A New Reality (Hiatus)

by MaxRev

Summary

Anxious and prone to panic attacks before the bombs fell, Alice barely managed to cope from day to day. Then she met Nate. He became her rock, the one person she could hold onto when she felt overwhelmed. He loved her just as she was and taught her how to cope one step at a time. Then the bombs fell and the world she knew was ripped apart. Drowning in fear and pain, she struggles to live in a world that is brutal and chaotic, full of dangers unimaginable to her. How would she ever have the strength to go after their son Shaun when she couldn't even see herself leaving Sanctuary?

Notes

“At least we still have the backup….”
Chapter Summary

I always wondered what it would have been like for the sole survivor to come out of the vault not knowing how to hit the ground running. Someone who had anxiety, panic attacks, who didn't know how to talk their way out of a situation, shoot a gun or any of the other millions of things you could think of that would translate into some instinct for survival. Most of the headcanons I've read for the f!sole are strong, tough and resilient (which is awesome by the way!) Alice....not so much and she insisted on having her story told!

She may be hard to like at first but I promise if you hang on for the ride, you will see some awesome things! This journey may not always follow canon but I hope you enjoy!

Chapter Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A scream tore from her throat, primal fear taking over as her mind came to grips with her current state; trapped with no way out. Claustrophobic from her earliest memories as a child, she became irrational and lost complete control.

Wild eyes frantically searched for a way out. Her vision was starting to grow dark at the edges and she knew it was only a matter of time before darkness overtook her and she surrendered to complete oblivion. Nothing else mattered at this exact moment but getting out of this tiny, cramped space where she could barely move, felt she couldn’t even breathe, and was starting to feel nauseous. Her body was shaking from the cold and now fear as well, causing an avalanche of emotions. Her heart pounded so loudly, she thought the people outside the window in front of her could hear it.

Wait. A window? She squinted through the ice crystals that partially covered the glass. There were people out there! She banged on the solid barrier as hard as she could, the movement sluggish, like a slow motion still in a movie. Suddenly, she realized how bitingly cold it was. Her fingertips and toes were numb to the point of pain.

Awareness came back to her all at once, slamming into her brain. The bombs, going to the vault with Nate and Shaun. A feeling of relief made her whole body go limp, held up only by the angle in which she was standing. Those people were across from her. It was okay. Closing her eyes, she took deep breaths to still her racing heart, just like Nate had taught her. His voice filled her mind. Breath, baby. Deep, slow breaths. In, then out. That’s it. Focus on my voice and calm your heartbeat. It was the deep tone of his soothing voice that had helped her many times before when she had been catatonic with fear.
Opening her eyes, she watched the hazy scene unfold across from her and quickly understood that those people weren’t here to help. They were trying to take Shaun away from Nate but he wasn’t letting their baby boy go. The voices were distorted through the thick door and she couldn’t quite make them out. Then Nate yelled, his voice loud and angry, passing clearly through the thick door, “I’m not giving you Shaun!"

There was a loud bang and suddenly, Shaun was whisked away from Nate, his arms falling slack. Her mind refused to acknowledge what it had seen, taking several agonizing moments to fully comprehend the events in succession. When it did, it hit her like a blow to the heart; they had killed Nate and now they were taking Shaun. She was all alone now.

Shaking her head, she refused to believe it was happening. She couldn’t catch her breath to scream but that didn’t stop the sound from erupting in her head, drowning out everything else. Darkness overwhelmed her, spiraling ever closer from the edge of her vision, a whirlpool of oblivion that she welcomed willingly. Her last image was a man with a balding head and a horrific scar on his face, words clear to her as he looked in her window, “At least we still have the backup….”

Eyes squeezed tightly closed, tears leaked through her lids like soldiers breaching a wall. Thankfully the nightmare faded away to a dream of her little family before the war. Nate was laughing at Shaun who was waving his arms and legs and cooing. She watched them, her heart so full of emotion. Nate turned to look at her and those eyes pierced her with the love that shown in them. As she lost herself in their depths, they turned a darker shade of grey, another emotion taking over; the one that shown in his eyes and traveled through his fingertips when he caressed her body.

Closing her eyes even tighter, she desperately tried to keep that dream of Nate with her forever. If she never opened her eyes again, he would stay….wouldn’t he? And Shaun would be there with them always. But as so often happens with what one desires the most, the icy fingers of reality pried them both from her once again. It was a war they fought, her and reality, every morning since she had escaped her frozen hell. Three months to the day.

Alice woke up as Nate slipped from her mind, like tendrils of fog in the warming sun. Sitting upright on the bed Codsworth had salvaged from who knew where, she swung her legs over the side and wiped away the tears that tracked down her cheeks with the backs of her hands. Would there ever be a morning where she would wake up ready to face the day instead of dreading it and all she had lost? She wondered how much more a person could take of that – and she wasn’t even strong to begin with. Nate had been the strong one.

One of the last memories she had of Nate was getting ready for his big speech at Concord. Looking in the mirror, he was standing behind her waiting his turn. He was smirking at her because she spent more time looking at and admiring him then getting herself ready. He shouldn’t have been surprised, really.

Looking at their reflections staring back at them, she knew they made a very odd couple. He was exceptionally tall, dwarfing her by sheer size. He had dark, swarthy skin and hair such a dark black, the sun gave it bluish highlights. Add to that his full beard and Nate would have made a very sexy pirate in another era.

What drew her most though were those expressive steel grey eyes that watched her with such love.
that it made her swell.

Looking in the mirror now, only her image stared back. She was the ugly duckling in this story and in her heart, she knew she would never become a swan.

And just like the image of him in her head, in the mirror, Nate haunted her day and night -- always close by but never within reach. Deep down she knew it was more from her fragile state and inability to let go. She wasn’t equipped to live in a world like this. He had been her lifeline in another world, one at the time she’d thought was harsh and cruel.

A bitter laugh escaped from between pale, chapped lips. She hadn’t known what harsh and cruel meant. Fate must be laughing at her expense, showing her how little she had known about the meaning of those words.

Behind her, she could hear Codsworth hovering at the doorway, waiting to speak to her. If she closed her eyes again, she could almost imagine that none of this had happened. That she and Nate were entangled in the sheets and each other, lying on their bed, Codsworth outside their door ready to announce he had made fresh coffee and breakfast was ready.

As if conjured from her conscience, she could hear Nate speak clearly in her head. *Hey, Sparrow. You got this okay? You’re stronger and tougher than you think.* She could feel his lips move as he smiled, his mouth next to her ear. His warm, strong body was an anchor behind her as those muscular arms wrapped her in safety. *Remember. I’ve got you -- always and forever. Whenever you need me, you just reach out and I’ll be here for you. Okay, Sparrow?*

Her lips curled up in half a smile. Sparrow -- Nate’s pet name for her. She had thought he used it because she was so tiny and small. Then, she looked up the definition of Sparrow. A small, plump, brown-grey bird with a short tail and a stubby, powerful beak. She had been so annoyed with him, an unusual emotion for her. When she confronted him about it, he had smiled down at her, his eyes sparkling with laughter; laughter that had ended up being contagious.

In her opinion, she was more like the antithesis of a sparrow. Slight and tiny with pale blonde hair, pale skin and even lighter birthmarks scattered across her face, cheeks and forehead red from a skin condition, freak of nature would be a better way to describe her.

Her smile slowly slipped away, again remembering the pain of what she had lost. She knew she would never find that ever again. Nate had been so gentle with her, so patient, and always by her side. Instinctively, she knew the people who grew up in this world after the bombs fell were tougher and stronger. Here, only the strong survived.

That thought brought her back again to Nate. He would have survived here. He was the strong one. The resilient one. He had started to teach her with infinite patience how to overcome her crippling fears. He had been an incredibly gentle man for being so strong and fierce, and in the face of things that would cripple even a normal person. Those were words she would never label herself. Going to war, he had seen things that had haunted him and yet still, he never let them get in the way of his happiness.

“Mum, I found some tea!” Codsworth’s cheerful voice floated through air. He sounded so excited and she didn’t want to disappoint him again. She had done so much of that lately.

Sighing, she got up and followed him down the hallway.

Looking around her house, it wasn’t the same as before. Codsworth had helped her clear out the broken and useless furniture and clean up the debris scattered all over the floor. Not much
remained after they were done. However, the ghosts still remained and refused to be laid to rest.

She supposed having any memories around her of the life she once had with Nate was probably not healthy but she didn’t really care. All she wanted was her old life back, to grow old with Nate, raise Shaun with joy and happiness and laughter – all the things she never had growing up. Shaun’s room now had a door that she kept closed. It was a reminder that she should be out there searching. She hated herself for failing him, for failing Nate.

Being the strong one was just not something she was capable of. Confronting this frightening world was beyond her scope of functioning for the moment.

Poor Codsworth, he tried so hard to help but all she wanted was Nate to hold her in his arms again.

She had always felt so tiny and insignificant beside him and yet so protected. For the first time in her life, she had felt needed and loved. Then it was gone in an intense, fatal explosion. What hurt the most was that he could have been here with her if not for the greed of a man with a gun.

Once again, Codsworth startled her out of her thoughts. “I thought we could go search the houses and look for anything else salvageable. Would that be acceptable, Mum?”

That was the last thing that Alice wanted to do. She had spent most of the last three months hiding out in this house while he had done his best to get her to live again. How was she supposed to make him understand that living was just too hard?

The panic attacks that had come so often after she left the vault had left her exhausted and just wanting to give up. In time they had come less and less but she was still weak and tired and there was just no energy to go on. What did she have to live for now? Shaun was probably better off wherever he was, thriving without a mother who couldn’t even care for herself.

Every time her memories touched on the vault and trying to kill those mutant roaches, she would just return to her memories of Nate and their former life instead. Reality was too hard here and she just wanted to run and hide and never be found.

She knew how ridiculous it was to think that way and Nate had shown her that she didn’t have to hide anymore but he was gone now, so what was the point? She hated venturing outside; there were too many dangers out there. Still, she often felt guilty as Codsworth hovered in and out, making his way around Sanctuary finding any items he thought she could use. Today, she had finally let him convince her to go outside again. The day was bright and sunny so she believed she should be safe from any storms and hopefully any other dangers.

They hadn’t been out for long but had covered a lot of ground, picking through piles as they went. In fact, they gone past the roundabout at the end of the street and ended up near the river that ran past Sanctuary. Standing up and stretching her back, Alice saw Codsworth about ten feet away pick up an item, look at it and toss it back down. A small smile appeared on her face. He did that a lot.

Turning her head back towards the river, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply as a cool breeze blew past her. A strange smell made her eyes snap open. It was sweet, yet pungent and for some reason, it made her anxious. She wasn’t sure why. Scanning the area, she didn’t see anything dangerous, although she was hardly a walking textbook for post war changes.

Keeping an eye on the area around here, she kneeled back down and began looking through another pile of junk. There was quite a lot of it littering the sides of the river and Codsworth had thought they might find something useful. So far, it had been a bust.
The breeze was getting stronger, fingers of air pulling strands of her hair from the bobby pins keeping it up. She had to stop several times to pull it back behind her ears. It was like a game between her and the wind; tug it out, tuck it back, over and over. Becoming increasingly frustrated, she stood up, putting her hands on her hips as if to warn a child she had had enough. Her frustration waned as a frisson of fear snaked its way down her back, her eyes widening slightly.

Thick grey clouds had moved across the sky in the distance, creeping closer to Concord and moving in the direction of Sanctuary. The clouds didn’t remind her of the Radstorm she had been through after leaving the vault. Then again, her memory was hazy at best, having experienced a panic attack. In any case, she had no desire to repeat that experience. She was beginning to think that maybe it would be a good idea to start heading back to the house.

Turning to make her way up the hill and back towards the house, Codsworth called to her from further along the river. Apparently, he had found something he thought she should see. Anxiously glancing back behind her, she walked swiftly towards him. As soon as she checked it out, she was heading straight for the house.

Approaching him, she heard the deep rumble of thunder in the distance, followed closely by a distant flash of light. The storm was coming closer. She knew it was a regular thunderstorm, no different from before the war. There was no green haze to suggest a Radstorm was on the way. However, her mind refused all logical explanations.

Instead, she could feel her muscles tense and her heart speed up. The clouds were still far enough away, yet she could feel occasional rain drops on her skin. Everywhere they hit, she twitched in response as if it was acid hitting her skin instead of rain. With a suddenness that gave her no time to react, she was overcome by a recent memory.

Chapter End Notes

A special thank you to my amazing beta, Raiven-Raine, for all of her help :)
Deja Vu

Chapter Summary

Sometimes living in memories is the best way to escape; at other times, escaping from them is all you want to do.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A sudden fierce wind blew in followed by a green haze that lingered in the air. An ear-splitting crack sounded right above them, followed by a brilliant glowing light that blinded her. Her skin became clammy, her pulse accelerating like a freight train out of control. Random thoughts, nothing she could grasp hold of, ping-ponged inside her brain and she struggled to gain control of herself. Everything around her became threatening, bent on tearing her apart.

This was the point where she would freeze in fear, nothing able to move her. She could not be reached as her fractured mind turned inward to a safe haven, a place where she existed until her body perceived the threat was over. This could be anywhere from a few hours to whole day. Nate had been the only one who could ever reach her at those times; the only one to get through the haze and talk her back into the real world….and he was gone now.

Rubbing her chest, it felt like her heart was bleeding inside. She missed Nate so much. How was she going to get through this without him? Her breath hitched as another slash of lightning lit the sky and thunder rumbled, sounding like it was laughing at her for being so cowardly. Balling her fists, she tried to will the memory away but it wouldn’t be denied.

Another slash of lightning ignited the sky making the green hazy air glow menacingly. Alice was almost to that place where she would cease to function outwardly. Just a few more seconds and she would remain where she was regardless of the threat, catatonic and oblivious to everything around her. Terror became a living, breathing beast inside her trying to claw its way out. It begged her to run, to hide, to get away while at the same time pushing away all rational thought until she was frozen by that same terror. A noise to her left made her shrink back in fear, convinced that whatever was out there meant her harm.

Distantly, she realized Codsworth was hovering at her side. He was trying to talk to her but his words were meaningless in her state of mind. Noticing where one of his metal limbs pointed, she spotted a pair of doors just above the ground. What her terrified mind saw was an abyss so dark and never-ending, it would swallow her whole, never to be seen again. Codsworth’s words barely penetrated the panic she was in and only a few managed to be heard.
“Radstorm…radiation…need to get in—”

Ruthlessly, she pushed the memory from her mind. How was she supposed to live in this world if a simple storm brought her world crashing down again? Deep breath in, deep breath out. Just like Nate taught her. Continuing to walk quickly, she heard Codsworth trailing behind her. Stopping and turning to face him, she saw the doors to the root cellar out of the corner of her eye, the place he had taken her the day of that first Radstorm. Her mind was tossed back into the memory.

Stumbling to the hole, she saw it was a cellar behind the house next to them. A shelter from the storm. Cautiously, she looked down into it as another bolt of hellish lightning lit up the sky. A ladder, a bed….and then it was dark again. Carefully, she climbed down, yet she wasn’t careful enough. Her foot slipped, missing a rung, and she tumbled to the dirt floor, twisting her ankle. Moaning in pain, she started to cough and sneeze from the dust that rushed up from her fall. One thought caught and held from the turmoil in her head -- maybe she would die down here. Unwilling to move in the pitch black hole, she heard Codsworth floating above her and heard the crash of the heavy metal door close behind him. Abject terror overtook her in that exact instant as she realized they were sealed in. Like a frightened horse running unchecked, her heart galloped wildly in her chest. An urge to throw up overwhelmed her as the feeling of dread intensified, making her nauseous.

Though she couldn’t see, her world started to spin uncontrollably, and too tired to fight anymore, she let the whirlpool take her down into blessed darkness.

Awareness came back slowly in stages, like a computer being rebooted and coming back online. There was light, though it was muted. Cautiously opening her eyes, she saw darkness at the edges of the light. To her, that darkness gave the impression of being warm and welcoming. A place she longed to sink back into to escape again. Everything was just too overwhelming.

Dampness filled the air with a slight chill. The ground beneath her wasn’t hard but rather soft and lumpy, as if she was lying on something. The smell of damp earth hit her nose and her hazy mind wondered if she had been somehow buried alive. The thought did little to alarm her as her thoughts intermittently appeared, winking in and out like a flickering flame. None of them stayed still long enough for her to grasp onto them.

Then suddenly, one of them broke free and rose to the surface. There had been a storm – a Radstorm Codsworth called it -- green mist coating everything. He yelled something about radiation, needing to get to a safe place and then the thought disappeared again. Her head felt fuzzy, like it was wrapped in cotton. She cautiously moved her head to observe her surroundings. The cellar turned out to be more of a bunker. Who knows how long people had been living down here. Had any of their neighbors come down here when the bombs fell? Could any of them still be alive? She wasn’t even sure if it was possible.

The lumpy ground she was laying on turned out to be a mattress. Steel shelves were placed haphazardly around the walls like they might have been used for storing food that had been canned from a garden. Now all that sat on them were a few cans of Cram and some beans, boxes of deviled eggs and Fancy Lad snack cakes and purified water. Cement blocks were stacked halfway up the dirt walls, sandbags placed in front of them, as if abandoned in the middle of a project.
It gave the impression that someone had intended to be here for a while. There were even some stimpaks and med-x syringes. Electricity had been hooked up underground here and a radio softly played music. This was a place she could go anytime a Radstorm hit—or if they were attacked. She ruthlessly pushed that thought away. No sense inviting another panic attack thinking of everything that could happen.

Leaning up on her elbow, careful not to move her head too much, she called out to Codsworth. “What did you say that storm was?”

“That was a Radstorm, mum. They come in from the glowing sea, nasty things that spread radiation all over the Commonwealth.” He hovered over to her. “How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?”

