered. The singing and laughter. The yellow bracelet and brown eyes. But there was so much that she’d forgotten. So much.

Marian read her daughter’s mind. “We have all the time in the world now,” she said simply. Sliding her hand down until it curled around her daughter’s. A tight clasp.

And it was perfect.

Mother and daughter reunited after twenty years.

Amata was filled to bursting.

Even though her body had been burned by fire. Her mind scarred with grisly imagery. The cage. The bomb. The crooked mouths of those slavers.

But her mother was here. And that was all Amata needed.

Almost.

Amata turned her head. This way and that. Seeking. “Where’s Keelah?” she asked breathlessly.


“Amata…” Marian began.

And the tone alerted Amata that something was wrong.
And like an hourglass filling with sand, the memories came back to her.

The towering raider. The hands around Keelah’s throat. A shot fired.

Amata gulped. Her eyes swimming. She had a killed a man.

And Keelah had fallen to the ground. Slowly and brokenly.

“Where’s Keelah?” Amata asked again.

Marian hesitated a second before pointing. A still body on a nearby bed.

. . .

“There’s nothing else I can do for her,” Red told Amata. When the vaulter had raced over to Keelah’s side and demanded explanation.

Amata wasn’t completely healed herself. She was gaunt and badly bruised, but the former Overseer drew herself to her full height and began to assert herself like the leader she’d always been.

“What’s your diagnosis?” she asked Red.

And Amata could see what was afflicting Keelah. Her girlfriend had been beaten to a pulp. Her face badly damaged; her throat scarred. And now that Keelah’s armor had been removed and been replaced with a thin gown, Amata could see the bandages covering the wastelander’s body. So much white cloth that it was like second skin.

Red cleared her throat. “Keelah has suffered considerable damage to her body. Broken ribs. More than a few serious lacerations. Her larynx was badly damaged. That’s why we have her hooked up to the breathing machine. And, of course, her health was already compromised from the radscorpion attack.”

Amata traced trembling fingers across Keelah’s brow. Her girlfriend was terrifyingly motionless. It was a dramatic departure from the woman who could barely still still long enough to have her hair braided.

“She’s in a coma,” Red continued. “After so much trauma, her body just shut down.” Red met Amata’s eyes. Trying to offer comfort. “She may come out of it. She may not. We just have to wait and see.”

Amata bit into her bottom lip. Trying to keep her composure.

Marian moved to her daughter’s side. Wrapped a supportive arm around Amata’s waist.

Marian didn’t believe in platitudes, so she didn't say anything. But she was there. And that was more than Amata could have asked for.

. . .

So they waited.

There was a steady stream of visitors to Keelah’s bedside. Lamplighters and Big Towners. Old Lady Palmer and the vault poet, Beatrice.

Pepper Gomez bought food trays and tea. The chaplain, Brotch, would stop by and recite psalms.
The constants were Charon and Amata. They only left the clinic when they needed to use the facilities or change their clothes.

Amata had been reinstated as Overseer (a job Officer Gomez was more than happy to relinquish) and she set up shop in the medical clinic. Shared an office space with Red and kept a watchful eye on Keelah at all times.

Sometimes the strain became too much for the young leader. And Marian would find her daughter huddled in some isolated corner, sobbing quietly.

Amata needed to focus on her own recovery, Marian would remind.

Marian had seen the burns on her daughter’s body. The still-healing scars. One of the blisters so large across Amata’s back that it resembled a tree.

Scars. They all had scars now.

But Amata would take her treatment. Hissing sharply when the antiseptic cream met her skin. Then she would return to Keelah’s bedside. Watching. Waiting.

No improvement.

Three entire weeks and no change in Keelah’s condition.

The fourth patient—the woman who had been cut—had already recovered from her injuries and been discharged from the clinic. Amata had offered the woman lodging in the vault, but the shell-shocked woman had refused. Insisted on returning to the family she’d been stolen from months before.

The traveling merchant, White Coat Charlie, hadn’t left the vault. Even though nearly a month had passed and his visit was supposed to be a temporary one. White Coat Charlie was working with Red on a medication that they hoped would spur Keelah’s healing. The trader spent his morning perfecting mixtures, tearing roots. His evenings were spent exploring the vault; marveling at all the technology and creature comforts.

His armed guard, Paulie, made himself at home as well. He found a friend in Officer Gomez. Became the Officer’s shadow; his new intern.

Even Marian transitioned seamlessly. Moving back into the vault. Reacquainting herself with old friends.

A surprising amount of stability for Vault 101.

Days became weeks became a month. And life went on.

While Keelah languished in bed. Her body healing without her mind.

And on the thirty-second day—

“Wake up lazy.”

Keelah’s eyes fluttered. Open.

A figure leaning over here. Unclear. Fuzzy around the edges.

Keelah blinked. Once. Twice more. Until her vision cleared.
Color returned. Lines sharpening. A brightness like stars staring back at her.

Blue.

So much blue that it was like an ocean. Or floating sky. A dollop of punja fruit ice cream, melty and sweet.

Susie Mack.

The blonde grinned down at Keelah. Her blue eyes dancing. “Took you long enough to wake up. Slacker. I’ve been pinching you for four weeks straight.”

Keelah licked her lips. Tried to sit up in bed and failed. “How long have I been out?” she garbled; flopping back against the pillow. Tired already.

“Long enough for me to learn that you talk in your sleep. And in erotic detail, I might add. I never knew Amata had freckles all over her body.”

Susie waggled her eyebrows suggestively, and Keelah lamented that she didn’t have the strength to punch her irksome friend.

The pain hit her then. Shit!

It felt to Keelah like she’d been backhanded by a Deathclaw.

The wastelander risked a glance at her body. Saw a smattering of bruises; tubes and wiring crisscrossing her chest; purpled skin.

“I feel like shit,” Keelah declared.

“You look like it too.”

Keelah glared. Her eyes moving quickly over her friend’s body. There was bandaging wrapped tight around the vaulter’s neck, hiding the vicious radscorpion scar. And Susie was leaning heavily on a crutch. Her entire right leg encased in a cast.

“Glass houses,” Keelah retorted. “Glass houses.”

But her eyes were soft. Teasing. And Susie grinned back at her.

It felt damn good being back in each other’s presence.

“Where’s Amata?” Keelah asked. The smile falling from her face. Because suddenly Keelah was afraid that her girlfriend had been left behind in the metro tunnels.

Amata had been injured so badly. And that raider had been bearing down on her…

“She’s in the back with Red, reviewing your medical charts. For weeks they’ve been trying to come up with some miracle drug that would revive you. They’re going to be so pissed when they find out that I bought you back to life with a pinch!”

And Susie chortled merrily. Her blues eyes flashing. “I’ll go fetch Amata and Doctor Pepper,” she told Keelah. “I’ll snag Charon too. He’s been pacing the halls like a mad man.”

And Susie shifted her weight on the crutch.Began her painful trek towards the back office.
But the blonde stopped suddenly. Turned around and fixed Keelah with a serious stare. “I was worried about you,” she admitted.

Such a short sentence but weighted with so much meaning.

And Keelah understood. Intuitively. The wastelander managed a small smile. “I’m not going anywhere Suze,” she promised.

An assurance similar to the one she’d given Charon that night he carried her out of the radscorpion lair.

Susie’s eyes narrowed. “You’d better not. Dork.”

Then Susie shuffled away.

Keelah chuckled. Not caring that it hurt; or that the laughter made it harder for her to breathe around the tubing in her mouth.

She was alive. Amata was alive. And Susie.

And they’d defeated the Fisher of Men. Finally. And found Amata’s mother.

Keelah settled back against her pillows. This time she didn’t mind being confined to a hospital bed.

Even the cartooned vaulter was a welcome sight. His cheery smile and grandiose ‘thumbs up’ almost like a salutation.

*Welcome home Lone Wanderer.*

There was a stampeding of feet.

Amata racing into the room. And Charon. Red and Lucy. Marian, tall and strong, in the background.

Within seconds Old Lady Palmer was there, crying and wringing her hands. And MacCready with his trademark scowl. Freddie Gomez all smiles. Sammy. Bittercup.

An entire room full of people because news traveled fast in the vault.

Charon stood on one side of Keelah. Amata on the other.

Amata pressed her face into Keelah’s neck. Breathed in that heady scent. Cried soft tears that dampened Keelah’s hospital gown.

“Kee’…” It was all Amata could manage. And it was enough.

Keelah sighed at the contact. Felt her eyes close. Voluntarily this time. The smell of lavender surrounding her. So much warmth. Safe. Home.

“Amata,” she whispered.

Charon locked eyes with Keelah. His olive eyes filled with uncharacteristic emotion. The combat mercenary nodded his head. Gruff and brief. But Keelah understood what he was communicating, and she smiled at him. *Me too.*

Red tried to get the crowd to disperse. The doctor waved her arms and shooed. “Come on, you guys,” she complained. “I know you’re all happy to see Keelah, but the girl needs her rest.”
Susie scoffed and plopped down on Keelah’s bed. “Please. Keelah’s been resting for a month.”

And Susie stole a potato crisp from a nearby tray. Nibbled on the salty snack as she grinned at her two friends.

Keelah and Amata were all soppy-eyed, whispering softly. Amata cupping Keelah’s face and Keelah tilting her head into the embrace because that was the most her body would allow at this point.

“You might need one of those curtain thingies, doc,” Susie predicted.

And she was right. Amata kissed Keelah. Soundly. Violating her own rules about PDA.

Red gave up dispersing the crowd when more Lamp/Towners burst into the clinic; headed by vault comedians, Sticky and Knock-Knock.

Sticky didn’t waste any time. He elbowed his way to Keelah’s side. “I got some new material that’ll help you feel better Key-Lock,” he reported. “What’s blue and smells like red paint?”

Keelah stared back at the teenager. She didn’t even have the energy to hazard a guess.

“Blue paint!” Sticky crowed. And the teenager giggled madly at his own joke. Patting Keelah on the shoulder so vigorously that he nearly upset the wires that were connected to the wastelander’s body.

Keelah winced in pain and Amata put a firm hand on Sticky’s shoulder. Turned the teenager towards the exit. “Why don’t we save the jokes for when Keelah is up and about?” the Overseer told him.

Sticky protested. Tried to twist away from Amata’s grip. “But I have a hundred more jokes in the queue. Like…why did the tomato turn red?”

Susie frowned at him. “Look here Icky—”

“It’s Sticky!”

“Whatsoever. You’re going to be the one turning red if you unplug one of these here wires, get me?”

Sticky narrowed his eyes at Susie. “I’m not a-scared of you. I once fought a Yao Gui barehanded and won.”

Bittercup snorted and MacCready shook his head bemusedly. Sticky was a terrible liar.

Susie waved her wooden crutch at Sticky. “Hey Sticky, you ever get a splinter?”

“So what?” Amata scolded.

“Just let me poke him one good time,” Susie requested.

And Amata was forced to play referee between the two. Susie calm and brutal with her hilarious quips. Sticky red-faced and dramatic with his outlandish comebacks.

A boisterous showdown. Two feet away from an injured Keelah.

And it only made Keelah laugh. Spiritedly. Genuinely. Now this was funny.

It was more than funny. It was comforting. It was calming. It was exactly the type of medicine Keelah needed.

There was a time when she’d lost all of that. Had a father desert her. Then a community.

All alone.

She’d walked a desert, so many miles. Maps on her Pip-Boy. Her palm. The ceiling.

Only to return to the starting point.

Vault 101.

Amata.

A smiling cartooned vaulter.

Welcome home Lone Wanderer.

Chapter End Notes

Final chapter but will do an epilogue.

Chapter title a song lyric from a beautiful, haunting song by Keaton Henson entitled “Flesh and Bone.”
Later Hero

Chapter Summary

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Complete.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Desperate Ones

Epilogue – Later Hero

“Grab those boxes over there and…this one.”

Keelah passed the oversized box of books to Sheriff Simms’ son, Harden.

The dusty skinned teenager frowned at Keelah as he adjusted his grip on the heavy box. “How much are you paying me again?” he asked moodily.

“How much are you paying me again?” Keelah responded. And she grinned at the teenager. “There’s a tip right there. Now get moving.”

She pushed against the teenager’s shoulder. Nudging him towards the front door.

The surly teen was helping her transition her belongings from her Megaton home to a brahmin outside, and he wasted time each trip back and forth, complaining loudly and poking nosily through Keelah’s things.

Harden cast woeful eyes on Keelah before tottering through the open door.