Another sharp crack in the distance and she was back again. She needed to get back to the house...now. Get away from these memories or let them wash over her until they were done with her. Either way, she couldn’t do this out here in the open. It made her too vulnerable. Turning quickly, she stumbled and felt a twinge of pain, her ankle still sore from when she had fallen down the ladder. A fact she hadn’t known until she came back to consciousness.

Mentally checking all her body parts, she started to say she was fine when she moved her ankle. That tiny movement caused her to gasp in pain.

“Your ankle? I’m afraid you took a nasty fall off the ladder.”

“I-it’s just a little sore, Codsworth. I’ll be okay, really.”

“I bandaged it as best I could but you might want to stay here for a few days to let it rest. It was a tad swollen when last I checked it.”

Resigned to the fact she wouldn’t be doing any climbing, she lay back down and closed her eyes. She was still exhausted from the fear and anxiety and sleeping—or running from her life—was as good an activity as any right now. It didn’t take long for her to succumb to the sweet spell of the sandman.

Today, the storm passed by them, no more than a few drops of rain and it was gone. She could breathe again. Sitting on the front steps, she thought about how Codsworth had saved her that day from the Radstorm and its dangers. Always by her side now, he was trying hard to help her to be independent so she could go look for Shaun. She shuddered, thinking of the physical act of walking across that bridge and away from the shelter of Sanctuary.

How quickly a few months could pass in the blink of an eye. Would she feel that way in 10, 30 or 50 years? If she even lived that long. In her heart, she knew she couldn’t stay in Sanctuary forever but oh, how she wanted to.

Looking around, she observed the changes they had made in these past few months. Well, Codsworth had made really. Her help was sporadic at best. In spite of that, debris had been cleared, mailboxes torn down, fences fixed haphazardly here and there with no real thought to a plan. There was still a lot of work left to be done but at least they had accomplished something.
As time passed, she felt like she was being pulled ever closer to a fork in the road where she would face a decision she didn’t feel ready to make. Looking over to where the bridge crossed the river, she had a thought that it would be perfectly okay if life continued on outside Sanctuary -- without her. This was followed by another that, as Shaun's mother, she was being selfish. She wished there was someone who could help her make that decision.

As if conjured by that thought, she realized she heard voices in the distance. Someone was coming over the bridge into Sanctuary. With her usual panicked response to something new, she ran into the house.

“Codsworth! People are coming over the bridge! What should we do?” Frantic with worry, his standard hovering pace made her impatient.

“I say, there are people coming? Shall I put out refreshments?”

Momentarily flustered by his inability to grasp the situation, she tried again. “Codsworth, people- strangers! What if they are -- what did you call them -- Raiders?”

That got his attention. “Oh drat. I suppose we should go out the back and head for the cellar. I was so hoping for some company. Not that I am tired at all of your company,

Her worry became tinged with frustration. Codsworth could be so nonchalant at times. Her world was falling apart again and all he cared about was if they had visitors.

Looking around the house before she left once again, it was like deja vu. This time, she looked at it through different eyes, seeing what they had done to fix it up. It still wasn’t much but to her it had become somewhat of a home again. What would she do if the life she had begun to build was taken away for the second time? She didn’t think she would survive this time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for stopping by and reading! Comments always welcome!

Thanks again to Raiven-Raine for being my beta :)}
Fighting Demons

Chapter Summary

“I was wondering…..what would I need to learn in order to survive in this world? I have no skills, no knowledge and nothing to offer anyone.”

Chapter Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day that Alice left the vault and ended up back in Sanctuary, Codsworth had casually mentioned that people in Concord had beat him with sticks. With questioning, he had admitted they were most likely Raiders. *Oh, the horror, Mum! They steal anything from anyone; they torture and kill. Their only loyalty lies with each other….and even that is questionable.* So it was that she found herself hoping it wasn’t Raiders who had arrived in Sanctuary.

“Codsworth, should we peak out around the house and see what they look like? If they are settlers or those Raider people you told me about?”

“I say, that is a brilliant idea! I can just peek my eye around the corner and report back to you.”

He left her standing there, hovering out of sight between the two houses to observe whoever was coming. The several minutes he was gone seemed to stretch on like an eternity. What was he seeing? Hearing? The suspense was giving rein to her anxiety, running completely out of control. Surely, if it was Raiders, he would have come back already and told her to get in the cellar. That thought immediately led to another. Wouldn’t the Raiders find the cellar? They would come down there, they would find her, they would….

“Mum?” She jumped not realizing he was right next to her, trying to get her attention. How long had he been there?

“W-who is it? Are they Raiders? Do we need to hide?”

“I believe they are settlers, looking for a place to stay. We should be safe. Shall we greet them?”

“How do you know for sure? What if they turn on us?”

“One of them is wearing what I believe is a Minuteman outfit. He must be someone we can trust. I would be happy to greet them myself, Mum, if you would prefer?”

A feeling of relief washed over her, making her knees weak and unsteady. She slid down the wall to sit and leaned her head against the back of the house. “That would be wonderful Codsworth. Thank you.”

Gliding effortlessly between the two houses, he headed for the settlers. Alice fervently wished for
the introduction to be a good one, though she was still reluctant to meet knew people. Another part
of her anxiety that she had had to deal with on a daily basis before the war--and before Nate.

Straining to hear any sound at all of Codsworth and the voices of the settlers, she sat as quietly as
she could. Fragments of conversation floated back to her but not enough to know what the outcome
was. She would just have to be patient and wait for him to come and tell her what was going on.

Meeting the new settlers that had traveled to Sanctuary hadn’t been as traumatic as Alice had
anticipated. Once Codsworth had met to them and told them about Alice, they had greeted her
kindly. Well, most of them anyway. Marcy Long was not the talkative type but unlike most people,
Alice wasn’t bothered by it. One less person to attempt conversation with.

Jun Long she identified with on a personal level. He looked so lost and alone, and her heart went
out to him--and even Marcy--when she found out they had lost a son. One they would never have
the hope of seeing again. Jun had said a few words to her but mostly, he just wandered around
Sanctuary, a lost soul with no purpose. She understood him the most of those she met.

That thought brought her up short. Was that how she was living now? Waiting desperately for Nate
to show up in her dreams so they could be together or longing to hear his voice in her head to get
through one more day, one more hour? Looking hard at how Jun functioned, she realized with
dismay she was also just existing. It alarmed her to think that she was becoming just like him.

Yet, even though he seemed to have given up on life, he was here with his wife and the rest of the
group. Usually in a daze, but he was still helping, lending a hand. Maybe he just needed something
to do, something to keep his mind off his pain. Maybe that would work for her as well.

Then there was Sturges. Just the thought of his voice made her break out in a grin. She loved that
deep southern accent. He reminded her of a singer she had heard about before the war -- Elvis.
Someone her mom used to talk about on rare days. Sturges always had a smile for everyone and
seemed to be the one to put the rest at ease or diffuse an intense situation. She knew she could be
comfortable around him. He always kept busy, working on something. Nate would have loved that
about him.

Preston Garvey was the leader of this small ragtag group, said he was a Minuteman, and he had
been the most helpful and alway spoke kindly and respectfully to her. He made sure she understood
something if she looked confused. Instead of going to Codsworth, he came to her with questions
first, only seeking out Codsworth if she didn’t have an answer. This always confused her but it also
made her feel important, which was something new to her.

There was one other settler, Mama Murphy. She made Alice slightly uncomfortable with her
prophetic visions she said came from having the “Sight.” What Alice really thought they were was
an excuse to have someone give her the drugs she had become dependent on. Yet, she was not
going to judge what extent people would go to in their attempts to escape the harsh world that
existed now. She didn’t have access to them, so who knew what she might do if she did.

“I knew we’d find you here. I saw you. You’re tied to this place, kid.”

Tied to this place. Yes, she supposed she was. There was no doubt the amount of chems Mama
Murphy had taken had really messed up her mind. The others claimed her visions came true though
they didn’t always understand what she said when she talked about them. Alice could relate. None of what she said ever made sense and it was a few sentences here and there.

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

Alice had dropped the scrap she had been picking up, whirling around to stare at the old lady with a mixture of hesitation and earnesty. “What did you say? How do you know? Did you see him?”

“I... can't see him. Not clearly. But I feel his life force. He's out there.”

“Where? I need to find him! Please, tell me everything you know!”

“Look, kid, the Sight, it's weird and it ain't always clear. But your son's out there.”

“But where? Please, tell me where!”

“The great, green jewel of the Commonwealth. Diamond City. The biggest settlement around.”

Put together like puzzle pieces, it made a weird sort of logic but Alice just couldn’t imagine herself traveling anywhere on her own. She wasn't sure where Diamond City was but it was a good bet it wasn’t over the next hill.

Hearing someone approach, she turned to see Preston walking towards them. She turned back to Mama Murphy, “Where is this place? Is-is it very f-far?”

Alice again felt like the worst sort of mother. She desperately wanted to find her son and this little old lady with her nonsense words had given her hope. She felt she had lost that in the last few months; Shaun was out there and yet it felt like she couldn’t be bothered to go look for him. Truthfully, she had been cowering and finding every excuse not to leave the house and then, not to leave Sanctuary.

Those thoughts led to another. Was he better off without her? Maybe wherever he was, he was safe and happy and loved. Right now, he could have a mother who loved him and would fight for him, a father to raise him and show him how to be a good man. He might even have brothers and sisters. Was it right for her to take him from a home like that? She had so little to offer her own child.

“Oh, I wish I knew, kid. I really do. But it’s not like I can see your son. I can just... feel his life force, his energy.”

What was that supposed to mean? “Try harder then…. please !” He was all she had left.

“I just know he’s out there. Look, kid, I'm tired now. If you bring me some chems later, the Sight will paint a clearer picture. Maybe I can tell you exactly where.”

Preston joined in the conversation at this point, “No! Mama Murphy, we talked about this. Those drugs... they’re gonna kill you...”

“Oh shush, Preston. We're all gonna die eventually. We need the Sight. And our new friend here, she's gonna need it too.”

That was the last thing she needed. Alice walked away, her brain trying to wrap itself around all she had found out. Her heart was beating so fast, she thought she would faint. It had come down to this; it was time to leave. She didn’t have any idea how she would accomplish this but it was time to move on. That thought alone was enough to drive her to her knees in fear.
At the first opportunity to find Preston alone, she would go and talk to him. He was so smart and seemed so sure of himself, surely he could help her figure this out. There was no one else to turn to. In the last couple of weeks since this group had arrived, they had been very busy. Thankfully, she had been too exhausted to have anxiety attacks but it also meant Nate had not shown up in her dreams. Would he ever come back to her?

It was another week before things started to settle down and everyone found a rhythm to their days. Food had been planted, pumps for fresh water dug, beds scavenged for everyone to sleep in and rudimentary defenses set up. Not much yet but it was a start.

Once everyone found their rhythm, a signal beacon was set up to attract more settlers. Preston, being a Minuteman, was all about helping the settlers of the Commonwealth in any way possible. As Sanctuary was one of the larger areas up north they had found, he figured it would be the perfect place to attract more people and give them a place to live and work. The more settlers they had here, the more secure they could make it.

Alice was not happy at all about even more people invading what she considered her home but she felt powerless to voice her opinions. She had no experience with speaking up and could only watch helplessly as life spiraled out of control around her.

One warm night, the sky as black as ink with the absence of the moon, Alice sat on a swing set on the south side of Sanctuary near the river. Codsworth hovered protectively nearby. She stared up at the stars wishing she could somehow find a way to escape to them. There was a whole world up there to explore. Would anyone from Earth ever travel into space again? Probably not for a long time, since technology had all but wiped everything out; it was not trusted anymore.

Hearing a sound behind her, she whipped around frantically becoming tangled up in the chains of the swing. Her heart leapt up into her throat, her hands became clammy and she knew a panic attack was beginning already. She had thought she might have some control of them now. Obviously not.

A gentle voice came from out of the darkness, “Hey Alice. I didn’t mean to startle you. Just thought you looked like you could use some company.”

It took several minutes to find her voice through the haze of fear, “H-Hey Preston.” She didn’t trust her voice to say more than that.

“Is everything okay? Sorry if I’m intruding on some personal time. I can leave.”

Closing her eyes, breathing deeply, Alice struggled for a sense of calm. That was when she heard it, the voice she had been missing since this small group of people had come to Sanctuary. Easy Sparrow, you’ve got this. Deep breath in, slowly let it out. I’m right here. I’ve got you.

She supposed Nate’s voice could be considered a drug. It coursed through her body, regulating her breathing, slowing her heart and helping her calm down. Opening her eyes, she saw Preston was
still there. He was clearly waiting for a response since he hadn’t walked away.

“No, it’s okay. I was just looking at the sky. It’s so different from before, so much brighter.”

“Yeah, I suppose it would be. It must have been something to see though, all those lights from the city lit up in the distance.”

“Light pollution they called it, drowning out the stars in the sky. Even the moon for all its brightness barely made a dent in it. I prefer it this way.”

They stayed there, lost in their own thoughts for a bit of time before Alice spoke again. Gathering every bit of courage she possessed, which was pretty much nonexistent, she asked a question.

“I was wondering…..what would I need to learn in order to survive in this world? I have no skills, no knowledge and nothing to offer anyone.”

Silence greeted her hastily spoken words. At first she was terrified that he was judging her but then she thought about what she had seen over the last few weeks. She sensed in Preston a kind soul who just wanted to help everyone, so she relaxed. Most likely because he was just thinking about the best way to answer.

“The first thing you need to do is learn to shoot a gun.”

Now that terrified her. She knew it was coming, had anticipated it. Yet, the fear of holding one, shooting one, watching as the bullet struck whatever she was aiming for brought a chill that spread throughout her whole body and stole her breath away. She was barely able to function in this tiny corner of Sanctuary. How did she think she could ever leave? It was hopeless.

She wished that hiring someone to look for Shaun was an option. Yet, even that almost sounded worse than going herself. Like even that idea made it seem like he wasn’t important enough. Putting her head in her hands, she thought it would have been better if her whole little family had just died together.

“I know that scares you, Alice. Being the one pulling the trigger is hard for anyone. I hope it isn’t presumptuous of me to say that I’ve watched you since we’ve been here.” Seeing her eyes widen as she looked up at him, he rushed to explain. “I’m not stalking you. I just see things that most people don’t. I’ve had plenty of time to do some people watching since traveling the Commonwealth.”

Alice relaxed as he continued in his calming, gentle voice. There was a story there somewhere but she chose not to ask for it. It appeared many in this world, including her, had demons and ghosts to deal with on a day to day basis. She just happened to have a few extra issues as well.

Someone like Preston would be a good friend to have in her new life but she was determined, not only to not get close to anyone ever again but also to never subject anyone to all of her problems. Nobody deserved to have a broken person like her clinging onto them. Somehow, she would make it on her own. She just needed to figure out how.

As if he had read her thoughts, “Everyone of us has ghosts in our past or demons that we fight every day. It’s how we choose to deal with them that defines us. I don’t know what yours are and I’m not asking you to tell me. Only you can choose your path and decide whether you want to fight them or let them win.”

He turned to go back to patrolling but having only gone a few feet, he turned back to her. “We all have an inner core of strength we often don’t realize until we’re put to the test. Just something to think about. As for shooting a gun, if you want to learn to use one, just come ask. I can find the
time to show you.” With that, he continued on his way.

The stars were no longer of any interest to her. Preston had left her with a million thoughts bouncing around in her head. Could she really do this? What did he mean about inner strength. Of course, he was strong. He had to be to have brought these settlers here and to keep them safe. Nate had been strong; he had been in the Army and gone to war. How can you survive that if you’re not strong? Marcy was strong; she continued living despite having lost her son and knowing he would never come back. She wasn’t as sure about Jun.

She did know that she wasn’t strong, not even a little bit. It was impossible he was implying that she was. There was no inner core in her, no steel, no spine….nothing. She resembled a limp, wet noodle more than anything and If she dried up, she would snap in half. She had a lot to think about.

Several days crawled by as Alice considered the idea of learning to shoot. To be honest, the thought of actually holding a gun was enough to make her hyperventilate and go into hysterics. How could she deliberately point a gun at someone and kill them? She shied away from that thought every time. There was no doubt in her mind that a gun in this world was mainly used to kill. She didn’t think she could do that.

Alice came awake with a start. Her eyes darted around looking for the source of whatever had woken her. She listened quietly, lying still so as not to make a sound. Looking out the hole where a window used to be, she saw it was still dark out, stars blinking on and off in the night sky. The others must still be sleeping soundly as she heard none of the day to day sounds; hammers striking metal, murmuring voices or footsteps echoing on the pavement.

Wait….there it was, the sound that had woken her up. Snuffling. Was there an animal somewhere outside? What kind of animals lived here now? She hadn’t given much thought to it and had never bothered to ask. Her heart started to pound in terror and her palms became sweaty. Was she in danger?

The sound intensified and was accompanied by more of the same. Was it...were they...getting closer? Suddenly, the silence was broken by a yell. Pandemonium erupted in the night. She heard yelping, growling, yelling and then gunshots. What was going on? She didn’t want to know; she just wanted to hide. Slowly, her body had risen up against the wall at the head of the bed, her legs were scrunched against her, arms wrapped tightly around them, eyes squeezed shut. Trying desperately, she longed to make herself smaller.

A shadow suddenly loomed and she opened her mouth to scream.

“Alice, it’s me. I know you’re scared but we need you.”

It was Preston. The scream died in her throat, replaced by disbelief. “My help? What can I do?”

Her answer was an object tossed on her bed as Preston ran back out the door. Looking at the indentation in the mattress, she saw it was a gun. No practice first, no word as to what they were facing or what exactly she was supposed to do to help. Just grab the gun and follow him.

Trembling with fear and adrenaline, Alice inched forward on the bed, staring at the gun as if it was a snake about to strike. Reaching out slowly, she ran her fingertips over the cold metal and a shiver passed through her body. She was expected to pick this up and use it. What was out there that they
needed her help for so desperately?