Keelah wasn’t paying him in bottle caps, but she’d promised the teen a vintage battle helmet and all of the Grognak comics she had on her shelves.

Keelah went back to wiping down the table tops and counters. Moving the torn piece of fabric rapidly over the slick surfaces.

It was amazing how dust traveled in the Capital Wasteland. How it moved with a mind all its own; relocating from town to town; settling down before moving on again.

She had to stand on the tip of her toes to reach a particularly stubborn spot near the ceiling. Grunting
with pain when all of her old injuries reared their heads, protesting the movement.

It had been two months since the fight in the south metro tunnel and she still felt tender; sore in all those places that healed the slowest.

But Keelah wouldn’t dwell on the pain. Not today. She wouldn’t let the bad memories suffuse her thoughts. She was moving into the vault today. Permanently. Completely. Leaving the ramshackle house that had been her home for more than five years and returning to Vault 101.

Keelah paused a moment. Let her gaze travel over her sitting room. The worn couch; the weathered bookcases; the metal storage lockers that had been emptied; their contents already transported to the vault or sold.

*I’m actually going to miss this place,* she mused. *For a good long while, this was the only home I had.*

And on cue, her handybot Wadsworth buzzed into the room; waving a feathered duster as he tried to make the house tidy for its new inhabitants.

“I hope the new tenants will be as pleasant as you were, Madam,” Wadsworth chirped.

And the robot waved the duster in Keelah’s face (affectionately?) sending the woman into a sneezing fit.

Keelah turned away from him. Rubbed at her burning eyes as she tried to find her breath. “You’ll like your new roommates, Wadsworth.” Keelah told him with a strained voice. “They’re some of my best friends. And you’ve already met them.”

She was wiping dust from her nose when Brick and Donovan barreled inside the house; both rangers carrying boxes and rucksacks and arguing loudly like they always did.

Reilly and Butcher were right behind them. Reilly limping in that stilted way of hers and Butcher still a bit pale and gaunt from his injury of months past.

Reilly swatted Brick and Donovan on their backsides like an irate den mother. “The two of you have been bickering the entire walk from the compound. Now knock it off!” she scolded.

Donovan blushed embarrassedly and Brick rolled her eyes, but all the rangers composed themselves when they saw Keelah. They sauntered over.

There was a boisterous round of greeting. Hi-fives. Hugs. A playful elbow from Brick.

“I can’t tell you how much we appreciate it, you letting us move in here,” Butcher told Keelah. His arm slung around Reilly in an uncharacteristic display of affection.

Donovan and Brick had already bounded up the stairs to claim their rooms, and the sound of their quarreling came floating down. Low-pitched and spirited.

“It’s my pleasure,” Keelah told Reilly and Butcher. “With the rangers here, Megaton is that much safer from raiders. Plus, it puts you closer to Bumble, and she misses the two of you something fierce.”

Reilly’s eyes watered at the mention of the Little Lamplighter. “I can’t wait to see her again. And all the other Lamplighters and Big Towners.”
Reilly removed the supply pack from her back. Began unloading her things. “Of course Brick is the most excited to be moving to Megaton. She and Jenny Stahl are still courting. They’ll probably be engaged before we know it. And Donovan’s closer to Susie now.”

Keelah nodded. A smile playing on her lips. “Lovebirds,” she said sarcastically. Even though she was similarly besotted. “It wasn’t difficult for you…” she asked Reilly carefully. “Leaving the ranger compound? Giving up mapping?”

A thoughtful look passed over Reilly’s face and the squad leader threw a glance at Butcher. A hint of something in her green eyes. “It wasn’t difficult at all actually,” Reilly finally said. “The rangers have explored every bit of desert there is. We’ve enjoyed the adventure. And we’ve made a tidy profit off our maps. But we all agreed that a change of scenery would be nice. Something quiet and steady. Safe.”

And Keelah couldn’t help but think of Theo. The ranger who had been killed by super mutants and left behind in a stairwell.

Her eyes moved from Reilly to Butcher. Both rangers afflicted with ailments that would never fully heal.

“Besides…” Butcher interrupted with a smile. Trying to break up the somber mood. “Donovan tells us that you and Susie are planning to reopen that Springvale store. And, I dunno, I’ve always been pretty good with numbers and figures, so I’d hoped I could pitch in, if you’d have me.”

“Of course!” Keelah quickly responded.

“And Donovan and Brick want to serve as guards,” Reilly added.

Keelah beamed. Ecstatic. “That would be great. We’re not entirely sure when we’ll reopen the store since Susie’s got a ways to go before she’s comfortable on that leg, but we’d love to have the rangers on board when we get things started up again. It’d be like old times. All of us together.”

The three of them exchanged smiles and Reilly and Butcher went back to unpacking. Keelah to dusting.

It had been a topic of fierce debate—reopening the Springvale store. Keelah and Susie had wanted to give their enterprise another go. But Amata had been vehemently opposed to the idea. As had Susie’s parents.

Keelah and Susie had nearly been killed by radscorpions. And there was always the threat of raiders. Absolutely not! Amata had declared. When Keelah and Susie pitched the idea to her. Amata had glared daggers at them both; her hands clenched into fists on her desk.

But Keelah was stubborn and Susie was charming, so a compromise had been eventually reached.

The Springvale would store would reopen only after Keelah and Susie had recovered from their injuries. The store wouldn’t be open more than three times a week. And Keelah had to add armed personnel to her team (White Coat Charlie and Paulie had immediately volunteered).

And now Reilly’s Rangers were on board.

We’re going to be all right, Keelah thought to herself, as she wiped down the last bookcase.

“I have to get the rest of my things ready to go,” she told Reilly and Butcher.
And she waved the couple on. Encouraging them to explore the house, get settled.

There was so much she still had left to do. Boxing. Cleaning. Lugging. And Megatowners kept stopping by, telling her goodbye and dropping off food and other farewell gifts. If she didn’t get a move on, she wouldn’t make it back to the vault by dinner.

Butcher helped her carry the next two boxes out. And Keelah scolded Harden when she found the teenager idling near the brahmin; playing with Dogmeat; scratching behind the dog’s ears.

Keelah released a frustrated breath. “Harden, I’m going to have to dock your pay if you keep dragging your feet.”

“So that means no more smiles for the rest of the day?” he said sardonically.

And Keelah bumped him with her hip. Playfully. Trying to perk the teenager up. *What was his problem today?*

Harden took the box from Keelah. Fastened it with rope to the brahmin’s back. But the frown lingered on the fourteen-year old’s face. And he kept stealing glances at Keelah. Furtive and quick.

“What gives Harden?” Keelah asked him. When she caught the boy staring at her again.

“I ain’t never had a dog,” Harden finally said. His eyes sad as he tightened the rope on the brahmin. Double checked that it was secure. “Or a friend really. There aren’t any other kids in Megaton ‘sides Maggie. And she keeps to herself.”

His eyes flickered to Dogmeat. Crestfallen.

Harden kept Dogmeat for Keelah all those times she had to take long trips into the desert. The teenager walked the dog. Fed him. Played catch with a ball that had been worn down by teeth and time.

Keelah knew that Harden loved Dogmeat. But Keelah loved her pup too.

She whistled for Dogmeat. Smiled affectionately when the pooch immediately bounded over; his tongue lolling from his mouth like sticky candy.

Dogmeat’s tongue was warm against Keelah’s palm. Familiar and rough. A kiss. A greeting.

The dog yipped. Raced back to Harden’s side. A kiss to his palm now. Warm nose. Wet pants.

Keelah bit into her bottom lip. Made a decision.

“Why don’t you keep Dogmeat for me?” she said. Voice soft and unsure. “Like you always do?”

Harden’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah…I mean…I’ll still come visit. And he’ll still come out with me when I make my supply runs. But I’m going to be spending a lot more time in the vault now, and Dogmeat’s always been an outdoorsy dog. I don’t want to keep him cooped up for long stretches in the vault. He wouldn’t like that.”

And at the sound of his name, Dogmeat ran back to Keelah. Standing on his hind legs until his paws met her abdomen. His tail wagging vigorously.

Keelah smiled down at him. Such a loyal companion, he was.
“You take good care of my pup,” Keelah told Harden. As she nuzzled Dogmeat in a firm hug. Patted his head. Smelled his fur. *I’ll see you soon boy.*

And Keelah was surprised when Harden rushed her; flinging his spindly arms around her shoulders. Squeezing.

“Thanks,” he murmured into Keelah’s hair. The loneliness and grief that had been mounting in him since he’d heard Keelah was leaving Megaton quieted for the time being. Stayed.

Keelah patted the boy. Watched amusedly as Dogmeat ran circles around them, barking.

“Just so you know,” Keelah told Harden, as the teenager pulled away. “Now that I gave you my dog? The Grognak comics are staying with me.”

Harden pouted, and Keelah laughed.

“Now get back to work,” she told the teenager.

And Dogmeat barked in agreement.

.

There was a steady trickle of Megatowners coming to tell Keelah goodbye.

Bringing covered food trays and badly wrapped packages of Med-X; other trinkets they thought Keelah could use.

Keelah had been a good neighbor to them. Generous with her foodstuffs and always willing to repair a broken computer or scare off a sneering raider.

The Megatowners were sad to see her go. The lean young woman from Vault 101 who had grown up before their eyes. Who’d earned a distinguished moniker and a fabled status but shied away from the accolades. Content to sit on her front porch and watch the stars. Or frolic around town with that scruffy dog of hers.

Nova was in the line of people waiting to bid Keelah adieu. The redhead waited until the crowd had dispersed before approaching Keelah. A compact item in the woman’s hands; tucked into a sleek traveling case.

Nova smiled at Keelah. Careful and slow. And Keelah brightened at the sight of her.

Nova looked much happier these days, now that Moriarty was gone. She ran the saloon now and no longer provided “her services.” She smiled readily and laughed hard. She seemed free. And it was a beautiful thing to witness.

Keelah was happy for her.

Keelah gave Nova a loose armed hug. Careful not to jostle the package the woman was carrying.

“Just came by to give you a going away present,” Nova told her. The sweet smell of her perfume lingering between them.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” Keelah protested. “Besides, you know I’ll be visiting all the time. Got to be beat you at least once in chess.”

Nova chuckled. “Good luck with that, hun.” And she pressed the traveling case into Keelah’s hands.
“I’ve been going through Moriarty’s old things. He had quite a few lock boxes in storage and so many bottle caps squirreled away that it’ll take me forever to count them. I’m going to do my best to track down the families of the people he abducted. Return their caps to them. Sheriff Simms and the Regulators are going to help me.” She patted the traveling case. “I found this tucked away in a closet, and I figured you would want it.”

Keelah turned the traveling case over in her hands. Finding the shiny metal locks that secured the case. Then she unfastened them, one after another.

Perched inside the case on velvet cushion was Agatha’s Stradivarius.

Tears sprang to Keelah’s eyes, and the wastelander shook with emotion. Overcome.

Nola’s face tightened at the reaction. “I wish I’d known what Moriarty was up to, hun. I’d have stopped him. Or tried to anyway.”

Keelah cleared her throat. Brushed at the tears that were spoiling the view of the pristine violin. “Silver knew,” she husked. “That’s why she ran away from him.”

“Silver?” Nova asked hopefully. Her green eyes widening. Suddenly desperate.

“Yeah. She’s still alive. She misses you.”

And Nova covered her mouth with the palm of her hand. Containing her own emotion.

“Thank you,” Keelah told the redhead. Fastening closed the traveling case. Cradling it like it was something precious. Because it was. “Thank you.”

Nova kissed Keelah on the cheek. “Take care of yourself, darling. And the next time you’re in town, perhaps we’ll go visit Silver together, hmm?”

Keelah nodded and Nova gripped her hand before walking away.

The loaded-down Brahmin stomped its feet. Ready to move. And the flies that had been gathering on its rump flew off; a wild scatter of wings.

Keelah strapped the travel case to her back. She would carry the Stradivarius herself.

Then she patted the brahmin on its back, leading it down the city ramp.

Reilly and the rangers trailed her, chatty and playful. And a few Megatowners came out of their homes; shouted goodbye. Waved.

Sheriff Simms stood at the city gate and he nodded at her. The brim of his cowboy hat hiding eyes that were brown and still; kind.

“I’ll be back soon,” Keelah told him.

And she waved at the protectron, Deputy Weld, before starting down the path. Away from Megaton. Towards Vault 101.

She would be back. Soon. Or maybe not. She had options now. Multiple homes.