Taking a deep breath, she snatched the gun up in her hand before she could think too much and walked out of the bedroom. Thankfully, she often slept in her vault suit, so she was already dressed. Turning down the hallway and towards the front door, she hesitated a fraction of a second. As it turned out, it was a second too long. One step out of the hallway and she came face to face with the source of the noise.

Before her was something out of a nightmare. It was shaped like a dog but that was where the similarity ended. Russet colored skin was stretched tightly over the bones of its skeleton. There was no fur that she could see and the head, it was just….bare. It was like the skull of a steer’s head she had seen in pictures before the war only with a thin layer of skin. The fangs and front teeth seemed larger and sharper with the absence of the muzzle and the eyes were just eyeballs in sockets.

It stopped in its flight from being chased and they stared at each other each of them surprised. Then it growled, low in its throat, a sound like no dog she had ever heard. It was much like what she thought a hound from hell would sound like and she expected to see smoke spiraling upward from the nostrils and glowing red eyes.

The apparition that appeared before made her think of a dog that looked like it had been skinned alive and was exacting revenge against all humanity for its pain.

The panicked feeling was back, the edges of her vision starting to waver and darken. Instinctively, she knew if she gave in to the panic, this beast would tear out her throat. Faintly, she could hear shouts but her eyes refused to stray from what stood before her.

In a split second of clarity, she remembered she had a gun but oh dear God, how was she supposed to aim it! She was frozen in place and couldn’t summon the strength to raise her hand yet she knew it was either her life or the life of this thing. She would have to.

In what felt like the slowest of motions, her right hand came up and pointed wildly at the dog, trying desperately to aim but her hand was too shaky. Without conscious thought, her left hand came up, the gun now gripped in both hands, yet the shaking didn't entirely stop.

She didn’t think she could shoot but she had to try. Slumping against the wall, she prayed to a God she had believed in once upon a time, begging to die quickly. Her last image was of the nightmarish features closing in for the kill as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut and pulled the trigger.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! I know this chapter was a long one but I wanted to fit it all in.

Thank you everyone for reading and for the kudos :) Comments are always welcome!

Shout out to my awesome beta, Raiven-Raine!
Eyes tightly closed against the outside world, she drifted on a sea of darkness.

When the ringing in her ears from the gunshots stopped, all that was left was complete silence. Cautiously opening her eyes, the first thing she saw was the hellhound. The skeletal shaped head rested in her lap, eyes open and sightless, staring straight into hers. It was no longer able to see but that simple fact didn’t register with her. All her tormented mind could grasp was that it was lying on top of her, staring at her in defiance. Scrambling back on hands and feet, she tried to dislodge its body from hers. Unable to catch her breath, her heart started escalating rapidly, skyrocketing from flight mode into overdrive.

Shadows crept into her vision and lulled by the sweet promise of oblivion, she embraced it. Her world spun crazily and then she was falling down a dark tunnel to land softly at the bottom before being completely swept away. She could feel that there was someone here with her and she called out -- it could only be Nate.

Eyes tightly closed against the outside world, she drifted on a sea of darkness. Her senses were heightened and her skin shivered in response as the zipper on her suit whispered down her body. Every nerve ending felt alive as callused hands trailed over her sensitive skin; Nate was here now and he would take care of her. Only he could chase away her demons. She was pulled deeper into the void and her fevered mind shut out everything but what she could feel.

Time stood still until she felt soft, full lips meet hers in a loving caress. Lips tasted her own gently and tenderly before stealing her breath away, becoming urgent, almost feverish in their intensity, setting out to consume her. With a low groan, those lips left hers and she mourned the loss until she felt them travel down along her neck, nipping and licking, finding the tender spot behind her ear. She arched up in response.

"My delicate little Sparrow, what do you want?"

“You, Nate,” she cried out in anguish. “I want all of you.” It was all she had ever wanted since waking up and finding him gone.

That rough, calloused hand gently tugged the sides of her suit apart. Even with eyes closed, she could picture those clear grey eyes darkening to the color of a stormy sky as passion took over. She moaned in response as his mouth covered one taut nipple, tongue circling and then sucking.
A ragged inhale, a moan and she felt his chuckle at her breast. Her legs came up to wrap around him as she pushed her core up against his erection, wanting...no...needing to feel the length of him inside her, possessing her and making her whole again.

Her hands slid up through hair that had grown longer. She loved how the silky strands slid softly between her fingers. The rough edge of his beard made her skin prickle wherever it touched and she was drowning in sensations, never wanting this moment to end.

At long last, his hand moved down lower until his fingers found her core, sliding back and forth against the cloth barrier; a barrier she wanted gone. It had been too long since she had felt like this. She reached down between their bodies, longing to feel length of him.

“Alice? Alice, are you okay? Can you hear me?”

A tiny frown marred her delicate features. Nate’s voice sounded…..odd. She slowly drifted up through layers of consciousness as the darkness drifted away.

Eyelids slowly fluttered open, thoughts still unfocused, she was confused at what she saw. Mama Murphy sat in a chair by her bed while Preston stood over her, trying to get her attention. As her mind cleared, she looked around wildly, trying to find Nate. She cried out desperately.

“Nate! Nate, where are you? Come back, please!”

“Alice, Nate’s not here. You have to stop this. Let him go.”

She refused to believe that. He was just here. She knew he was, she had felt him, touched him.

Curling up into a ball on her side, tears leaked from her eyes in pain and frustration. A gentle hand rubbed her back trying to give comfort. It took some time but she finally calmed down, a stray hiccup the only evidence of her crying.

“What happened?” The words came out ragged and broken.

As Preston helped her sit upright on the bed, Mama Murphy reached over to hand her a cup of water.

She drank greedily, her throat dry and sore. Why were they hovering over her? Had she had another panic attack? Preston reached out to grab the cup and set it on the dresser across the room...next to a gun. Memories exploded inside her head, causing her heart to thump so loudly in her chest she was sure everyone could hear it.

Looking up at Preston with wide eyes, she asked a question she wasn’t really sure she wanted the answer to, “Is it dead?”

“Yes, it’s dead. We took the body out of the house. I’m sorry Alice. I should never have left you alone like that. I should have stayed and protected you. Some Minuteman I am.”

Hearing the anguish in his voice took away all her own fears for the moment. She laid a hand gently on his arm.

“Preston, stop. Don’t say that. You needed an extra pair of hands and I was here. I wanted to come to you earlier about practice but I kept putting it off. I don’t think either of us expected this to happen so soon. We can only learn from this and move forward.”
She hoped she sounded more convincing then she felt. She wasn’t angry with Preston having come to her for help. He did what he had to in that moment. She was angry with herself, though. This had just proven to her that she didn’t want to be like Jun, just existing in some semblance of a life. She didn’t want to sit here anymore while her son was out there somewhere. He was her son, not someone else’s. It was vital that she learn to protect herself, which brought her to the next question.

“Did...did I kill it?”

“No, you didn’t. You emptied the whole clip but you actually only hit it a couple of times. Neither of those shots was vital. Codsworth had come in the side door just as it lunged for you and he killed it.”

Closing her eyes, she wasn’t sure if she was relieved or not. It seemed there was an underlying censure in his voice, though it could be just her personal judgement of herself she heard. She also realized she had wasted valuable ammo. He was probably regretting his decision in regards to that as well. Tears started to form again in her eyes, only this time for letting everyone down.

“How about those lessons now?”

Sighing in defeat, she nodded her assent. “Okay. I’m ready.”

The next morning at dawn, Alice and Preston made their way across the bridge and headed towards the Red Rocket. It was far enough out of the way of Sanctuary that if their gunfire drew attention, it would hopefully give those left behind time to defend themselves.

“So, you ready for this?”

Alice thought about how she felt. She was apprehensive and still scared about shooting a gun but last night had been just the catalyst she needed to go forward. They also weren’t shooting at anything living. Preston said he would just set up some targets with cans or bottles so she could get a feel for the gun and work on her aim.

“Yes, I’m ready.” Looking over at him, she straightened her shoulders. “I need to do this, Preston.”

He merely nodded his head, apparently satisfied with her answer.

As they approached the Red Rocket, they both saw movement near the old gas pumps. Preston halted and steadied his laser musket.

“Stay back, Alice. Let me get a closer look before you follow.”

She stood next to the guardrail, heart in her throat. She wasn’t even carrying a gun yet, what was she going to do if Preston needed her help?

“It’s okay Alice. You can come down.”

What she saw was the best thing since finding Codsworth still around in Sanctuary. Standing next to Preston, tongue lolling out, was a beautiful German Shepherd. Running her hands through his fur, she found it was incredibly soft. He didn’t smell very good, but she knelt down and wrapped her hands around his neck anyway. She had always wanted a dog.

She and the dog both watched as Preston set up targets for her to shoot at. The dog leaned into her while she just idly ran her hands through his fur or scratched behind his ears. Poor thing must be starved for attention. There was no owner anywhere around that they could find.
“Okay, everything’s ready. Let me go over a few things with you. First is your stance. You can stand with your legs side by side and shoulder width apart. Are you right-handed?” At her nod, he continued. “In that case, you can also stand with that leg behind the other, like for support.” In both instances, he showed her what he meant.

“Which way is best?”

“Well, that is entirely up to you. It depends on each person and what you feel most comfortable with. Try both ways.”

He went on to explain arm and body position, balance and grip. He showed her each one, and then let her get a feel for what felt comfortable to her. Then the practicing became real. He showed her how to turn off the safety and went to stand by the dog near the building.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the targets. She was not as terrified as she was last night since there was nothing but cans and bottles to aim at. She was anxious because she wanted to prove she could do this, to make him proud. He had drawn a line in the dirt for her to stand behind, quite close to the targets. She supposed she had to start somewhere.

Her first few shots went wild but with his patient tutoring and her continued practice, she started to get the hang of shooting the gun. After an hour, she was actually hitting roughly around the center of the target. He also encouraged her to keep backing up. She was exhausted but kept going. This was important and she had no more time for excuses.

“How do you feel about it now?” Preston called out to her after a while.

“I’d feel much better about helping now!” She was grinning ear to ear and proud of herself for even managing to do this. Before the bombs fell, she could never have imagined doing something like this. Now, look at her. Besides that, Preston had encouraged her every step of the way. Even at the start when all she had been able to shoot at was air.

Glancing around, a frown appeared. “Where’s the dog?”

Preston looked around as well. “He was right here a few minutes ago. I’m sure he’ll be back. Why don’t we call it a day and head back to Sanctuary.”

As they started to put everything away and get ready to head back, they heard a bark in the distance. Both of them turned to look towards the sound and then towards each other. Alice was the first to speak.

“Should we go see what’s up?” Normally, she would stay and wait -- or hide -- but shooting the gun had given her a burst of confidence.

They soon heard more barking and it was getting closer. The dog had found something or was trailing something.

Preston turned to her, “Be ready. Shooting at something moving is quite a bit different than shooting at a stationary object.”

Alice’s confidence plummeted and was quickly replaced by fear.

Suddenly, they saw movement. Something was running up over the hill followed by the dog.

“Molerats!” Preston yelled, aiming his laser musket and firing.
Frozen to the spot, Alice forgot everything she had just learned, all the tips that Preston had patiently given her. Her fear jumped in front of all logic thought and she panicked like she always did. She heard the dog bark and everything seemed to come back into focus. Finding her stance, she aimed and fired….and missed. She tried again…and missed again. Once more, she tried. This time the bullet hit the target, in the leg. She kept aiming and firing and before she knew it, everything was quiet.

Slowing coming back to herself, she noticed things one at a time. The dog sat at her feet looking up at her with his head cocked, panting, blood coating his muzzle and spattered down the front of his chest and over the top of his head. Preston stood about 10 feet away, inspecting the bodies of the molerats to make sure they were dead. They had been squealing and growling before but now, there was just ringing in her ears. She still held the gun in her hands, so she loosened her grip and pointed it towards the ground.

“Are they dead?”

“Yep, all dead.” He walked towards her. “You did really good, Alice.” He smiled.

A strange feeling bloomed in her chest, a feeling of pride and self worth. Maybe she could do this after all.

When they got back to Sanctuary, they found a caravan. The small group that now called this home had gathered around for the latest news of the Commonwealth and to see what supplies could be had. It appeared to be an exciting event. Maybe the caravans would stop regularly once more settlers found their way here.

Mama Murphy called to the dog when she saw him, "Hey, Dogmeat!" He trotted over to her to be petted.

Alice looked from the dog back to Mama Murphy, "Is he your dog?"

"Oh no. Dogmeat doesn't belong to anyone but himself. He chooses his own friends, just like you or I do. The Sight showed me he was going to choose you." The Sight again. Alice still didn't know what to make of it but the dog was here and apparently, he liked her as he had stayed by her side all the way from the Red Rocket. Dogmeat -- what a strange name. If that was what he answered to, then she would stick with it. Leaving him sitting next to Mama Murphy, she walked over to Jun. He sat off by himself looking lost and and alone. Maybe he needed some company.

“Hey, Jun.”

“Hey Alice. I...I want to thank you for all you’ve done to help us. I know it hasn’t been easy but I think you and me, we’re kind of the same. We've both lost a child, haven't we.”

Not sure where this conversation was going, Alice chose to stay quiet but nodded in agreement.

“I mean...we’re still here though, still alive and we have to go on. For them.”

She wasn’t sure if he was trying to comfort her or himself or just wanting her to agree with him that it was right for them to continue to go on. All she knew was that she didn't have all the answers. Her situation was completely different than his in any case. Her son was still out there -- somewhere.
“His name was Kyle. I can’t help thinking, maybe I should have done more. Maybe I should have gotten out with Marcy and him, gone somewhere else. Just have been stronger for them both. I don’t know. I feel I let them down in so many ways.”

“Jun, I believe you did all that you could. Sometimes,” she paused, taking a deep breath, willing away the pain of her own self doubt, “sometimes, we do all we are capable of and that still doesn’t stop bad things from happening or that we have all that pain to deal with afterwards. Be strong, Jun.”

She stood up and walked away. That short conversation convinced her. She needed to go, leave Sanctuary and actually start searching for Shaun.

As she walked towards her house, Preston called her over to the caravan. “Listen, I know you’ve been thinking about leaving. These guards said that it would be okay if you went with them. I think it would be a good idea at first if you have some extra protection when you set out on your own.”

She was grateful that Preston had thought of this. Yet, that was just like him, to always be thinking of others. Impulsively, she hugged him and went to the house to grab some things. It was time to move on.

As she was packing, that familiar fear settled in, causing her to doubt herself. She crouched down on the floor, wrapping her arms around her legs. Resting her head on her knees, she wondered if she wasn’t making a mistake. She could die out there and Shaun would never know but if she stayed here and did nothing, Shaun would still never know, and she would have to live with the guilt for the rest of her life.

Standing back up, she drew in a breath, and finished grabbing what she needed. The caravan was staying for the night and would head out again in the morning. They were headed to Diamond City and that was one of the reasons Preston had for sending her with them; protection all the way to her destination.

Her stomach was tied up in knots as she lay near the guards that night. A million thoughts ran through her head and she just wanted to drown them out and get some sleep. There was no telling what her new future would hold but she hoped that at the very least, it would take her to Shaun. The fear of failing, of the dangers and the things that could happen threatened to overwhelm her but she was finally doing something. Finally stepping out on her own -- sort of -- and making things happen.

Nate would be so happy, so proud of her. It was almost like she could see him smiling down at her. Her eyes looked up at the brilliant stars in the night sky and imagined one of them was him up there right now. That thought brought her a measure of peace and as she drifted off to sleep, she thought she heard his voice, my sweet little bird is learning to fly.

She was really going this time and nothing was going to stop her. Not even herself.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all of you continuing to read this! I appreciate the kudos and you're welcome to leave comments/feedback!
The caravan got a late start, what with one thing after another. One of the thick ropes that was used to tie everything onto the pack brahmin broke and a new one had to be found. Abernathy farm was attacked by super mutants, so the guards had agreed to go help defend the settlers with Preston and a couple of others. As they passed near the farm, they wanted no interference.

A rad stag had charged the group on the way back, so the meat was given to the caravan guards and they stayed to cook the meat, deciding it would be nice to have some fresh rad stag steak on the way.

Alice didn’t know what to do with herself. Nobody needed any help with anything. Preston had left, Sturges was tinkering with a radio, Mama Murphy was sleeping and Jun was nowhere to be found...not that she really wanted to talk with him. Trying to help Marcy ended in her being told to “get lost.” So, she went to sit out by the river until the guards were ready to go.

That was where Preston found her. “I think everything is finally ready. I told the guards I’d come get you.”

“I guess this is it, then. Thank you for everything, Preston.”

“You’re welcome, Alice. You’ll do okay out there. Just remember, it might be hard at first but just keep going forward.”

“I will.”

She didn’t think she sounded very convincing but he smiled at her. A real smile.

Turning to walk up the hill and join the caravan she paused as Preston called after her.

“Good luck finding your son, Alice. I hope everything works out. Come back and visit some time.”
It was already so hard to leave, she couldn’t turn back to look. He had been so patient with her, so kind, it was like leaving the only friend she had ever had behind. If she didn’t look at him as she said goodbye, maybe she could pretend this wasn’t happening. So, instead she called back to him over her shoulder, waving as she went.

“Goodbye, Preston.”

The guards were checking their weapons as she walked up, the trader pulling on the ropes to make sure they were fastened tightly. His brahmin, Brisket, was loud and vocal. Dogmeat sat near the brahmin, tongue hanging out as he panted. Excited to see her, he ran up to be petted.

It was time to go. Seeing that she was ready, the female guard, Ria, turned and headed up over the bridge and out of Sanctuary, following the road towards Diamond City. The trader, Devon, followed her and then the rear guard, Jake.

As they passed over the bridge, Alice stopped, taking what she thought might be her last look at the place she had called home. There was nothing left of what it had been, yet even now, in its current state, it had been a home to her once again. This time, she wasn’t sure if she would make it back.

Her memories of before and the last few months she would carry with her forever. If...no, when, she found Shaun, if it was at all possible, she would bring him back here. To their home.