It was a far cry from her first visit to the walled city. When she had neither home nor friend. Not even a bottle of water to slake her thirst.
Just a hole in her belly the size of a cantaloupe and a ruined baseball bat.

So much had changed.

... 

She ran into someone on the road.

And the encounter was so unexpected that Keelah nearly tripped over her own feet.

“Scribe Yearling?” she squawked. As she squinted at the robed figure trundling her way.

It was Scribe Yearling, the Brotherhood librarian. And the bookish brunette was lugging a suitcase and a crate full of books.

“Keelah!” Yearling exclaimed. Spilling her items onto the dirt path as she erased the distance between herself and Keelah. She caught the wastelander in a firm hug. “I was just on my way to see you!”

Keelah returned the embrace happily before pulling away. Studying the dirt-streaked face of her good friend.

Scribe Yearling had walked all this way from the Arlington Library on her own? And with this much gear?

“What are you doing way out here?” Keelah asked. “And on your own? Is something wrong? Did something happen at the library?!”

Keelah was suddenly panicked. Enclave attack maybe?

“No. No. Nothing’s wrong.” And Yearling patted Keelah on her shoulder. Calming her. Before returning to her abandoned possessions. Yearling began to stack her items in neat piles on the side of the road. “I finally did it,” she told Keelah. “I tendered my resignation to the Brotherhood of Steel and they accepted it.”

“I didn’t think the Brotherhood let members leave the organization.”

“They don’t usually. Unless you’re leaving to join the Outcasts.” And Yearling released a heavy breath. Plopped down on her crate of books, using them as a temporary chair. “But Elder Lyons was moved by my argumentation. And it didn’t hurt that his daughter, Sarah, supported my decision.”

Keelah grinned. There was a reason she loved Sarah Lyons. Beneath all that power armor, Sarah was a big ole softie. Gonna give her a big fat smooch when I see her. She’ll probably punch me, but it’ll totally be worth it.

“So what are you going to do now?” Keelah asked Yearling.

“I have no earthly idea. That’s why I was headed to see you. I was hoping you could accommodate me until I found new work and a place of my own.”

“Oh.” And Keelah scratched her forehead. Some phantom itch. “Talk about bad timing…uh…I just moved out of Megaton, Yolanda. Gave up my house and everything.”

Scribe Yearling looked devastated. Her umber eyes darting all over the place as she processed the unexpected information. Began to plot an alternate course.
Maybe there was another town in need of a librarian? Maybe she could go back to the Brotherhood? 
*That shouldn’t be too embarrassing. Oh my, what have I done?*

Keelah walked over to scribe. Placed a hand on Yearling’s shoulder to interrupt the woman’s frantic thinking. “I have the perfect job for you,” Keelah said. Smiling in a way that melted the tension that had bloomed in Yearling’s belly. “But first, let’s see if we can’t get your suitcase and books affixed to my brahmin. Poor fellow. White Coat Charlie’s going to kill me for overexerting his prize cow.”

“White Coat Charlie…?”

But Keelah only motioned for Yearling to help her lift the crate of novels. They had to move some things around. Unfasten the rope, retie it. And Keelah had to give the brahmin a few soft scratches and a treat to get it moving again.

The small caravan continued towards Vault 101. Keelah and Scribe Yearling catching up on things. Yearling gasping loudly when Keelah told her about the radscorpion attack; the Fisher of Men.

“What exactly is this job you have in mind for me?” Yearling asked nervously. After all, she’d just defected from a military organization that was a bit too coarse for her. She wasn’t trying to sign up for more armed conflict.

Keelah smiled encouragingly. “You’ll love it. I promise.”

And the wastelander quickened her pace.

There was a vacancy in the vault that Scribe Yearling could naturally fill.

. . .

“Teacher?” Amata asked. Staring up from the stack of papers that lined her desk.

“Yes. *Teacher.*” Keelah perched on the edge of the desk, dangling her legs; which made Amata’s mouth quirk in amusement. “Scribe Yearling would be a phenomenal teacher. She has the experience. She’s personable. And she bought a ton of books with her from the library. New material that we don’t have in the vault. Plus she’s already friendly with a couple of the Lamplighters. The students will get on with her much better than they do with Officer Taylor.”

“Officer Taylor quit this morning. Thank goodness. He’s back on the security team.”

Amata rose from her chair. Patted Keelah against the hip until the wastelander moved off the desk. When they were face to face, Amata kissed her. A quick peck against Keelah’s lip before the Overseer moved away. Walking over to the filing cabinet. Sorting through papers. Removing files.

“If you think your friend will make a good teacher, I’ll certainly consider it. I’ll have to give her a formal interview though. Vault procedure.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“And she’ll need an orientation.”

“Of course.”

Amata returned to the desk. Added the files to the towering stack. “Where is Scribe Yearling now?” Amata asked her girlfriend.
“Downstairs, near the vault door. Charon refused to let her in until she’d been “processed.”

Amata laughed at the use of air quotes. Keelah could be so dramatic sometimes.

“I, for one, appreciate that Charon is taking his new job as vault surveillance agent seriously,” Amata stated.

“He already knows Scribe Yearling.”

“Just doing his due diligence, Keelah.”

“He patted her down. Twice.”

Amata smiled. And couldn’t help but lean over to place another kiss against her girlfriend’s downturned mouth.

“Bring Scribe Yearling to my office. I’ll interview her. And if everything checks out, we’ll get her set up for her new role as teacher.”

“Thanks, precious.”

That drew another smile from Amata. “I love it when you do that,” the Overseer murmured.

“When I say ‘thank you?’”

“When you use pet names.”

And, of course, Keelah already knew that. The wastelander placed a kiss against Amata’s cheek. Another to the side of her neck. That area below her right ear where a burn scar stubbornly clung.

“My Sugar Bombshell,” Keelah whispered against soft skin.

And Amata shivered. Goosebumps racing across her body.

They would have disrupted the paperwork on Amata’s desk (made a mess of things) but Charon’s voice interrupted them. Came crackling through the intercom mounted on the wall.

“The visitor has been processed Overseer,” Charon reported. “All clear.”

“Thank you Charon,” Amata responded. Staring back at Keelah through half-lidded eyes.


Amata nodded. Pulled away slowly. “Get some of the Lamplighters to help you. I don’t want you straining yourself.”

“Yes ma’am!”