Passing the Red Rocket, Alice’s memories from long ago were replaced by more recent ones; finding Dogmeat, shooting at the bottles and cans, then the molerats, followed by Preston’s words of encouragement, his pride in her after taking on the molerats...even though she hadn’t shot very well.

Dogmeat barked and ran off towards the gas station. Her heart stopped just for a moment as he took off. Was he going to stay here instead of going with her? Was she going to lose another friend?

Apparently not. He ran back towards her and she swore he was smiling. He trotted by her side and she ran her fingers through his fur, scratched behind his ears. A smile spread across her face; she wouldn’t be alone after all.

Impulsively, she reached down to hug him, laughing when he licked her face. “Thank you, Dogmeat. I need a friend right now.”

Everyone settled into a rhythm as they walked and Alice ended up behind Ria, Dogmeat at her side. Ria and Jake carried their guns, homemade pistols, cradled in their arms. Ready at a moment’s notice. Devon had a gun as well but kept his strapped to his side, under his coat.

Alice carried her 10 mm around her waist. Preston had made a holster, just like in the western movies. He had even shown her how to draw her gun. She felt like she was “all thumbs” when she tried to mimic his movements.

There was plenty of time to look around as they traveled. Conversation was hard anyway, each of them spread out so far apart. The guards weren’t much for talking anyway. They were paid to do a job and do it well. Devon often talked to his brahmin.

She could see that the world she had known was gone, replaced with a ruined and unusual imitation. All around her she saw reminders of a life that to her was only yesterday. To everyone around her, it was normal. They neither knew nor cared about what life had been like before. It
took all they had just to survive in the here and now.

Occasionally, the trader might move up to walk with her for a bit, explaining things Alice saw that she didn’t understand. There was so much to learn, everything completely different and she often felt overwhelmed by it all.

There was a book she read when she was little, Alice in Wonderland. That was one of the rare times she remembered her mother smiling, actually felt like she had been loved by her.

“Mommy, look!” Her 7-year-old self had been enraptured by the cover and the title. “The girl in the book is named after me!”

Her mom had laughed and Alice had looked up at her with childlike wonder. Her mom never laughed, barely ever smiled.

“Actually, you are named after her. That book has been around for a long time. It was my favorite as a young girl.”

Her mother had bought her the book, another rarity as they never seemed to have money. Yet, as soon as they arrived home, life had once again returned to their kind of normal. A life devoid of laughter, love and sunshine.

So Alice buried herself in that world, eager to get away from the one she lived every day.

Looking at the world around her now, Alice felt very much like that girl in the book, having wandered into a bizarre land, everything around her different; sometimes fascinating, sometimes terrifying. Yet, unlike that Alice, she could never leave this place. There was no magical way out of this world.

Passing by Concord had bittersweet memories dancing through her head. The town had been decorated with banners and flags of red, white and blue. Nate had been nervous about his speech at the Veteran’s Hall that day. She could see that the decorations were still up, tattered and faded now, but still there.

The asphalt beneath her feet, the road they had traveled together so many times, was cracked, large chunks of it sticking up at odd angles. Faded, sometimes burnt, frames of vehicles littered the sides of the highway, occasionally abandoned in the middle of the road to where they had to go around it.

Scattered here and there, were semis and they would stop and raise the back door, looking for scrap or any kind of loot. Plants she had never seen before bloomed along the sparse grass that had grown up in the over two-hundred years she had been gone.

Up ahead, she saw the Drumlin Diner and remembered the many times she and Nate had gone there for dinner. They had only made it back once after Shaun was born. The owners had become good friends of theirs, Eloise and Herbert Campbell. She wondered what happened to them. Such a sweet, loving older couple. She hoped it had been over quickly for them.

As they drew closer to the diner, they heard shouting. Two people dressed in leathers, a male and a female, were arguing with the owner. The man was doing all the talking.

“We had a deal, Trudy. Hand over the goods. You owe us.”

“I ain’t giving you poison shilling chem-pushers anything! D’you know what that junk has done to my boy?”
“He bought them fair and square, Trudy. Ain’t our fault if he’s strung out. Now don’t make me come in there and shoot up that little trading post of yours.”

Ria motioned for them to get off the road and head towards a copse of trees and some brush. “Devon, you stay here with Alice. Jake and I’ll go check things out.”

“You be careful, Ria. Kay?”

She sent a wicked smile Devon’s way, one that made Alice shiver in dread. “Don’t you worry none, Devon. We’ll be back before you know it.”

She and Devon walked towards the diner that was just barely visible from where Alice and Devon hid. Dogmeat whined and she ran her hands through his fur, so he’d calm down. They watched as Ria and Jake approached cautiously.

“What’s the problem?” Ria called out, letting the two in leathers know they were coming.

“Whoa, whoa! Easy there. This doesn’t involve you. I’m just trying to collect what’s owed to me. Maybe you’d wanna help us out?”

“I don’t see how that’d benefit us. Why don’t ya just put them guns down and walk away?”

“Hell no! That’s it. You’re dead! Along with Trudy and her chem addict son!”

All hell broke loose as everyone started firing at each other. Alice felt her heart speed up in fear that Ria and Jake were going to get hurt, or worse. She soon found out how wrong she was. They tuck and rolled, away from each other, coming up on one knee behind some brush, each one easily taking out one of the drug pushers. She couldn’t believe it. It was over so quickly.

“Probably wanna pick your jaw up off the ground there. Might get a little dirty.”

She could hear the humor in Devon’s voice as he spoke. There was admiration as well.

“Traveled with these two before. They ain’t nuthin but the damn best caravan guards to be had. Been working together for as long as I been tradin. Got a system down and it works real well.”

It sure did. Alice wanted to be able to do that someday.

From the diner, Ria raised her arm and waved them over. It was safe now.

Devon led the way with Brisket, Alice following behind. Dogmeat ran ahead, sniffing at the dead bodies. Alice tried her best not to look at them, lying in pools of blood, lifeless, arm and legs thrown out in death like marionettes dropped by their puppeteers. She turned away from the gruesome sight.

Trudy was speaking with Ria. “Thanks for help. Can’t wait to see the crows feeding on that scumbag! Here’s some caps for your trouble. Ain’t much but it’s all I can spare.”

“You gonna be okay, then?”

“Yeah, we’ll be alright. Gonna take a while for my son to clean himself of the chems, but we’ll make do. Always have.”

“We’ll be on our way then.”

Just like nothing ever happened, they were on the road again. It was another life changing event
for Alice, just another day to day occurrence for her companions. Such was the world she found herself in. She could almost hear Nate’s voice, Better get used to it Sparrow, this is your new life.

Last time he said those words, was the day they were married. Those words meant something completely different now.

They continued on, back to their silent traveling. At least until Jake yelled out.

“Bloatflies!”

Was this another mutation? Looking to where he had pointed, her mouth dropped open like hinged trap door. The black spots, getting larger as they drew closer looked like flies but on steroids. They shot some nasty, sticky green stuff from the ends of their fat, black bodies. Reaching for her gun, she tried to steady it but she was shaking, the insect was hovering in the air and so it was hard to aim.

Finally getting frustrated, Alice just pointed and shot in the general area where one of the flies was...and watched it explode in a shower of body parts and yellowish green goo. Yuck. Ria and Jake took two more down and the threat was gone.

It took every ounce of self-control she had not to gag as Ria and Jake stripped the bodies for the meat. How was it possible they could eat that after seeing what came out of it? Finishing up, they turned and saw the look on her face, laughing at her reaction.

Ria’s rich, husky laugh still lingered in her words. “You’d be surprised what you’ll eat when you’re hungry.”

A shudder passed through Alice’s body….not if she could help it. There was no way she could ever manage to eat what came from the thing she just saw. Give her the now irradiated canned food from her own world any day.

They stopped for lunch shortly after that. Ria and Jake stood guard while Devon threw the rad steaks on the fire to warm up.

“Think you can manage to choke one of these down?” He looked up at her and smirked.

Alice had to admit, the smell was tantalizing and she was starving. Dogmeat was salivating. She supposed if she didn’t like it, she could give it to him. Her companions might not appreciate that.

Rummaging around in her bag hadn’t turned up anything she really desired. Preston had packed some Cram, a couple of cans of beans and she knew that Codsworth must have hidden the Fancy Lad snack cakes in there. There was also some purified water.

“I...I don’t know. Could I maybe try just a bite first?”

She figured she sounded picky and ungrateful but the truth was, she was terrified to eat what came from the animals around here. In reality, she figured if the rest of them were still alive it should be okay, but what if they gave it to her and she hated it? Better to try a small piece and let them finish it.

Devon whipped out his knife and speared a small piece, handing it up to her. “Careful, it’s still hot.”

Gingerly, she grabbed it, having washed at least her fingers with a small amount of water. Ria had laughed and shook her head. Alice didn’t care. She wanted at least her fingers to be clean when she
ate her food.

Her eyes widened in surprise. It was good. It wasn’t that much different from steak she had eaten before. Maybe just a tad gamier. They all finished their steak in record time, though Alice had given have of hers to Dogmeat. The others didn’t seem to care.

Once lunch was finished and the campsite was clean, it was business as usual. At this point, with the situation at Drumlin Diner, they had been on the road for about two hours. Ria and Jake had figured it was about that much time straight there; they had a brahmin in their group, which they said added about an hour and they had also figured in time for any other unexpected encounters along the way.

The Corvega Assembly rose up, tall and imposing, on their left as they went further. Jake said it was always best to steer well clear of the place. Raiders had taken it over and one of their favorite jobs was to attack caravans as they passed by. Figured it was easy money. On the other side of it were super mutants. Alice made a note to stay far away from this area.

She knew that they were getting near to Cambridge. A lot of memories were there and she wondered how it all looked now. Her Pipboy unexpectedly began squawking and the other three turned to stare at her. Ria looked at the offending device.

“Turn that thing off!” She hissed. “Do you want to broadcast our location! Bad enough this damn brahmin keeps making noise.”

“Oh, hush, Ria. Brisket ain’t hurting no one.”

Everyone started arguing while Alice frantically tried pushing buttons and turning dials to get the Pipboy to be quiet. Finally, she turned the right dial. Blessed silence. The message, however, continued ringing in their heads.

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

“Brotherhood scum. I say we leave em at the mercies of whatever they’re fighting.”

“Yeah, serves em right.”

“They’ve always dealt fairly with me. I don’t always have the things they need but when I do, they give me the caps I ask for. We should at least see what’s going on.”

Listening to the squabbling going on around her, Devon was the only one that seemed to want to help. Ria and Jake were ready to leave without checking to see if they were in trouble. Yet, they had helped the lady at the diner.

“Shouldn’t we go help them?”

Three pairs of eyes swung back to look at her, making her anxiety skyrocket. Being the center of attention was something she tended to steer far away from. Maybe she said something wrong? Those people on that broadcast needed their help. Ria, Jake and Devon had experience fighting. It only seemed fair to put it to use.

“The Brotherhood of Steel can officially bite my ass. They don’t want our help….probably throw it back in our faces.”
“Who or what is the Brotherhood of Steel?”

“They think they’re some kind of military organization. All they do is hoard tech and keep it away from everyone else. They say they’re helping us so we don’t destroy ourselves again. Just a bunch of people playing at soldier, thinking they’re better than us.”

Ria nodded her head in agreement, adding more. “They demand crops from the settlers, paying little in return...sometimes they don’t pay up at all. They can go back where they came from. We did just fine before they showed up.”

Alice absorbed all this information and wondered what Nate would do in this instance. It wasn’t hard to figure out; he would have stepped in and helped at least, then gone on his way. She was supposed to be trying to be stronger. When would that start if it wasn’t now?

“I still think we should at least go help them out of whatever situation they’re in. After that, we can just keep going towards Diamond City. Right? Even if you don’t like them, wouldn’t you want them to stop and help you if your situation were reversed?”

Ria opened her mouth to argue, but Jake interrupted. “Fine. We help them, then we leave. I’m not staying around long enough to have them kick us out after we save them.”

Ria, Jake and Devon all decided they would go to the police station, scout out the situation. If they didn’t like it, they would leave the Brotherhood of Steel to whatever fate decided. Alice got to babysit Brisket. They had no idea what they were walking into and she had the least experience.

“Take good care of my girl, okay Alice? She’s all I got.” The trader patted the brahmin on the shoulder and then the three of them walked away, around the corner and out of sight.

“Just me and you and Dogmeat now.”

Alice sat on a lawn chair, next to a dirty pale yellow patio table, umbrella stuck in the middle at an awkward angle. It had seen better days. Now, the canvas was faded, full of holes and tattered beyond repair. Pulling her gun out of its holster, she laid it on the table within easy reach.

Sounds filtered to her around the buildings in the little cul de sac. Small tufts of grass grew here and Brisket was happy and content, grazing. Wondering if the Brotherhood was anything like the Army before the war, she thought about Nate and if he would have joined them, had he lived instead of her...or if they had both lived.

She noticed Dogmeat’s head come up, his ears pointed forward as if he heard something.

“What is it, boy?”

Looking at Brisket, she relaxed a little. The brahmin continued to grazing. She was relaxed, so there didn’t seem to be anything wrong. Dogmeat had also put his head back down on his paws, yet continued to look towards the area he had been before.

Alice’s body was tense, coiled like spring. She couldn’t relax now, regardless of the ease the animals were feeling. Getting up out of the chair, she reached for her gun, holding it by her side as she went to stand in front of Brisket. Devon would never forgive her if something happened to his precious brahmin.

Just as she started to relax, she heard a weird gurgling sound and then shuffling. What on earth would make that kind of sound? The suspense was driving her anxiety into overdrive. A sudden movement at the edge of her vision made her turn in alarm. She wished she hadn’t. Her worst
nightmare couldn’t conjure up a horror such as this.

The skin of the thing shuffling towards her, arms held out at awkward angles, was mottled and looked vaguely like the melted wax of a flesh-colored candle. It had no nose. Looking at right at her were black, lifeless eyes, devoid of any emotion. The tattered remnants of clothes covered the emaciated frame. Was this thing...had it been human once?

It made her think of the horror movies Nate used to watch late at night. Only this time, she couldn’t bury her head in his side, hiding her face from what she saw. This was no illusion, makeup applied just for entertainment. This was real and it was headed right for her.

Chapter End Notes

As always, comments and kudos welcome!
Everything is Nonsense

Chapter Summary

If I had a world of my own,  
Everything would be nonsense. 
Nothing would be what it is, 
Because everything would be what it isn't.

Her Name is Alice--Shinedown

Chapter Notes

I love the quote at the beginning of that song because I think that is exactly how Alice feels with everything coming at her in this strange new world. She doesn't quite know what to make of it all and since she has woken up, there always seem to be a new and unfamiliar terror to deal with.

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The instinct to flee took over, heart building into a frantic rhythm, banging painfully against her ribs. She didn't even notice her breathing increase, but hyperventilation was an all too familiar companion at these times. However, it was her abject fear that kept her feet rooted to the ground, frozen and unable to respond as quickly as she could have. Time stopped and the rest of the world faded away, her focus narrowing to just herself and this creature coming at her.

Alice could actually feel the cold trickle of sweat easing its way slowly down the valley in between her breasts, making her skin break out in goosebumps. Panic mode was starting to take over, causing her body to shake and her blood to freeze like ice in her veins. Her heart came to an abrupt stop….then catapulted into rapid flight, faster than before, threatening to burst out of her chest.

The monster launched itself towards her and she was transfixed by the change in movement, startled by its speed. She felt suspended, incapable of thought or movement. It was like a train wreck one couldn’t look away from, gruesome and yet oddly hypnotic.

Dogmeat’s warning bark jarred her back into awareness with a jolt. Holding her arms straight out in front of her, she aimed at her target but it was impossible to find a vital area. She couldn't control her shaking, the barrel of her gun wavering all around the chest and stomach. Leaning back on Brisket for support, she felt the brahmin launch away in fear.

Squeezing her eyes shut, on the edge of hysteria, Alice pulled the trigger, her support gone. She fell down awkwardly, twisting her ankle and landing on her elbow, still refusing to open her eyes. If this was the end, she didn’t want to see it. Bad enough her ears were attuned to every horrible sound the monster made as it came for her.
A loud yell echoed off the buildings around her, “For the Brotherhood!” Followed by the twang of a weapon that sounded like Preston’s.

“I hope that’s the last of them.”

Hearing a deep, gruff voice, Alice opened her eyes. The creature that had been charging towards her lay at her feet, not moving. Closing her eyes to shut out the sight, she fell backwards against the ground, limp with relief.

A large shadow blocked out the sun. She didn't want to open her eyes, didn't want to see whatever it was, but curiosity got the better of her. A giant in power armor stood over her. Cloaked in shadows, sun coming from behind it, all she could make out was the shape of the power armor and a weapon hanging to the side, held tightly in steel fingers. The features were indistinct but the voice was soothing...and male.

“That was reckless, civilian, shooting with your eyes closed. You could have missed your target completely and shot something...or someone...else.”

The voice was no longer soothing. The reprimand as well as her second near death experience almost had Alice on the verge of tears. What had ever made her think she could do this? She wasn’t strong enough to look for Shaun, let alone survive out here. Turning to her side, trying to escape from the soldier’s anger, she tried her best not to dissolve in a puddle of tears.

“A sigh, accompanied by an apology. “I'm sorry if I came off a bit overzealous. Are you injured, civilian? I can offer medical assistance if it's required.”

Her elbow was sore and her ankle throbbed. Her butt had taken the brunt of the fall and apparently, it was unharmed. All in all, she didn’t think her injuries were bad enough to warrant medical attention. Especially if he was the one giving it.

“I--I don’t think so.”

However, as she attempted to stand, she stumbled. Her ankle was worse than she expected, causing her pain as soon as she put weight on it. A steel hand reached out to steady her until she could get her balance.

“Thank you.”

“Now, what were you doing out here?”