And Amata laughed at Keelah’s playful salute. Pushed past her girlfriend. Went back to her desk, to her work. While Keelah skipped out of the room.

The wastelander had a sizeable To-Do list to get to herself.

But both of them were distracted. Amata staring down at her paperwork, not seeing. Worrying a ballpoint pen between her fingers as she procrastinated.
And Keelah hesitated in the hallway. Stopping and starting. A step forward and back. A retread. So much uncertainty that she found herself walking in circles.

Keelah retraced her steps. Pressed the door panel on Amata’s office door and stuck her head around the corner.

“I love you,” she declared. With no preamble.

And Amata’s head shot up. The Overseer sighed in relief (the tension ebbing); a smiling lighting on her face. “I love you too.”

Today had been the first day they’d been apart in two months. The first time Keelah had ventured into the wasteland after nearly dying in the south metro tunnels.

They were both haunted by those memories. Both still afraid that the other was not yet out of harm’s way. Would someday vanish; be stolen; disappear. Again.

They said “I love you” incessantly now. While making love. Or holding hands. While brushing their teeth in front of the bathroom mirror. The expression had become a chorus. A reminder. A pledge they made throughout the day, just in case they didn’t see each other again.

It was a fear-based affirmation. But it was sincere. And necessary.

Keelah smiled brightly. Feeling better already.

And because Scribe Yearling was waiting for her (and because Keelah knew Charon would search the librarian again. He was that damn thorough), Keelah blew her girlfriend a kiss this time; before continuing on her original path.

The sliding door closed again, and this time Amata was able to work.

... 

“This is the last place I have to show you. The medical clinic.”

Keelah gestured Scribe Yearling inside the spacious clinic. It was the last stop on their tour of Vault 101.

Scribe Yearling had been hired as the vault’s new school teacher. And after a lengthy orientation (Scribe Yearling asked a lot of detailed questions and Amata—delighted to find someone as interested in policy as she was—provided detailed answers) and a heartfelt reunion with the Lamplighter, Penny, Keelah had been commissioned to give Scribe Yearling the lay of the land. She’d saved the clinic for last.

“Let me introduce you to the doc, Red. Hopefully she’s not with a patient.”

And Keelah knocked on the doctor’s office door before entering.

Red had her own stack of paperwork that she was riffling through. Reams and reams of handwritten notes that looked like scribble to Keelah; reminded her of her workaholic father.

“Hiya Red,” Keelah greeted warmly. “Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to introduce you to the vault’s new teacher, Scribe Yearling. I’ve been giving her a nickel tour, and I saved the best for last.”

“I’m flattered,” Red joked. And the doctor rose from her chair. Her eyes light with humor as she came around the desk. “Nice to meet you Scribe Yearling,” she said.
“Call me Yolanda,” Yearling amended. And the librarian extended a hand for Red to shake.

Red smoothed the wrinkles out of her lab coat before clasping Yearling’s hand in hers. Shaking.

“Pleased to meet you. Even more happy to hear that the Lamplighters and Towners are going to have a permanent teacher.” Red grinned. “Hope you like a challenge. The Lamplighters are a boisterous bunch.”

“I’ve dealt with my fair share of cut-ups. I think I can manage.”


Red blushed. Her earth-colored skin darkening momentarily. “That’s ‘cause it’s mine. It’s a side project I’m working on. I’ve been writing a few articles on immunizations. Disease prevention and such. I’m combining them into a journal. I hope to be able to circulate it one day. Help those kiddos in the wasteland stay in tip top shape.”

Red slid a folder over her handwritten work. Clearly embarrassed by her ambitious project. The copious notes. But Keelah could only smile fondly at her friend’s zeal. Red had such a big heart. Even though she wasn’t the mayor of Little Lamplight anymore or the momma bear of Big Town, the bespectacled doctor’s first instinct was still to look out for others.

“I think it’s a great idea, doc,” Keelah told her. “And I have a buddy in Megaton who could probably help you with publishing and distribution.”

Moira. The brains behind the successful *Wasteland Survival Guide*.

On second thought…

Moira would probably ask Red to experiment on the Lamplighters. Keelah could just hear Moira now: *Golly Red, do you think you could have the children fall from really tall heights? That would really help with our research on fractured limbs. The more bones they break, the better.*

“Never mind,” Keelah quickly amended.

“Well, I’d love to contribute,” Yearling commented.

“You would?” Red asked. Incredulous.

“Absolutely. I have a keen interest in pediatrics and in the sciences more generally. I used to care for my siblings when I was younger. I’ve seen firsthand how something as simple as a common cold can be fatal.” A pained smile before her eyes locked on Red’s. “If you need someone to review your work or make any edits…*Anything* really…I’d be willing.”

And even in her peculiar Brotherhood robe, with her stern countenance and severe bun, Scribe Yearling’s eyes remained soft. Welcoming.

Red uncovered the work she had hidden. “I would appreciate any help you could offer,” she said breathlessly. “*Very* much. Thanks!”

And Keelah was going to interject. Say that she would pitch in too, but she stopped herself when she saw the blush steal over Scribe Yearling’s cheeks.
Red took a step closer; her journal articles clenched tightly in her hands as she approached Scribe Yearling. “How about I take over the tour for Keelah? Escort you to the cafeteria where we can get a bite to eat and review what I have so far?”

Scribe Yearling nodded forcefully. And the librarian had to clear her throat before she could speak. “I’d like that.” Soft and low.

Red smiled. “After you.”

And Keelah could only watch in amusement as the two women excused themselves from the office. Red and Scribe Yearling were already deep in discussion regarding Red’s papers. And they were laughing earnestly. Effortlessly.

“I’m hungry too,” Keelah grumbled to the empty room. They could have at least invited me to dine with them.

But she wasn’t offended by her friend’s desertion. It was sweet actually. Curious and sweet.

Speaking of sweet…

Keelah nicked a peppermint stick from Red’s desk before leaving the office.

. . .

She saved half the peppermint stick for Charon. The ghoul liked his chewing gum, and he liked his peppermints.

They sucked on the slivers of candy in silence. Backs pressed against the wall; standing. Staring at the behemoth vault door that was now Charon’s duty to guard.

A full ten minutes of silence. Which was normal for them. Comfortable.

But Keelah finally decided to breach it. “You didn’t have to move in here, you know? Just because I did.”

“I know.”