Not even "your welcome.” He just moved straight into interrogating her. What did she do? Was this a secure area? She hadn't known.

“I was with a caravan. The guards and the trader went to help you while I stayed behind to watch Brisket.” That thought had her panicking all over again. "Oh my God! Where is she? The trader will kill me! I have to find her!"

Becoming frantic over the loss of Brisket, all thoughts of what had just happened were whisked from her mind. The trader had left her with his most prized and beloved possession...not to mention his livelihood. He probably would kill her -- or worse -- if Brisket was lost.

“No one is getting killed on my watch. Who is this...Brisket?”

“A pack brahmin, piled high with boxes full of scrap and stuff.”
“Brisket is a cow?” At her affirmative nod, he sighed. “I don’t make a habit of rescuing farm animals but I wouldn’t want to see you punished for dereliction of duty. Let’s go locate this animal. The others will be busy securing the area and rendering first aid back at the police station.”

Grateful for his help, they took off in the direction he had seen the brahmin run as he barreled around the corner after the feral ghoul. Alice limped along behind him, carefully setting her foot down as she walked. This was not going to be easy.

“What exactly is your business in the Commonwealth, civilian?”

His tone of voice suggested he was suspicious of her. She wasn’t sure if she should feel insulted or flattered. Looking down at herself, she could only wonder, why would anyone be suspicious of her?

“I’m just trying to get to Diamond City. I’m looking for someone.”

“Are you from a local settlement?”

Debating on what to tell him, in the end, she decided to tell him the partial truth. Associating the military with Nate, she hoped he could be trusted. Then again, this world was not like her own.

“I’m from Vault 111.”

Now, instead of suspicion, she heard surprise. “You’re a vault dweller? That is quite an admission, one most people wouldn’t want to make. I appreciate you being honesty. That is not a common trait in the Wasteland.”

She felt a tiny twinge of guilt; she hadn't been completely honest. Yet, she was also warmed by his praise, unrealistic as that was.

His power armor clanked along beside her as they searched. The last time she had seen one of those suits was as she and Nate, holding Shaun, ran frantically to reach the vault. A vision of people screaming, crying, yelling at each other and at the soldiers ran through her head, vivid in its intensity, causing her to stumble.

Once again, the armor clad hand reached out to steady her. She was trying desperately to stay in control and the only thing keeping her from splintering apart was finding that brahmin before the trader found out she was gone. Then she could have an anxiety attack, worry about her painful ankle. Now her elbow was starting to hurt as well.

“What attacked me? Was it even human?”

“Skinwalkers, ferals, shamblers...call them whatever you like, but they’re not human.”

“So, it’s a...what exactly?”

“Ferals may have been human once, but now they’re scavengers of human flesh. Just soulless freaks that need to be exterminated.”

Alice wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. He sounded so outraged, so cynical.

Pushing past her innate nervousness around someone as intimidating as this soldier, she asked another question. “How did they get like that?”

He looked at her curiously, probably wondering why she didn’t know this already. She hadn’t
thought it wise to tell everyone she met about what type of vault she had come from. That she had been frozen for over 200 years. What would their reaction be? When she asked Preston what he thought, he told her to take a “wait and see” approach.

“Radiation. Many of these ferals were around before the war. They had no place to go and were exposed. They’re actually healed by radiation but it also degenerates their brains, making them soulless freaks who need to feed.”

Afraid to ask, but needing to know, “Feed? On what?”

“Flesh. They’re cannibals.”

So much for keeping the anxiety attack at bay. Here it came, full blown, overriding all her attempts to push it aside. She had almost been a snack for a prewar human turned irradiated, brainless zombie.

Legs collapsing from underneath her, she went down in an undignified tangle of limbs. She felt nauseous, dizzy and her heart was pounding out a wild rhythm. A vivid memory arose in her mind, Nate showing her how to put her head in between her knees in case of feeling faint. *It will help the blood start flowing to the brain again.*

To Danse’s credit, he hadn’t even heard her fall. He had been walking along, she had asked him some questions, and then suddenly she was no longer there. Turning around to look for her, he saw her several feet back, on the ground in a heap, skin pale and sickly, reminding him of a scribe on their first day in battle.

“Are you hurt? Do you need medical aid?”

Maybe she had been hurt by that feral and he hadn’t seen it. Damn those things to hell! Having come from a vault, it appeared she was not equipped to handle the abominations that thrived in the Wasteland. She shouldn’t have been left here by herself; a 10 mm pistol was hardly adequate protection against ferals. What had made her leave the safety of the vault and the protection of her fellow vault dwellers? Why was she on the way to Diamond City?

These questions would have to wait. She was clearly in need of some kind of aid immediately.

“Where does it hurt?”

A groan was the only response he received, as she had her head between her legs, arms holding them in place.

He couldn't discern any visible injuries from what he could see of her, though it was quite possible there might be where her body was curled in on itself. This could also be an emotional or psychological manifestation from the events that occurred. Quite understandable given her situation. However, she would never survive out here if she didn’t toughen up.

“You need to get yourself together.”

There was still no response but then his attention was broken by the sound of footsteps approaching. Danse stood up, stepping in front of her as a shield, his laser rifle ready to defend against whatever was coming around the corner.

It was only the two caravans guards and the trader, blood spatters covering their clothes and faces. The trader looked around, searching for something. Not finding what he was looking for, he turned his sights on the vault dweller with an angry scowl.
“Where is she? What did you do with her? How could you let something happen to Brisket? You said she’d be okay!”

Sounding both accusing and anguished, he berated her.

“That’s enough.”

Voice stern and unyielding, Danse interrupted Devon’s tirade. Those under his command knew better to argue when he used that tone. However, the trader was not under his command.

“She lost my brahmin! That’s my living! What am I s’posed to do now?” he continued to wail.

“I suggest you go search for your brahmin. Let civilian come to terms with what she’s been through. As a vault dweller, she is not equipped to deal with the abominations that exist in the Commonwealth.”

“Hmph….shoulda stayed where she was then.” He grumbled as he walked off.

The caravan guards attempted to slip by him unnoticed, but Danse nothing got by him.

“You’re experienced guards, entrusted with the safety of the caravan. What was your reason behind leaving this civilian here defenseless and without protection?”

Ria looked him up and down, not at all impressed by his power armor or overbearing attitude. “We thought she could handle herself. If she can’t, then she has no business being here and should go back to her little hole in the ground.”

“Perhaps you’re just unqualified to handle the situation. The Brotherhood would consider this a breach of duty.”

“Really. Then I guess the Brotherhood can keep take care of her now.” She spoke the word Brotherhood like it was a bad taste in her mouth.

Danse frowned in displeasure. “We are not caregivers. Our mission in the Commonwealth is a valuable one and benefits the Commonwealth as a whole. As she is a member of your caravan, that makes you responsible for her as well as escorting her to her destination safely.”

“Not anymore, honey! She’s all yours.” Both Ria and Jake turned and walked away, leaving him standing there wondering what he was going to do with the civilian.

Looking behind him, he observed that she was shaking. Was it nerves or was she crying? He was almost afraid to ask, then it didn’t matter as Scribe Haylen rounded the corner looking for him.

“Sir, are you okay? I saw you take off after that stray feral and when you didn’t come back I….” She trailed off as she saw the huddled form of a tiny woman behind him.

She looked at him, eyebrows going up, a questioning look on her face. He shrugged his shoulders in response. This was not his field of expertise. Better to leave everything in Haylen’s capable hands. He wasn’t exactly sure what they were going to do with her. This woman was a complication he didn’t need.

As Haylen bent down to provide assistance, he stood guard over them, alert for anything threatening. Behind him, he could hear Haylen’s voice speaking in quiet, reassuring tones. There wasn’t time for this. They needed to evacuate this area immediately.
“Haylen, it's time to move. I don’t want to be out here for much longer. It’s not secure.”

“Yes, sir. I just wanted to get Alice calmed down.”

It hadn’t surprised him that Haylen had already found out her name. She had an understanding demeanor that won everyone over, even those with a more obstinate character, like Knight Rhys.

“Very well.”

“Those ferals are daunting, especially to those who have never encountered one.”

“It was a rather unpleasant encounter, to be sure. Now, if you’re ready, let’s move out.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to leave comments and/or questions and thank you all for the kudos!
Falling Apart

Chapter Summary

Alice finds herself in a new situation, encountering new people, wondering how she will ever complete her journey.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Haylen knew that Alice was woefully unprepared for the journey ahead, trying to find the baby that was stolen out of her recently murdered husband’s arms. Yet, she also felt compassion for this woman and what she was going through. No one should have to endure that kind of pain.

Alice, steadied by the support of Scribe Haylen, followed behind the soldier in power armor. She was nervous and scared. Her anxiety rose even higher as she wondered how she would get to Diamond City now on her own. This constant roller coaster ride of emotions was starting to annoy her while before, she had never given it much thought.

She looked over at Dogmeat trotting next to them, tongue lolling out, happy to be on the move. What would it be like to be a dog? In Dogmeat's case as far as she could tell, he was never anxious or scared by anything that happened around him. He was just happy to be petted and ready to move on to the next adventure.

Damn you Nate! Why did you leave me! I can't do this without you. I'm not cut out for this kind of life at all.

The sudden burst of anger towards her beloved Nate had her feeling instantly guilty. It was shameful that she could ever harbor that kind of feeling towards her dead husband...a man who had given her everything; love, a home, a beautiful son. A man who had been helping her find her own identity, though that journey had been cut short. She lacked the strength to go forward on her own.

Lost in her thoughts, she stumbled as she walked down an alley, reaching out a hand to keep herself from falling even with Haylen there for support. Looking up at where she was, she noticed the soldier had stopped in front of a brick building, the vermilion color of the brick faded by time. Cambridge Police Station in metal letters, some broken or completely missing, sat on the perimeter of the canopy.

Surprisingly, the building itself was still intact. It had been fortified with barriers, a walkway that surrounded the perimeter as well as sandbags, yet the ferals that had been shot littered the inner courtyard around her, bodies flung haphazardly like discarded ragdolls of a giant child. Just how many of these things existed? Where had they all come from? Alice had a sudden thought that made her heart stop for a frantic second. Would that be her one day? Gunned down to keep her from eating human flesh?
She began to shake until Haylen gently took her arm, stirring her from her morbid thoughts and urged her up the stairs where the soldier stood. What was his name again? Searching her memory, she thought she remembered Scribe Haylen refer to him as Danse.

“Where’s Knight Rhys?”

“He’s inside, sir. I made sure to take care of him first, administered a stimpak, dressed his wound and then helped him inside before I went looking for you.”

“Very well. Let’s go in.”

Walking inside, into the dusty interior and up the stairs, Alice was struck by the contrast from the outside. Through the muted sunlight filtering in through the dirty windows, she watched dust mites dance through the air. She hadn’t had a chance to observe many of the buildings on the way here, but looking at the faded red brick encasing the exterior of this one, she had expected it to be less run down. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The floor was still intact however, the echoes of their boots and the heavy pounding of the power armor making a solid sound as they walked across it. Having long since seen better days though, the former shine was now long gone, it was now grey and dirty with age and disuse.

Many of the walls had large gaping holes with bits of plaster and wire sticking out, bricks littering the floor underneath them in piles. Sheets of paper were scattered everywhere, discarded remnants of another time. The paint on the walls, the filing cabinets, the tables and chairs; all the colors were muted and dreary.

The only vivid thing she saw in this room was Haylen, her deep blue eyes bright and sparkling, crinkling at the corners, military outfit mostly still clean and in good repair. There was even a tinge of pink on her cheeks, making her freckles stand out, as she conversed with another soldier who must be Knight Rhys.

Everything else in the building was coated in a thick layer of dust. She inhaled a lung full of it and started coughing. It flew up her nose, making her sneeze as well. Just what she needed on top of everything else.

“Who is that?”

Alice knew it had to be the other Knight, the one talking to Haylen. He didn’t sound very friendly at all. She wondered if it was the aggravation of her sudden appearance that made him sound so hostile or that the other two had offered to help her.

“That’s Alice. She was traveling with a caravan and they left her behind, so we brought her with us.”

“Why? We aren’t babysitters. Let her learn to fend for herself like we all have.”

Alice stood up as a bottle of purified water was thrust in her face, held by steel fingers. She reached out and took it gratefully, swallowing carefully so as not to choke again, this time on water. It helped chase the dust down her throat and while her nose itched, she wasn’t in danger of sneezing again. She felt in control of herself, such as it was.

“You’re giving her our supplies now, too? Are we going to have to feed and water her dog as well?”

The soldier turned to him, “Rhys, that’s enough! Like it or not, this civilian is now under our
protection. You will treat her with respect.”

Knight Rhys turned on his heel and stalked off, clearly not happy about the whole situation.

“Come on. Let’s find a place where you can relax and breathe without these two bothering you.”

Haylen had stepped up beside her, wrapping an arm around Alice’s shoulders and steering her towards a back room. Most of the room was covered in piles of rubble all over the floor, but there was a table with some chairs, most of which were missing the backs. A faded yellow sleeping bag had been laid out on the floor.

“I’ll give you some time to yourself. If you need anything, let me know, okay?”

Near tears at Haylen’s soft voice and gentle demeanor after the rudeness of Rhys and the other soldier’s abrupt demeanor, Alice just nodded, not at all trusting herself to speak. She watched Haylen walk back into the main room. Once she thought Haylen was truly gone and out of earshot, she flopped down on the sleeping bag and let the tears fall without making a sound.

Everything was falling apart around her. She was never going to get to Diamond City. She wasn’t even sure she would survive another day. Look at what had just happened! Stuffing a fist in her mouth and biting down, she stifled a moan of despair that threatened to erupt despite her best efforts.

Dogmeat came over and laid down by her side, as close as he could get, putting his head on his paws. Wrapping her arms around him, she buried her face in his soft fur. He was all she had right now and she was grateful for his presence.

She longed to just go back to Sanctuary and never leave again. This was a stupid idea; to think that she could actually go out and find Shaun. She felt like just a pathetic excuse for a mother. That thought started another round of tears. Eventually, she fell into a deep sleep, brought on by her adrenaline crash and sheer emotional exhaustion.

A little while later, Haylen peeked around the corner to see how she was doing. A smile tilted up at the corners of her lips as she observed Alice, curled up on the sleeping bag, one arm slung over her dog who lay curled up beside her. They were so cute together. Her smile slipped as she thought about how anguished Alice must be, frantic to find her son, dealing with a new reality. Rhys sure hadn’t helped the situation. She wanted to strangle him sometimes.

As if summoned by her thoughts, he walked up, leaning against the opposite wall and looking into the room.

“So, what’s the scoop on her and her four-legged mutt, Haylen? Why are we suddenly her babysitters?” Rhys nodded his head towards the sleeping woman and her dog.

Turning to look up at him, she frowned. “She’s a civilian who is completely out of her element and needs a little compassion. Is that such a hard concept for you to grasp, Rhys?”

He threw his hands up in the air, “What gives with you and Danse, huh? Since when do we wander around helping Commonwealth settlers? We’re better off leaving them to themselves. Let them figure their own lives out.”

“Honestly, Rhys, there are times I just don’t get you. Regardless of what our mission is, they still sometimes need a helping hand.”

“A hand out, you mean. I don’t see how giving her our supplies does us any good. Just means
we’re short on the things we need.”

Haylen rolled her eyes and sighed in exasperation. “There are times I’m ready to knock that brick block you call a head off your shoulders!”

He smiled, his eyes sparkling with humor. This was the Rhys she saw that nobody else did. He may be married to the Brotherhood, but there was another side to him that only she saw. Rhys would often say and do things, just to get her riled up. He told her she was cute when she was angry. Despite the attitude that most other people saw, Haylen knew without any doubt, that Rhys would lay down his life for his brothers and sisters. He was loyal to the Brotherhood to a fault. She still wished he wasn’t always so hard on those outside his circle.

Both of them straightened up as they heard the heavy, clanking footfalls of power armor. Danse was coming. Haylen gave him her sternest look, which usually meant for him to be quiet and behave himself. Not that it ever truly worked.

“How is our charge?”

Haylen had to crane her neck up to look at Danse. He stood at least seven feet tall in his power armor and he was already tall and muscular to begin with. She could understand why most were intimidated by him, civilians and Brotherhood soldiers alike.

“She’s sleeping right now, sir. I think she was overwhelmed by an adrenaline high and when it wore off, she just passed out from exhaustion. I was debating on waking her up to get her something to eat.”

“Let her sleep, Haylen. She probably needs the rest. Go ahead and see what rations we can spare when she does wake up.”

“Yes, sir. I’m on it.”

He watched her go, turning to see Rhys staring at him in displeasure. Rhys had been a challenge when he first started under Danse’s command. He had been reprimanded many times and once, Danse even locked him in a cell to get him to calm down and rethink his options.

It had taken time, but Rhys had finally settled down...somewhat. He could still be hot-headed and quick to judge but Danse knew that Rhys would always bleed for his brothers and sisters in the Brotherhood, no matter the cost. A trait Danse admired greatly. However, there were still areas where Rhys was incredibly short sided. As it turned out, helping this vault dweller, who was so clearly in need, was one of those areas.

“I understand why you don’t approve, Rhys, and while we’re no longer under Elder Lyons’ leadership, that shouldn’t mean we abandon someone who is not part of the Brotherhood that so clearly is in need of it. As Paladin, you will follow my orders and if that’s too much to ask, then I suggest you make yourself scarce while she is here. Do I make myself clear?”

Glaring daggers at him, Rhys finally relented, stalking off in a huff to one of the back rooms. Danse considered going after him but he couldn’t make Rhys’ change his mind. He had to do that on his own.

Danse couldn’t fit through the hole in the wall while wearing his power armor. He settled for just looking in on their charge from the main room. She looked peaceful right now, stretched out on the sleeping bag, her arm around the dog.

The scene from before came back to him in stark detail. He had rounded the corner, determined to
extinguish the lone feral that had escaped between the buildings. What he saw had stopped his heart for a quick second.