And Charon made a puffing sound with his mouth. Loosening the flavor of the tart candy but also a noise of irritation. ‘Cause Keelah could be thick sometimes.

“But aren’t you going to miss traveling?” she asked him.

“No.”

“And Underworld?”

“No.”

“Vera?”

Bryan Wilke’s aunt in Rivet City with whom Charon had developed a rapport.

Charon crunched into the candy. Dissolving the treat into a fine dust. Dozens of tiny shards pricking his tongue. “We’ll still go outside, won’t we?” he asked Keelah. “Me and you? Do supply runs?
And restart the Springvale store?"

"Yes."

"There you have it."

A soliloquy for him.

"It’s just…" And Keelah could only look at him through her periphery. Too much eye contact and Charon would clam up. "What we have is friendship, Charon. Not a contract. You don’t have to stay with me any longer. You can do whatever you want."

A pause. Weighted and long as Charon chewed and Keelah breathed.

"I’m doing what I want," Charon finally said.

And he did something he’d never done before. He used his right hand, circled Keelah’s wrist. Right above the yellow bracelet Amata had gifted her.

It was Charon’s version of a hug. A promise.

It was there and gone.

Then he went back to chewing. Swallowed the last bit of candy.

"Got any gum?" he asked Keelah. After another five minutes had elapsed.

"No. But Amata might. I’ll check and bring you some if she does."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

And Charon raised an eyebrow at her. The little bit of eyebrow he had left. And Keelah smiled.

Understanding.

...

It took Keelah the rest of the day to get her things unpacked and sorted. She stored clothes and armor in the chest Amata had cleared for her in their bedroom.

She stacked her books in neat rows beside Amata’s. Placed Agatha’s violin on the end table (carefully). She would find someone who could play the instrument. Or she would learn herself. And Agatha’s station would be restored. One day.

And when everything had been tidied; the bedroom feeling more like hers (theirs), Keelah made her way down to the reactor room.

She tossed a few boxes of sweets and cola in her and Amata’s hideout. Then she began to tinker with some of the exposed wiring that had caught her attention days ago.

Now that she was back in the vault full-time, she’d returned to being one of the vault technicians. It calmed her—restoring old wiring; replacing broken filters; patching up; correcting.

She worked in silence. Humming occasionally when the mood overtook her; but for more than an
hour it was simply the sound of steel sharpening; the turn of a screw. And Keelah’s measured breathing.

Then there were footsteps on the stairs.

Keelah expected Amata, but it was the other Almodovar woman. Marian.

Marian had stopped wearing her wasteland armor. For two months now. She’d transitioned to loose-fitting slacks and a collared blouse that had long lost its original color. But even in softer clothes, with her nail-board stored away in her living quarters, Marian still looked imposing. Tall and resolute.

A warrior.

The older woman strode towards Keelah. Her brown eyes narrow and evaluative.

Keelah stopped her work. Put down her tools. Waited.

Marian had been circulating her orbit for days now. Biding her time. Keelah had expected a confrontation. So she stood. Released a breath.

Marian folded her arms behind her back. So poised. Like Amata. But even though Marian shared her daughter’s eyes (and much of her face), she wasn’t anything like Amata.

Amata was sugar. Soft. Wrapped in a stony exterior.

Marian was hard all over. Angles. Someone who had carefully cultivated her edges.

The wasteland had changed Marian. Like it had changed Keelah.

So even though Marian wore a shimmery blouse with faded flowers, all Keelah could see was the roughened hands; the battle pose.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Marian said. Her voice rich and deep like clotted cream.

“Oh?”

“There’s a conversation I’ve been meaning to have with you, but I put it off because of your injuries. And Amata’s.”

Keelah rubbed the back of her neck anxiously, jangling the yellow bracelet on her wrist. It drew Marian’s attention. The heart-adorned jewelry.

Marian smiled. Small and thin. Like it was new to her. Something she was still perfecting.

“I didn’t realize how close you and my daughter were. Until I saw you in the train station. How you’d tried to drag yourself to her side. And Amata told me about the landmine. How you risked your life…”

Keelah gulped. Not wanting to rehash what had happened in the metro tunnels. Not wanting to relive those details.

But Marian pressed on. “When Amata saw you on the exam table…when you were unconscious and we didn’t know if you would survive…I realized then what you meant to her.”

Marian’s eyes where shining. Hot. Like tiny suns that one couldn’t stare at for too long. “I missed
everything,” Marian continued. “Amata’s first step. Her first words. Her graduation. I missed it all. I wasn’t there to press kisses to her scrapes and bruises. Didn’t help her with homework. Or listen to her go on about her first crush. I wasn’t here for any of that. I was out there, hoping to get in. I missed everything. And I can’t get those years back.”

Keelah had to look away from those desperate eyes. For just a second. She didn’t know why Marian was telling her this. Part of Keelah had anticipated an encounter similar to the ones she’d had with Alphonse Almodovar.

Stay away from my daughter. You’re wasteland trash! You’re not good enough.

But there was none of that in Marian’s words. Her soft voice. Her hot eyes.

“I wanted to say thank you,” Marian concluded. “Thank you for being there for Amata when I couldn’t.”

And the declaration drew a gasp from Keelah. Surprise.

Keelah was even more flummoxed when Marian caught her in a hug. Placed a tender kiss against her forehead. Whispered. “I didn’t remember you at first because it’s been so long, and I’ve been so far removed from Vault 101. But I searched my memory and I found it…You. Twenty four years ago. When your father first came to the vault, carrying you in his arms.”

Marian’s arms tightened around Keelah because she knew how delicate this subject was. Amata had told her. “Your father loved you very much, Catherine. He did. Remember that.”

And it was the first time Keelah could remember not being offended that someone called her by her first name. Her mother’s name. How could she be offended when Marian said ‘Catherine’ with so much care and tenderness?

“I didn’t know your mother. She was gone by then. But she would be proud of you, sweetheart. She would be so proud. And I know, because I’m a mother. And I’m proud of you. I’m so proud of you, little one. I wanted you to know that.”

And Marian continued to hold on when Keelah began to cry. Old hurts resurfaced and tended. Carefully considered and put away.

The most Keelah had ever had of her mother was a holotape. A holotape with a canned voice and a name that never felt like hers.