The feral had been on a fixed trajectory towards a tiny woman like an RPG on its intended target. Without warning, a dog erupted from beside her in a flurry of wicked teeth and growls, ready to tear the feral apart. The woman herself had been on the ground at an awkward angle, both eyes closed, hands wrapped around a 10 mm. Her finger had been slowly squeezing the trigger, arms stuck straight out, gun barrel aimed nowhere near its intended target. Instinct had taken over and shouting a battle cry, he had aimed his laser rifle and reduced the feral to ash. He had walked over to ask her if she was okay and instead of answering, her eyes darted around frantically.

Shaking his head at the memory, he turned to go. There were reports to record into one of the working computers. He hoped Haylen would be able to procure some extra rations somewhere in this dilapidated building. There was also the problem of figuring out how he was going to get the woman to Diamond City. He could take her himself but he really needed to go to ArcJet.

A long sigh slipped through his lips. He was proud of being Paladin and yet there were times it weighed on him heavily; the lost soldiers under his command, orders he had given, decisions that were usually anything but simple. Stepping out of his power armor, he sat down at the computer.

Hearing sounds from the room where the woman was sleeping, he looked up. The dog came walking out, brown eyes trained on him and whined softly. What did it want? Having gotten his attention, it turned and went back to the makeshift doorway. It looked back at him, whining softly again. Was the woman in some kind of trouble? Had she been hurt after all and none of them had noticed? Sighing at the interruption to his obligations, he backed away from the computer and walked over to the dog, who ducked into the room as he approached.

He frantically looked around for Haylen. Not seeing her in the immediate area, he surmised that she must have gone downstairs. If the woman was truly hurt, he only had rudimentary field medical training at best. If she needed comfort, that was really not his area of expertise. The one time he had offered Haylen a hug, it had been the most awkward moment of his life. Right now, there was no one to rescue him.

“Her name is Alice.”

He nearly jumped a foot in the air. No one was ever able to sneak up on him but he was so focused on this uncomfortable task, he hadn’t heard Haylen approach. She put the meager rations she had scrounged up on the table and quietly walked back out. So much for getting help.

“Alice, wake up. You’re safe now.”

The woman, Alice, awoke with a start, not knowing where she was right away. Thoughts hazy and still stuck in the remnants of a nightmare, she could recall none of the events from the day. Every beat of her heart was a painful battering inside her chest, like it wanted to escape and run from whatever danger was taking shape around her. Her eyes darted wildly, too and fro, not really seeing anything. Ghostly fragmented images hovered at the edges of her vision and she didn’t recognize a single one.

“Easy, civilian. You’re safe now.”

At first she didn’t recognize the man in front of her. Vague memories of a woman and another man in a fitted suit and there had been a soldier in power armor. Oh! This was him! He looked different without his metal suit, dressed in the same orange jumpsuit as the other soldier. He had a fitted
hood on as well and all she could see was his face, scarred and dirty, but she recognized that face, now that she was paying attention. His voice was deep and soothing, rougher and deeper than Nate’s but effective all the same.

“I’m...sorry for disturbing you. I was having a nightmare.” She stared off over his shoulder. “I can’t remember what it was though.”

“Nothing to worry about.” The silence stretched out awkwardly until he continued. “Haylen found some rations and we have a little more water. If you are hungry or thirsty, that is.”

He had been squatting down, and turning slightly, he indicated supplies on the nearby table. When he stood up, he towered over. He really was a large man. Not quite as tall and muscular as Nate but then, Nate had been one of a kind. She felt a deep sadness as she thought of him.

As the soldier walked away, Alice called out, “What do I call you?”

He looked back over his shoulder, “I apologize. I should have introduced myself. I’m Paladin Danse of the Brotherhood of Steel. And you are?”

“My name is Alice.”

“Well, Alice, I have duties to attend to. We’ll talk later.”

She felt like she had just been dismissed even though he was the one that walked away. Dogmeat trotted over to her and she idly ran her fingers through the fur on his neck. Having made it this far, she needed to figure out how she was going to get to Diamond City. Maybe she could ask Haylen if caravans stopped her to trade, though judging by their meager supplies, she figured the answer was probably going to be no.

“What are we going to do, Dogmeat? We could go, just you and I, but I really don't think I would last very long and every noise would have me running and hiding in terror.”

He looked up at her, angling his head, and gave her a soft woof in response. A plan needed to be formed. She just wasn’t sure how to go about that. None of this was her area of expertise. In fact, she didn’t even have an area of expertise. She wasn’t much good at anything. Well, unless falling apart at the least little thing counted. That would put her up at the top then.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and for the kudos! Comments always welcome :)
Hidden in the Depths

Chapter Summary

Lost in memories, she was startled as Dogmeat walked up and rubbed his head against her hand. She'd been lost in another life, another time. Sighing for what could never be again, she knew that when she could stand on her own, if such a day ever came, she would come back here and maybe venture inside. Not sure if it was abandoned or not, eyeing the crackling fire barrel outside, she would most likely have to be careful.

Chapter Notes

I just want to thank you all so much for continuing to read along and follow! Alice isn't an easy character to like but I hope you'll stick around to see the person she becomes as the story progresses :)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Deciding that it would be a good idea to eat something, Alice rummaged in her pack for the food Preston had put inside. It wouldn’t be fair to take the soldier's supplies when she had her own. What she had was supposed to get her to Diamond City where she could purchase more. With this unexpected stop, they might be gone even sooner. She would just have to be frugal with what she had. The first thing she pulled from the bag was a box of Fancy Lad Snack cakes. Her mouth watered as she could almost taste them before they even reached her mouth. Sugar was a particular weakness of hers.

“Better not let Danse see those!” An amused voice spoke up.

Looking up at the sound, she saw that it was Haylen. She had taken off her cap and what was underneath was silky copper colored hair, pulled back in a ponytail. Removing the cap along with her glowing skin, freckles and the ever present twinkle in her deep blue eyes made Haylen look more youthful, closer to her own age, maybe even a few years younger. Everyone seemed so mature here but they probably had to grow up fast with all the dangers that lurked around every turn.

“Why not? He doesn’t like them?”

“The opposite, actually. He loves them. Every time we’ve found them, they’re gone before we even realize it. He denies it all of course, but Rhys and I know better.”

Looking down at the box, an idea came to mind. Looking back up at Haylen, “I should give these to him then. It seems insignificant after what he did for me but the only thing I have I can give him to say thank you for saving my life.”

Haylen’s smile softened. Here was a woman, most likely a few years older than her and yet, she
had no idea what life was like out here. All she wanted was to find her son and now, she wanted to find a way to thank Danse for saving her life. Danse wouldn’t know what to do with her gratitude.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. He’s actually right outside in the main room.” Oh boy, Haylen thought, this is going to be fun to watch.

Alice followed Haylen out to the main room. Her eyes surveyed the area, looking for Rhys, not wanting a confrontation with him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep Rhys preoccupied.” Haylen leaned close, whispering in her ear as if she knew what Alice was thinking, nudging her forward with an elbow.

Alice felt like her feet were rooted to the floor in fear. Danse was so intimidating and she had just never done anything like this before. She absolutely never, ever approached anyone on her own. Nate had instigated their relationship and anytime he had introduced someone to her, usually a fellow soldier, he brought them to her. This was completely new territory. Looking to Haylen for guidance, her shoulders slumped as she saw that she was already halfway across the room.

Surreptitiously moving forward, she stood near Danse but not close to him by any means. Her mouth dry from fear, she tried to say his name only to choke on it instead. Taking a deep breath, she forced his name out of her mouth.

“Danse.”

Even with that effort, it was more of a squeak than anything...but it got his attention.

That stern oval face all she could see with that cap, he turned towards her, brows lowered in concentration. She stepped back involuntarily, thinking he looked dangerous and upset at her interruption but upon seeing her, his eyebrows went up in the other direction, almost comically, and she struggled not to giggle like a 12-year-old.

“Is there something you need?”

“I--I wanted to thank you for s--saving my life earlier. I don’t have much, but I wanted to give you something.”

Clearly, he wasn’t sure what to make of that. He just stared at her, like he expected more of an explanation. The confused look on his face echoed in her own. Wasn’t this what someone normally did when imminent death was thwarted? Thank the person who saved them? Embarrassed at his response, or lack thereof, she thrust the snack cakes towards so fast, he had to reach out and take them. It granted her a reprieve from those penetrating eyes.

Not waiting for him to look up again, she turned to hurry back to the other room, calling back over her shoulder, “Thank you again, Danse.”

She didn’t see him look up, didn’t see the shock and wonder on his face at her gesture. Neither of them saw Haylen peeking around the corner of another room, watching the scene unfold, a smile on her face from ear to ear.

Recon Squad Gladius was still not able to get a distress call to the Prydwen with their weak signal. Danse knew that he couldn’t hit ArcJet without backup and Rhys was not ready for that kind of mission. He thought about taking the civilian but she would just be a liability.

There was only one outcome for this situation. They would have to plan another strategy for ArcJet
while he took Alice to Diamond City. Hopefully, he could procure some supplies while there to get Gladius through until the Prydwen arrived. As Alice slept on in the other room, Danse briefed Haylen and Rhys on his current plan of action.

“I can’t believe you’re just going to be her glorified babysitter, escorting her to Diamond City. I agree we need supplies but there’s got to be a better way! Besides, getting a signal out to the Prydwen should take precedence over this...helpless civilian.”

Rhys shook his head, displeasure for what Danse was doing not just evident in his voice but also written all over his face.

“I think you’re doing a wonderful thing, Danse. Don’t listen to him.” Haylen was speaking to Danse but was glaring at Rhys. “I know Rhys has reservations for this deviation in plans but without supplies, it won’t even matter if we have a signal.”

“I can assure you both, I value your input. However, this is the only option we have at this point in time. It’s imperative I procure additional supplies until we get that signal fixed. Rhys, secure the perimeter. Haylen, gather whatever supplies you can throughout the building, secure them in a central location and complete an inventory. I will leave at dawn with the civilian and return at the first available opportunity.”

Danse heard Rhys mumble something as he turned away towards his power armor and laser rifle to go over it once last time. He turned back so suddenly, Rhys almost lost his balance.

“I expect full cooperation in this. Am I clear?”

Knowing that look as well as the tone of voice, Rhys didn’t hesitate, “Yes, sir.”

“Very well.”

Danse knew Rhys meant well. He had taken him under his wing, seeing great potential in the young man. He had come a long way, but he still had a great deal to learn. They had all been through so much since coming to the Commonwealth on a recon mission and now, only the three of them remained. Still, Rhys would do well to work on his attitude or he would never advance in rank.

The next morning dawned, clear and cloudless. A perfect day with good visibility. He donned his power armor, grabbed Righteous Authority and waited for Alice at the door. It was time to head out.

Alice walked out of the room, hair tousled and falling down around her shoulders, eyes heavy lidded and sleepy. Who on earth thought it was a good idea to get up at the crack of dawn? Unfortunately, there was no coffee to be had to wake her up.

Tripping over her own feet as she walked over to Danse, she reached out to steady herself on the table next to her. This was going to be one long trip. Plopping down in a chair, she did her best to put her hair up, longing for even a bit of water, cold as possible, to splash in her face. Grabbing her backpack and her gun, she called for Dogmeat and wandered over to Danse’s side.

“Reporting for duty, sir.”

“You’re a civilian, there’s no need for you to report. Let’s move out.”

Her attempt at humor falling flat, Alice tried not to let the embarrassment show on her face. What made her think she should even try? Making jokes was something she had never been any good at.
Being awkward, clumsy, panic stricken…that was where she excelled.

Speaking quietly, she answered him. “Yes, let’s go.”

Leaving the Cambridge compound, Alice followed along behind Danse in his suit of power armor. She almost had to run to keep up with him. Dogmeat trotted beside her, occasionally running off to follow an intriguing smell, always coming back to her side.

She was just about to call out to Danse, ask him to slow down, when they passed by a familiar building. Alice stopped in the middle of the road, oblivious to everything around her. In front of her was Fraternal Post 115. Nate had often told her about this place. It was a tall and stately building of yellowed brick, worn by time. Largely intact, there were several areas where the concrete had worn away, yet it gave the building even more character. Even the windows were still whole.

Lost in memories, she was startled as Dogmeat walked up and rubbed his head against her hand. She’d been lost in another life, another time. Sighing for what could never be again, she knew that when she could stand on her own, if such a day ever came, she would come back here and maybe venture inside. Not sure if it was abandoned or not as she observed the crackling fire barrel outside, she would most likely have to be careful.

Turning away, she saw Danse running back towards her. She had forgotten all about him and he certainly didn’t look very happy. It appeared she had made a mistake…yet again.

“Civilian, we must stick together! I insist that you keep up.”

She cringed at the harshness of his tone. Yet, knowing he was right made her feel guilty. There wasn’t time to stop and stare every time she came across a memory of her former life. It could get her killed.

She supposed an explanation might help him understand but she had the feeling that in the end, it wouldn’t matter. Surviving out here was going to be a steep learning curve and she just hoped she was up to it.

“I do understand and I’m sorry. I will do my best to not slow you down or stop unnecessarily. I...uh....do have a request though.”

“Go ahead.”

“Can you maybe….slow down a bit? You’re very tall and my legs are, well, very short. I’m finding it hard to keep up with you.”

“Very well.”

He sounded so matter of fact that Alice wasn’t sure if she was imagining things, but she thought she saw him blush with her admission. Was he embarrassed? Impossible! Not this imposing soldier. It must have been the exertion of running back to her. They continued on their way and she was now able to keep up.

They were just at the bridge, one Alice had been across several times with Nate when they went to see a baseball game. He loved the sport so much, he had bought season tickets.

When they had found out their baby was a boy, he had been so excited. Everything discussion about Shaun from that point involved that sport….baseball mitts and bats, their first game together,
T-ball, little league. He was beside himself. A bittersweet smile curved her mouth up to one side. If...no, when...she found Shaun, she would teach him what she could. Except she couldn’t hit the broadside of a barn.

A shot rang out as they neared a boat that had crashed into the bridge. The words painted on the wheelhouse, stuck in between the open sides of the bridge at an odd angle, read USS Riptide.

“GET DOWN!” The soldier yelled right as a volley of gunfire erupted at their feet. He pointed to a rickety set of boards, the only way to get inside the wheelhouse. “Take cover in there. I’ll take care of these raiders.”

Alice ran towards the wheelhouse, terrified she was going to be shot in the foot. With her type of luck, that would be a normal occurrence.

Eyeing the rickety boards and the way they were haphazardly thrown down, she tentatively set her foot on one. They creaked and trembled, even under her slight weight. How long had they even been sitting here? Was it safe to put all of her weight on them? She didn’t weight much -- 90 pounds soaking wet -- the words, in Nate’s voice, ran through her head.

A vivid mental image blossomed in her mind; boards breaking in two and her body free falling, smacking hard into the water below like a ragdoll and following soon after the wheelhouse landing on top of her and pushing her ever deeper into the cold depths below. She froze, couldn’t move.

Startled, her mouth opening to scream, she was grabbed by the arms and shoved inside the doorway of the wheelhouse. “Get in there now, civilian!”

It was the soldier. For a split second, a thought occurred to her that really had no relevance to the moment. *What should I call him? I can’t keep calling him soldier, yet Danse seems too personal and Paladin...I’m not even in the Brotherhood.*

Pushing the inane thought aside, she scrambled up into the cab, not an easy feat considering how it sloped downwards at such a steep angle. The doorway was open to the rest of the ship below but she was somewhat hidden if she flattened herself to the side.

Another thought crossed her mind, this one infinitely more important than the last. Where was Dogmeat? Hearing a bark, followed by a low growl, she carefully edged over to the doorway, peeking around the edge of the doorway to look outside.

Both the soldier and Dogmeat were now on the deck of the ship below, engaging the Raiders in a fight to the death. Dogmeat would grab the body with his teeth and wrestle it down, at which time the soldier would shoot to kill.

She hoped that soldier would keep Dogmeat safe; she couldn’t lose her new best friend.

A loud metallic thunk echoed in her ear. Turning to look, she saw a bullet buried in the metal right next to her face. Ducking back inside, she slid bonelessly down the wall, her legs giving out beneath her. That bullet had embedded itself in the metal...right next to her head. A few inches over and---

Refusing to continue that thought, she knew she would do well to stay down and out of sight...just as the soldier had ordered her to.

Time seemed to crawl by as Alice huddled inside, listening to the sound of guns going off and the twang of the laser rifle, an occasional bullet whizzing by her hiding place. She couldn’t seem to keep herself from cringing at every sound, eventually her hands slid up to cover her ears and she
huddled into herself, trying to drown out what was going on around her.

Occasionally, she heard grunts and shouts of pain or a battle cry from the soldier, even through her muffled ears. Her heart thumped to a stop every time she heard a yelp from Dogmeat, thinking this would be the last time he ever made a sound. It made her feel guilty. She should be the one down there to protect him.

With a suddenness that was eerie, the sounds around her grew quieter and eventually stopped completely. She wasn’t sure if the battle was coming to an end or if it was moving further away. The longing to glance outside again was almost overwhelming but was quickly terminated by the memory of the bullet that came so close to her head.

Footsteps echoed on the ladder below the wheelhouse and a shadow darkened the doorway in front of her. Male or female, she wasn’t completely sure, as the sunlight from behind them hid any details. It appeared to possibly be a man because of the large, bulky outline. Of one thing she was certain, it wasn’t the soldier who had accompanied her.

Was he dead then? Where was Dogmeat? Maybe the soldier had sent this person to check on her or offer some help.

“Well, what do we have here? I think I found me a trophy!”

The blood froze in her veins. It was a raspy voice and male. He was definitely not here to help her. This must be one of the Raiders and she was alone.

Thoughts crowded through her head, all wanting her attention at once. This was her fault! Those soldiers back at Cambridge, the whole military organization would blame her for getting one of their own killed. How had the Raider known she was here? Had he just been passing by and seen her? What was he going to do to her? Where was Dogmeat? Where was the soldier?