Marian had just given Keelah something else to hold on to. Your mother would be so proud…

To help quiet the storm that had overtaken Keelah’s heart, Marian began to sing. A song about love and sunshine that Amata had crooned on her eighth birthday.

You make me happy
When skies are gray
You’ll never know dear
How much I love you
Please don’t take my sunshine away...

A gift from a mother to a daughter.
Susie passed Keelah in the hall.

“Where are you coming from?” the blonde asked her friend.

And Keelah tried to hide her reddened eyes behind her lashes. “Just tinkering around with some stuff in the reactor room.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

Keelah chortled. Feeling better already. Susie was gifted like that. And Keelah felt a rush of affection for her sassy friend. Clutched Susie in an impromptu hug. Nearly made the vaulter fall over. Stumble on her crutch.

Susie patted Keelah on the back. Returning the hug somewhat awkwardly. Macks didn’t embrace. They didn’t talk about feelings. They certainly didn’t cry in public. But—damn it!—that’s what Susie was doing. All of a sudden. Crying because Keelah had triggered something inside her. Some soft and fragile, buried deep.

They’d been through so much in such a short period of time. A vault rebellion. Mass death. Unspeakable violence. Lost friends. They’d recovered some things but not others.

And it still hurt. All of it. Even though they were trying to move on. Trying to forget.

Susie sniffled. Trying to compose herself.

And Keelah pulled away. Wiped at her eyes.

“You suck,” Susie told her. Her nose red and wrinkled.

“I know.”

“Don’t do ever that again.”

“I won’t.”

But who were they kidding? ‘Cause not even a second later, Susie moved forward again and Keelah obliged her. They hugged again. Longer this time. Without the discomfort.

It seemed like everyone in the vault was expressing themselves these days. Uncorking those buried emotions. ‘Cause you had to, right? Before it was too late?

“Guess I’ll be on my way,” Keelah said. When they’d separated again. When Keelah had swallowed the lump in her throat and Susie had regained her balance on the crutch.

“Me too. I was headed to the theater room. Amata made me supervisor. She thinks it’ll make me and Sticky get along better. But it won’t.”

Keelah laughed. “Just don’t hit him Susie. Please? The boy bleeds like a faucet.”

“No promises.” And Susie shuffled away. “Later hero.”

“Later.”
Keelah and Amata lay in bed that night. Naked except for their underclothes. Skin touching. Scars and bruises. Faded burns, pucked skin.

The scars were ever-present but they reminded the women that the other was alive. Keelah had kissed every one of Amata’s. An apology of lips and tongue. A balm. Worship.

She held Amata. They held each other. Their legs tangled as their minds wandered separate paths.

“Your feet are cold,” Amata complained. And Keelah chuckled. Wiggled her toes until they danced along the back of Amata’s thighs, eliciting a dramatic shriek from her girlfriend.

Amata tussled with her. Pushed Keelah onto her back. Straddled her. She tickled Keelah with her fingers while Keelah counteracted with her toes.

Keelah giggled. Loud and long. So happy. Her spirits lifted. She’d left her melancholy downstairs in the reactor room. In the hallway with Susie.

“I love you,” she managed. Between giggles. They said it so much these days. As if they were making up for lost time.

“I love you too,” Amata replied. Stilling her fingers and letting her mouth do the work for her. Kissing Keelah softly. Then firmly. A suction of lips.

And when Amata’s hand drifted to snare in Keelah’s dreadlocks, they encountered something else. A ball of paper beneath Keelah’s head. Tucked beneath the pillow. A crumpled note.

“What’s this?” Amata asked. Still perched above Keelah. Her lips kiss-roughened and wet.

Keelah kissed her. Couldn’t help it. Not when Amata was looming like that. And Amata smiled into the caress before pulling the wrinkled paper from beneath the pillow. Unfolding it. Her eyes jerking to Keelah’s after reading a single line.

Keelah smiled up at her. “For years you wrote me love poems and put them under my pillow. I figured some turnabout was in order.”


“Sorry babe. I’m no poet. But I searched and searched until I found the perfect poem for you.”

And it didn’t even matter to Amata. Amata kept kissing Keelah. Kept murmuring into her girlfriend’s skin. “My love. My darling. My sweet, adorable plagiarist.”


“No, you read it. I want to hear.”

And Amata’s voice was so breathless and low that Keelah lost track for a moment. Shuddered pleasantly. Goddamn Amata! That tone!

Keelah swallowed. Recovering her faculties. And she didn’t have to take the paper from Amata’s hands. Didn’t have to read the poem at all. She’d memorized these words:

I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,
or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.

I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;
thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,
risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;
so I love you because I know no other way

than this: where I does not exist, nor you,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.

Keelah’s eyes were wet when she finished. And so were Amata’s.

“Say it again,” Amata urged. Craving the words (their import) like she always craved anything associated with Keelah. “Please.”

And Keelah tried. Getting so far as the second line before Amata interrupted her with a fierce kiss. Their mouths and bodies so connected that they shared breath. Mind. Spirit.

They held on to each other.

They held on.

They held.


It had been this way since they were eight years old. It would be this way for many years to come.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes
This was supposed to be a six chapter story and it turned into this novel-length epic. Hopefully this fic reads like a really immersive DLC.

Thanks to everyone for sticking with this fic this long and for leaving kudos and comments. I'm going to take a bit of break before I write any more stories, but I have an idea for a Fallout/Once Open a Time crossover fic that centers around Regina Mills (my fictional crush). And q requested that I do a Nuka World fic, so I'll get around to that story as well (eventually).

A few ending notes:

- That last poem was Pablo Neruda's 'Poem XVII.' If you couldn't tell already, I adore Neruda's work.
- I purposely left vague what happened to Susie's brother (Wally Mack) and Anne Palmer and the scouting crew. That's just how the Capital Wasteland works. People go missing. Maybe for ill or good. And we don't always get closure.
- lasalle1alpha suggested that I find a way to give back the caps the Fisher of Men extorted, so I added that bit with Nova. Thanks for that suggestion.
- In my head cannon for this story, Butch and Trinnie (Kat) eventually visit the vault and Kat is reunited with her Lamplighter friends. And Butch reconciles with his mother.
- And I didn't resolve the Enclave issue because my last playthrough of FO3 with Broken Steel downloaded, the Enclave attacked my LW all the time. So I wanted to leave the Enclave thing open ended. They're not a major threat but they're always in the background, lurking.

Thanks again. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!