Fighting to push the panicked thoughts away and clear her mind, she focused hard, closing her eyes and willing her heart to slow down. It was an exercise in futility. Striking out in this world to look for Shaun was so much harder than she ever thought it would be. How had Nate done this day after day, let alone be a soldier?

The world around her came into sudden sharp focus, the Raider stepping inside the enclosed space with her. His stench enveloped her and his heavy breathing filled the air, the sound of the waves slapping the hull of the boat underneath her perch, the distant but still telltale crackle of the bonfires below; all of these filled her senses at an almost painful level. At her side was the familiar weight of her 10 mm. The one she could barely manage to use.

Opening her eyes to mere slits, she held her breath as much to keep out the unwashed body before her as to make as little noise as possible. Watching the raider’s booted feet move forward, step by step, she willed herself not to faint from the fear. A fear he could likely smell in the air.

A sound had him turning to glancing down below. Not knowing where the instinct came from, Alice took that tiny window of opportunity to grab her gun, for once not fumbling with it like she was a circus clown. She held it tightly in her hand, her finger barely touching the trigger.

The raider turned back toward her and a cloud whispered past the rays of the sun at that precise moment, giving her a perfect view of what he looked like.

His head was covered by shoulder length, greasy blonde hair. At least, she thought it might have been blonde. It was hard to determine.
The skin on his face, neck and arms would have been a tanned golden brown, had he not been covered by a layer of dirt. Pockmarks covered his cheeks, a scruff of unshaven beard along his jawline and chin. The clothes he wore were made of leather; vest, pants, boots. All of them as greasy as his hair if the shine on them was anything to go by. When he leered at her, looking her up and down, several gaps showed where he might have once had teeth.

Despite his unkempt appearance and leering smile, what frightened Alice the most were his eyes. They were dark, looked almost black inside the wheelhouse and she wasn’t sure if it was the shaded aspect of his face, their true color or maybe just the windows that allowed her to peer into his twisted soul.

Expecting lust, a sick kind of pleasure of being at his mercy or even a predatory gleam, what she saw instead was a void. No emotion, no evidence of humanity...as if whatever might have been had rotted away from the type of life he led. He rubbed his hands together, grin getting wider.

“So, little girl, you ready to play a game? I have one in mind that will be lots of fun.”

She started shivering and couldn’t seem to stop. Horrifying images did a macabre dance through her head of what he might have in mind. As he took a sudden lurching step in her direction, leaning down to grab her arm, the cloud moved and the sun shown brightly in the cabin once more. The raider put his arm up to shield his eyes from the brilliance.

A sudden shot of adrenalin kicked in, allowing her to bring the gun up. She grabbed it with both hands but aiming was difficult due to the shakiness of her arms. The gun barrel wavered to and fro. She hadn’t precisely meant to shoot him when she did but in trying to steady her arms as well as her hands, she inadvertently pulled the trigger.

The gunshot echoed loudly around her in the metal cabin, the sound bouncing around and around. Her ears were ringing and she had her eyes closed so tight, she thought they might never open again. There was a yell of surprise, then a high-pitched scream that continued to ring in her ears before the realization hit that the sound was coming from her.

“YOU FUCKIN LITTLE BITCH!” The raider’s enraged yell drowned out her own scream right before she heard a loud thump and then her gun was snatched out of her hand.

Keeping her eyes closed was worse than seeing what was in front of her, so Alice opened them. She decided that line of thinking was wrong. She wished she had kept them closed. The raider was shot but he wasn’t dead. He had slid to a sitting position on the floor, bright red blood smearing a trail down the wall behind him.

There was not much distance between them in the small confines of the cabin. Leaning to his side, his legs were splayed out in front of him, one boot touching hers. Dark red blood seeped from a hole in his stomach, between the fingers of one hand that tried to stem the flow. The other hand pointed the barrel of her gun directly back at her own face.

“You got some balls for a mousy little thing, I’ll say that. You shoulda killed me though. Now, I’m gonna make you pay for what you done. Say your prayers little girl. You’re gonna meet the devil.”

Closing her eyes once again, she let her fear fly away in the face of danger. There was simply nothing she could do now. Finally, she would be with Nate again.

She lifted up a prayer to whoever was listening to take care of baby Shaun and let him grow up to be a strong, loving man. A good man.
Nate, I’m coming. We’ll be together again soon.

She hoped he really was waiting for her.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos always welcomed :)
“Civilian…Alice...are you okay?”

Not exactly sure of the best way to answer that, she remained quiet. How was she to define ‘okay’? There was no physical harm to her. But...was she truly okay?

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been a while... Writing for those picture prompts and for NaNo, then throwing a 10-day trip across the states and the holidays right behind that really took a lot out of me! I can't promise I'm completely back but I'll do my best from here on out!

Hope all of you have had a wonderful time for those that celebrate the holidays wherever you live....

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ll be the one meeting the devil.”

She heard the deep, gravelly voice right before the laser rifle fired.

“You will be the one meeting the devil.”

Not exactly sure of the best way to answer that, she remained quiet. How was she to define ‘okay’? There was no physical harm to her. The man who had planned to hurt her was dead. She had been rescued by the soldier. But...was she truly okay?

No...on many fronts. First and foremost in her mind was that she had been so close to being with Nate again, only to have that opportunity snatched away. The anger that bubbled up inside her at that thought was enough to take her breath away. She was never angry. Ever.

Then, there was the fact that she had almost been raped, beaten, tortured. Granted, she had no idea what the raider had in mind but they were all valid possibilities. Something sickening had no doubt been going on behind those eyes.

And let’s not forget, she had just shot a man.

Her stomach heaved. Rising up swiftly from where she was crouched, she pushed past the soldier, not even caring if she fell into the water below. Running for the side of the bridge, she hung her head over the railing.

Her stomach was determined to rid itself of everything she had eaten that morning, over and over it all came back up until there was nothing left. Even so, she continued to dry heave until she was so
weak her legs collapsed underneath her.

“Drink this.”

She willed herself to open her eyes. It wasn’t much of a stretch to accomplish. What was playing behind them made her want to retch all over again.

A canister of water was what she saw instead, being thrust into her face, mechanical fingers wrapped around it. Weakly, barely any strength left in her body, she extended her shaking arm forward to grasp it. Instead, it fell awkwardly into her lap. Her head limply fell backwards, banging against the metal frame of the bridge. The pain didn’t even register.

“It’s not easy, shooting another living, breathing person, even if the taking of that life is in self defense. Knowing that you ended that life is hard to come to terms with. You can give in and hide, or just learn from it and go on.”

Too tired to even look up at him as he spoke, she just sat there, feeling like the worst sort of human being. In her mind, she understood that it was either him or her. Both of them couldn’t make it out of there, at least not unscathed.

She also knew that it would have been her. She was weak and pathetic and there had never been any strength in her as long as she could remember. If she had some kind of strength anywhere in her, she wouldn’t feel like this right now. Right?

“How-” her voice cracked. She stopped, opened the canister with unsteady fingers and swallowed some water. Started over again. “How do you do it, day after day? How do you keep going on?”

“You fight for your brothers and sisters, for those who can’t fight for themselves. You fight to keep them safe and free from harm, to protect them and hope they get to live another day.”

He paused and she finally looked up to see him gazing out over the water, yet she knew he wasn’t really seeing anything.

“Taking a life never gets easier. Defending yourself, trying to live in this world does. Sometimes, taking another life, especially one like that, is all just part of survival.” He had glanced up towards that raider as he spoke, disgust evident in his words.

Her eyes now open, she looked back the way they came but she also didn’t see anything, gazing back into the past. Snippets of conversation with Nate drifted through her mind. He wouldn’t talk much about the war, the things he had done.

There were times, when he was at that in between place between sleep and wakefulness that things would slip out. Times when he held her in his arms and she wanted to weep for him, for his pain, for all had lost, for the sadness. Everything made so much more sense now.

“We need to move on, civilian. We’re sitting ducks out here in the open and we still have some ground to cover while there’s daylight left.”

When he put it that way, what choice did she have?

She struggled to stand up, her legs unsteady beneath her. Dogmeat brushed up beside her, helping to steady her. As Danse walked away, she called out to him.

“Wait.” He paused, turning back to look at her, a question in his eyes. “I don’t know what to call you.”
He thought for a minute, those brown eyes so serious as they looked at her, through her. Was he seeing a memory, as she did sometimes?

“Danse.”

He turned back around and continued towards Diamond City. Alice took off after him, hesitating when she reached the ladder once again. Taking a deep breath, she put a hand on each side, gripping tightly. Placing one foot on the bottom, she hoisted herself up, wanting to close her eyes tight in case the ladder tipped sideways and she fell down into the irradiated water below.

She forced her eyes to remain open but refused to look anywhere but at the rungs directly in front of her. She could do this. This was nothing after what she had just endured.

A metal hand appeared in front of her. She looked up but couldn’t see Danse’s face for the sun shining behind him. “Grab my hand.”

He hoisted her up with ease, setting her back on solid metal ground on the opposite side of the bridge. The breath she hadn’t known she was holding escaped from between her lips. She wanted to thank him, but he was already gone, striding down the bridge. Following after him, she looked down, checking to make sure that Dogmeat was still at her side. He was, trotting happily along, tongue hanging out. He seemed none the worse for wear after taking on the raiders.

Edging her way past the discarded hulls looking like giant Matchbox cars, she also made sure to avoid the holes that opened to the water below. Carefully, she made her way across planks of wood placed here and there, finally reaching the end of the bridge where Danse waited.

Barricades were set up between the bridge and the city. With sudden clarity, she recognized this area. This way led to Fenway Park. Was that what Diamond City was? It certainly made sense. She wondered what it looked like now. Shaking free of memories once again, it was only a matter of time before she found out. They would soon be there.

Just up ahead, she could see the stadium high above the buildings. It was hard to believe it was still here and intact. At least she supposed it was.

Losing herself in memories despite her promise not to, she was taken surprise as a volley of gunshots rang out up ahead. Danse sprinted towards the sound, a surprise he was even that fast in that heavy armor, calling back over his shoulder for her to take cover. What would it be this time?

She felt her heart kick up in panic and yet, she was really just too tired and numb, wanting a place to hide away from the danger. At this point, she didn’t think anything could frighten her anymore. She had never been more wrong.

The staccato sound of gunshots continued up ahead where Danse had gone. Was there ever any end to the bloodshed in this world? Next to her, Dogmeat whined, seeming to know that danger was nearby.

Still standing on the street, lost in her thoughts, she heard Danse yell at her, farther away now. His deep, commanding voice still managed to carry over the distance, “Take cover Alice!”

Looking around, she desperately sought a place where she wouldn’t easily be found. The high, broken windows of the now useless entrance to Fenway Park didn’t offer much in the way of protection. So focused on finding a place to hide, it never occurred to her to also look around her while she searched. She never saw the beast behind her. Didn't even register Dogmeat's warning growl.
Something heavy from behind hit her in the back and she flew forward, her head and chest landing on a pile of debris, her legs and feet skidding across the concrete. A deep guttural snarl sounded next to her ear, thick globs of spittle dripping down, landing on her face. What on earth was this?

Alice had not even recovered from her confrontation with the raider. Her mind shut down, refusing to deal with this new situation. Wrapping her arms around her head, she did her best to curl up into a fetal position and act like she was dead. A random thought she remembered from watching a documentary about bears. Not knowing what had attacked her, she thought acting dead might work. In reality, she just simply couldn’t do this anymore.

There was a yelp and some growling, a snuffling and what she thought were Dogmeat’s barks, then a sharp pain exploded in her leg and her mouth opened wide on a scream. With no thought of what she was doing, instinct for survival taking over, she brought her other leg up. Kicking over and over again at whatever was causing her pain, Alice sought to dislodge it just so that pain would stop. Her booted foot met an immovable force that wouldn’t let go, shaking her leg like it was a discarded rag.

Opening her eyes to see what it was, a hulkish green mutated monster had her leg clamped tight in its jaws. The red-rimmed beady eyes stared into hers with hatred. Her mind taking flight, far beyond its endurance to comprehend all that had been thrown at her, she opened her mouth again, this time a scream being ripped from deep inside her. She kept screaming, over and over, until her voice was hoarse, kicking at the beast at the same time in mindlessness.

“Alice! Stop! It’s gone. You’re okay!”

She didn’t hear the voice, didn’t register that there was no resistance to the thing that was trying to consume her, still kicking at it. Arms reached around trying to stop her but she swung her arms as well and punched with her hands, not registering the pain in them as she encountered solid steel, her mind on sensory overload, running on adrenaline. Her body succumbing finally to exhaustion, mind too tired to fight, she blacked out.

Startled by the absolute meltdown of the tiny woman before him, Danse took advantage while she was unconscious to pry the mutant hound’s jaws from her leg. Ripping the jeans up to the wound, what he saw made him shudder. Those long, sharply wicked teeth had made her leg look like a slab of raw meat.

The bite marks were deep and jagged, covered in dirt, shiny with the unsanitary saliva from the hound’s mouth. It was bleeding heavily. Bleeding would cleanse the wound but at the alarming rate at which it was flowing, she would go into shock.

Danse grabbed a water canister, pouring the vital liquid in an attempt to cleanse it more properly. Grabbing a stimpak from his armor, he glanced up at her, seeing she was even more pale than usual. As she was still unconscious, he jabbed the stimpak near the wound.

He had a moment’s pause as he contemplated looking through her bag for clean cloth of some kind. Ruthlessly, he pushed his unease away. Now wasn’t the time for this. Finding an unworn t-shirt, he ripped a strip off, tying it around her leg as a tourniquet, using the rest to cover the wound as a makeshift bandage. It would have to do.

He positioned her as gently as possible on the floor, her pack shoved under her head for a pillow and waited for her to come around. He stood guard, her protector against the unforgiving harshness of the outside world. But as dark began to fall around them, Danse found himself becoming increasingly worried. Alice wasn’t coming around. How he wished Haylen was here now. He was
going to have to get her to Diamond City immediately. It was irresponsible to remain out here with super mutants...and who knew what else...around them.

Slinging his laser rifle over his shoulder, he kneeled and bent down to pick her up. She moaned in response to being moved but then settled once he gathered her close, her head resting against his chest plate. With infinite care, he pressed on into the night. He would make sure the civilian reached her destination. Her dog at her side.

As they approached the gates to Diamond City, he saw a woman standing outside waving her arms in an exaggerated fashion, arguing with someone over an intercom set up outside. The woman clearly wanted in but for some reason, the tinny voice that conversed with her refused to open the doors. Listening to the conversation as he walked up, her dramatics made sense. She was a newspaper reporter. They always manipulated their stories.

The woman turned to look up at him from under her pageboy hat, eyes opening wide. At first he thought it was the power armor and his chest swelled with pride, thinking she was in awe of the Brotherhood. Then, he realized belatedly that he held an injured woman in his arms and knew it was the state of her injuries that had caused, not awe but concern, as well as the civilian’s torn and blood soaked clothes.

“You open this gate right now, Danny Sullivan! It’s an emergency! There’s an injured woman out here.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure Piper. You’re just saying that to get me to open the door. I wasn’t born yesterday, ya know.”

Danse’s deep voice echoed through the speaker. “I can assure you, the woman is not exaggerating...this time. I am Paladin Danse of the Brotherhood of Steel. I require entry inside your gates. I seek medical assistance for the civilian in my care.”

“Oh wow, okay. Sorry, man. I’ll get the doors open right away.”

Immediately, the heavy green metal doors started to rise. The clanking and sounds of the machinery whirring as they opened made Alice stir in his arms.

Piper followed behind him as he stomped his way inside. “In your care, huh. You’ve really done a great job with that, haven’t you?”

Danse ignored her as he walked inside and up through the tunnel, leading to the market place. Dogmeat continued to trot at his side, occasionally reaching his muzzle up to sniff at Alice's leg. Sometimes he whined softly. “Is there a clinic or a doctor here?”

“Down the stairs, to your right, on the corner. Make sure you don’t trip on the way down. Wouldn’t want to damage your handywork.”

He was used to those in the Commonwealth not appreciating the Brotherhood of Steel. Choosing to ignore her, he continued down the steel walkway towards the clinic. As Danse approached the clinic, the slim, dark-haired doctor dashed out to him, firing rapid questions for information.

“Leave her here. I have a lot to do.” He paused to turn and look at Danse, eyeing his power armor.
with distaste. “Do you have caps? I’ll need payment, say....500 caps now. I’ll determine the rest as I go.”

“Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Right now, Danse would give anything to be able to take her to Cade on the Prydwen. He certainly had enough caps to pay the doctor whatever he charged but besides that fact, he knew Cade was the best. There was no telling what kind of doctor this was.

“Do you want me to save her or not?”

Knowing he had no other options, Danse agreed to the outrageous charge, most of which would still have to be paid once the doctor was finished. “When should I come back to check on her?”

The doctor took his time, removing the bandage, inspecting the gashes along her leg. Just as Danse was about to press for an answer, he spoke.

“Come back in the morning. What you did was sufficient but it still needs to be cleaned and bandaged properly and she’ll need stitches. One. Well, maybe two more stimpaks should go a long way towards healing. Still, even if she’s better tomorrow, she won’t likely be traveling anywhere for at least a few days.” The doctor eyed Dogmeat with distaste. "Make sure you take the dog with you."

Having turned back to his patient, the required caps pocketed and the promise of more following, the doctor returned to his patient. The conversation was over.

Danse turned to look at the dog. Would he follow? "C'mon boy." He set out for the Dugout Inn. Turning to look back, he saw that the dog wasn't following. He had laid down right outside the clinic. Apparently, he would not leave Alice. He continued on his way having been to the Dugout Inn once before and since he was now staying the night, he needed a room. He was disgruntled by the delay and change in plans to say the least. It wouldn’t be right to leave her here on her own but he had to at least make sure she was okay and that someone would help her with her quest to find her son.

As he settled in for the night after paying out more caps for a room, he tried getting some sleep. Only the nightmarish scene from earlier refused to be banished from his mind, playing over and over like those movie reels he had read about. The ending of this movie could have been entirely different with the slight young woman dead before her journey had barely begun.

Realizing that sleep was not on the agenda tonight, Danse sat on the edge of the mattress, resting his elbows on his legs, hands hanging between his knees. It was hot in the room and stuffy. Having discarded the regulation orange Brotherhood jumpsuit along with the white shirt he wore underneath to cool off, he found he was still uncomfortably hot. He rose and stretched deciding that some push-ups might keep his thoughts at bay.

Bending down and laying flat on the floor, Danse pumped his muscular arms up and down, lowering himself to the floor before pushing his body back up with effortless ease. It was mindless exercise, his body accustomed to more rigorous training. Even counting couldn't keep his thoughts from straying to the same subject. "150-151-152-150...Dammit!"

His thoughts quickly turning to the young woman with an urgency that surprised him, he jumped up from the floor, quickly moving to throw on his jumpsuit. Striding out of the room with a purpose, the bar’s inhabitant’s stepped aside once they saw his face. There was more there than just determination. Danse wasn’t sure why but he needed to see Alice. Now.
Chapter End Notes

** Changed the warning to show that violence will appear in the story. If you play the game, then that is about as much violence as you will probably see in my story -- unless Alice says otherwise! Figured I would put that up there just in case though.

I am thrilled with the comments that have been left and it means a lot that you understand Alice and are along for the ride. Thank you so much!!

As always, any comments are welcome and thank you again for the kudos :)
No matter how fast she was, it never seemed to be fast enough. The monster behind her continued to gain ground rapidly. Without warning a sharp, intense pain in her leg had her stumbling and falling and she screamed out in pain.

She struggled but something had her pinned down and wouldn’t let go.

I do apologize for the wait...again. Maybe now that I have this out of the way, it will flow better *crosses fingers* lol

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

It was a beautiful day, one of the most beautiful she remembered seeing in a long while. The sky was a clear deep blue, a few puffy white clouds drifting lazily through the sky. At times, she wished it was possible to just lay on one and float for awhile, free from this world.

The sun was shining brightly and the weather was still unusually warm and very dry. While there wasn’t usually snow for Halloween, it seemed there would be no cold weather this year as well. With Shaun so little yet, she was actually grateful. In fact, that should make the parents, as well as the children, extremely happy.

Turning away from the bedroom window that looked out onto the main road through Sanctuary, Alice walked into Shaun’s room. He wasn’t in his crib. Hearing low volume whispers from the living room, followed by cooing and gurgling, she headed in that direction.

Pausing at the end of the hallway, she watched Nate holding Shaun in his arms, speaking to him quietly and talking about baseball. He was so excited to take him to his first ball game at the stadium. It was a little ways off, but Nate was determined that he would know all about America’s favorite pastime...whether he could understand yet or not.

She heard a dog bark outside, sounding like it was right at their front door. Strange. There were no dogs in Sanctuary. Not that she knew of anyway.

Suddenly, Nate looked up, twisting around to smile at her. “It’s time to wake up Alice.”

She gave him a confused look. “I am awake.” The barking at the front door became louder, more frantic. She looked towards the door with a frown. Why didn’t someone come get their dog?

“Alice, you need to wake up now.”

Turning back towards Nate, she watched as he and Shaun disintegrated like tendrils of fog that
dissipated in the morning sun. She cried out to them to come back. Slowly, the house and everything around her faded as well into complete and total darkness.

A new illusion appeared of broken, crumbling buildings, burnt and rusted shells of cars, trees stripped of their leaves...looking like those end of the world movies they showed on the weather channel. She heard rustling and her heart started to pound in fear, her skin broke out in a sweat and she knew, instinctively, that she had to run, to get away. NOW!!!

A snuffling, grunting sound came from behind her and she felt hot, fetid breath on her exposed skin. She didn’t know what it was but it couldn’t be good. Her fear magnified and she sprinted as fast as she could, quickly becoming short of breath.

No matter how fast she was, it never seemed to be fast enough. The monster behind her continued to gain ground rapidly. Without warning a sharp, intense pain in her leg had her stumbling and falling and she screamed out in pain.

She struggled but something had her pinned down and wouldn’t let go.

Again, she thought she heard Nate but this time from far away, yelling at her, “Wake up, Alice! Wake up!”

As she was shaken over and over, those words unrelenting in their intensity, Alice slowly rose up from the depths of her nightmare. A tall, shadowy figure stood over her and she felt arms pinning her down. Struggling was futile against the sheer strength and size of the figure.

“Alice, it’s okay. You’re okay now.”

That voice. She recognized it. In her delirium, she couldn’t remember exactly where she remembered it from or who it belonged to but instinctively, she knew she wasn’t in any danger. She calmed immediately opening her eyes, recognized her surroundings….and promptly burst into tears, overwhelmed by relief.

The arms that had tried to shake her awake, the arms that had kept her from lashing as she struggled, suddenly stiffened in response to her dramatic emotional change as if unsure what to do.

A female voice, ripe with exasperation, came from behind them.

“Move out of the way, soldier boy. Can’t you see she needs a gentle touch?”

Silence was the only answer to the question and Alice focused on the two people in the doctor’s booth with her. The soldier moved off to the side, letting the woman move forward. He wasn’t happy about it judging by the look on his face.

“What? Don’t look at me like that! I bet you’ve never been gentle in your life, have you? Probably don’t even know how to function outside of that tin can you live in.”

A gentle hand wiped the sweat-soaked hair from her face, the other one covering her own shaking hands.

Alice looked up into a woman’s compassionate eyes, the streetlight outside subtly lighting one side in a warm amber light, the other side still in shadow. Even in the meager light she could tell that those eyes, while compassionate, didn’t miss a thing. Still, they softened upon seeing her tear stained cheeks.

Shoulder length dark straight hair, the exact color hard to distinguish in the shadows, was topped
by a pageboy cap. The woman exhaled as if coming to a weighty decision, the smell of bubblegum on her breath. A scarf was wrapped around her neck, the collar of her jacket raised slightly around it, like her own personal armor against the world.

“Hey there, it’s going to be all right, okay?”

The woman put a steadying arm around Alice’s back and helped her sit up on the narrow gurney where she was laying. Where had the doctor found it? It was a wonder she hadn’t fallen off...maybe that’s why the soldier had been holding her, to keep her from doing exactly that.

Walking a few steps away, the woman looked around the shack, searching for something. She made a disgusted sound, placing her hands on her hips and spoke, clearly annoyed, “Now, where does that quack keep the water?”

Apparently, she had found the doctor’s stash as a bottle was thrust into her face. This was getting to be a regular occurrence.

Danse had moved off to the side after that newspaper reporter from the gate had pushed him out of the way, taking charge in the care of Alice. He remained silent and chose to observe, more comfortable in letting someone else take the lead in this situation.

Personal confrontations were awkward for him, something he readily avoided if at all possible. The only time he had been unable to extricate himself from one was when Haylen had thrown her arms around him, crying. That had been distressing. His awkwardness had been lost on Haylen. Still, she had seemed better afterwards.

He looked Alice over, not quite able to see from where he stood in the shadows how her injuries had fared under the doctor’s care. Pushing the nosy reporter aside, he grabbed Alice’s pants leg and pushed it aside to inspect her wound. It wasn’t easy to examine in the meager light.

“I see why you left her in the doctor’s care. Your bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired. So, do you regularly man-handle a woman’s clothes, pushing them aside to get what you want?”

She had gone to stand outside the door, lighting a cigarette, inhaling and then blowing the smoke out towards the marketplace. Thankfully, she couldn’t see the blush that covered his face at her words. He wasn’t entirely sure but he thought there might be a double meaning in her words.

Haylen often told him he was imperceptive when it came to things people said and what they meant. As for himself, he said what he thought, wasn’t one to mince words about an issue. The truth was, he didn’t have much experience with a woman’s clothes...personally, in the field or in combat. His focus was always on the current or upcoming mission and for a long time now the Brotherhood had been his whole life. Still was. With Alice right now, his focus had only been to examine her injuries.

With Haylen on his team, he had a female to deal with a woman’s injuries or, as sometimes was the case, a woman’s emotions. But so far, this had only applied to Wastelanders they might encounter; his recon team had been made up of other Brotherhood men, Haylen being the only female and scribe. They had all treated her as just another soldier. Still, most of them had recognized she had abilities they lacked.
Sneaking a glance from under his brow at Alice, he saw she wasn’t even looking at him, wasn’t paying attention to either of them or the conversation. Her eyes were closed, her head down, shoulders hunched over, drawing into herself. His brows knitted in distress, was it his actions that caused her to react this way?

Shaking off his disquiet, he continued to inspect her leg. The wound was still red but the jagged edges were slowly knitting together, the swelling going down. However, the doctor hadn’t done such a good job of cleaning her up, smears of blood still showing on her leg. He sighed. Sanitary conditions were not prevalent in the Commonwealth. He thought that things would be better in a place like this. He was obviously mistaken.

The reporter came to stand next to him, smelling of cigarette smoke, making him long for one himself. He didn’t indulge often but sometimes, the need was overwhelming and smoking helped him relax. He could use that after the day he’d had. Nothing had gone as planned. In fact, nothing had since he’d set foot in the Commonwealth with his recon team. He had had such optimism when they started this mission. Now, he just had regrets and painful memories.

“Damn, couldn’t that quack have cleaned her up better? What a...a...jerk!”

Danse jumped in surprise. He had been so deep in his thoughts, he hadn’t realized she had come up next to him. Dangerous for a soldier, particularly one of his rank, to let his guard down. He watched warily as her eyes lit up and she turned to him with excitement in her voice. This didn’t bode well.

“You know,” her eyes slid sideways towards him, “we could just take her out of here. Didn’t you get a room at the Dugout Inn?”

Her suggestion appalled him. Just leave with this civilian and not pay for services rendered? That was dishonest! As he opened his mouth to give voice to that fact, she went on to explain.

“Just throw some caps on the table and we’ll take her out of here. I’ll head back to my place and grab some water, then meet you back at the Dugout.”

Danse wasn’t sure what to say but he knew taking Alice to his room at the Dugout Inn was a bad idea. If some of the patrons that frequented that place saw Alice, weak and injured, they would decide she was easy prey. There was nothing she could do to disabuse them of that notion either. She couldn’t even take care of herself.

He had planned to find another civilian who could help her. He would entrust her to that person and take his leave. Turning towards the reporter, he decided he had found just the person. Who better to help her than someone who was relentless and did anything to get a story? Besides, she had pushed him aside to take over Alice’s care. She was perfect.

Having already walked out the door, headed towards the lodging that housed her paper, Danse lengthened his already long strides to catch up to her. She was barely halfway there.

“I have a better idea, civilian. May we talk?”

The reporter turned around, her eyes glinting in the lamplight with humor.

“Civilian, huh? Name’s Piper. What’s yours, tin can?”

“I’m Paladin Danse of the Brotherhood of Steel.”

Her lips tipped up at the corners as if she was trying not to laugh at some joke only she understood.
“Okay, then. Well, that’s a bit of a mouthful. So...how about I just call you Danse?”

His hand reached up to rub the back of his neck, something he was not aware he did when uncomfortable.

“I’d prefer Paladin.”

While he had chosen to allow Alice the privilege of calling him by his given name, he wouldn’t allow such familiarity with the reporter. In the long run, it didn’t seem wise.

“Fine. What is it you wanted?”

With the acknowledgement of her attention, Danse became serious, pacing back and forth, hands clasped behind his back as he explained. “I need to get back to my post. My recon team has been here in the Commonwealth and we have need of a deep range transmitter for communications. I’d be grateful if you would help Alice with her mission.”

Her eyes narrowed, “So, what you’re saying is you want me to become her babysitter.”

He flinched, hearing the exact same words that Knight Rhys had used. “She’s....Look, I should let her be the one to tell her story but she came from a vault and her son, her baby, was stolen. She needs help looking for him. You’re the ideal citizen for this mission.”

Her whole demeanor changed when he recounted Alice’s story. “Her son was stolen from her? It had to be the Institute!” Looking thoughtful, she continued, “I think I know just the person who can help her.”

“Outstanding! Who do you have in mind?”

“None other than our very own detective, Nick Valentine. Alright, soldier boy, I’ll help. Tell me though, can she hold her own out there?”

Danse let out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding. He now had to explain to this reporter...Piper...that Alice was more of a hindrance than a help out beyond those walls. It didn’t sit well with him to lie or skirt the truth. It might make it easier for Alice but it could also get someone killed. So, he told Piper exactly what she was getting into -- even if it meant she retracted her offer of assistance.

“Alice is not at all prepared for life outside of these walls. When faced with danger, she freezes up and frankly, she is a danger to anyone she’s with. I told her to run for cover when we encountered some mutants just outside the walls. Whether she was actually obeying my orders or not, she was still injured in the process. I don’t think she has any necessary skills to stay alive in the Commonwealth. Keep her here, help her however you can...as long as she stays behind these walls. I would advise against ever leaving her on her own out there or taking her with you; she is a distraction you don’t need.”

Alice watched Danse and that woman talking, somehow knew they were discussing her. A part of her was too tired as well as still feeling too drugged up to care what they were saying. Another part desperately needed to know. That part won out with the simple question...wouldn’t it be better to be informed?
As her feet dangled off the side of the tall gurney she sat on, pondering how she could get down without making enough noise to wake the city as well as not reinjure herself, Dogmeat came over, leaning his body against her legs. Alice swore sometimes this dog could read her mind. Grabbing onto the sides of the gurney while simultaneously using him as support, she slid down to the floor, her knuckles white from her death grip as she held on to steady herself. She wasn’t sure how she managed to do it without fainting.

Slowly and carefully, leaning against the wall for support, Alice made her way towards the open doorway. Standing back just far enough, she was still hidden in the shadows but could still hear much of the conversation. Apparently, she had been quiet enough not to alert them.

…….’Can she hold her own out there?’ She heard the woman ask Danse. She held her breath wondering what he would say. If he told Piper she couldn’t defend herself, her journey was over before it had begun. Someone would probably see fit to drop her back off in Sanctuary and then what would she do?

His next words might very well seal her fate.

His voice was deep, so she could only make out a few words and they weren’t in her favor.

‘Alice -- not prepared for life outside -- freezes up -- frankly -- danger to anyone -- run for cover -- on the way here -- injured -- don’t think -- necessary skills to stay alive -- keep her here -- behind -- walls -- advise against -- leave -- taking her.’

So, this was the end then. She wasn’t sure whether to laugh, cry or scream. He was locking her up just as sure as if he had thrown her behind those bars in Cambridge and she was powerless to do anything about it. This was his world more than hers. Throw in the fact that he was a soldier and she just a civilian and that woman would abandon her at the first opportunity.

‘...a distraction you don’t need.’ With those last words, Alice shuffled back inside the room, collapsing into the chair next to the desk. She was feeling a little more clear headed now and turned quickly hearing footsteps as they both headed back towards her. Apparently, they were done discussing her. The woman walked in first.

“Hey there, how you feeling?”

“I...I’m okay.”

“Really? Cuz you look like something a molerat dragged in.”

Looking down at herself, Alice had to agree. Her clothes were stained with blood, one pant leg ripped and cut up now as well. There was blood still smeared on her leg and over what remained of the pant leg. She had even had some smears on her arm and her hands.

Reaching a tentative hand up, she realized her hair had fallen down as well, coming out of its bobby pins. A random thought almost made her laugh with a touch of hysteria, and she just managed to hold it in check. If it had still been Halloween right now, this would be her costume.

“How about we head back to my place. I’ll help you get cleaned up.” Eyeing her up and down, Alice felt like a bug under a microscope. ‘You should probably just about fit in Nat’s clothes I think. Geez, you’re tiny.”

Not sure if that was a compliment or not but grateful for the offer of help in any case, Alice agreed. She hoped whoever Nat was, he wouldn’t mind giving up his clothing. She had nowhere to go now after all. The soldier had just effectively given her journey a death sentence. Once again, she had
failed Shaun...she had failed Nate...failed herself.

As Alice turned to follow, the woman turned back suddenly, surprising her so she lost her balance. A strong, warm body came up behind her steadying her. The soldier. Where had he come from? She hadn’t seen him come back or even heard him.

Stiffening in response to his nearness, she was overcome by a burst of anger. He had not only humiliated her with his words, now he was all but proving to this woman that she really was incapable of taking care of herself. Granted, right now she couldn’t walk very well. A flush of humiliation blazed across her cheeks.

She lashed out at him, unable to turn and face him. “Despite what you think, I’m perfectly capable of standing on my own! And if I fall, I can also pick myself up off the floor.”

He stepped back as if burned and she swayed but was determined to stay upright. How dare he speak such careless words to someone he didn’t know about who he thought she was or what she could or couldn’t do? Damn him!

Turning around to face him, without faltering, she watched his eyebrows lift in astonishment.

“I apologize. I thought you required some assistance.”

“Apparently, you think I’m incapable of taking care of myself.” She watched his eyebrows climb even higher, almost getting lost in his hairline. “Yes, I heard what you told this woman.”

Her arm swung backwards wildly in the vicinity of the woman, almost making her lose her balance again. Dogmeat shifted so he could lean against her legs, again providing her with stability.

Vaguely, she heard the woman speak up behind her, “The woman’s name is Piper.”

Alice continued as if Piper hadn’t spoken. “I. Don’t. Need. You. Go back to your Brotherhood, your missions and whatever else it is you do. I don’t need a babysitter. Especially not you.”

Alice turned and marched out the door, refusing to give in to her pain. As she made it halfway across the marketplace, she came to the realization that she had no idea where she was going. So much for standing her ground. The sting of humiliation took place of her anger and then the first scattering of rain drops fell on her head. What a perfect start to what looked to be a miserable day.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for sticking around and being patient. I know where I want to go with the story, what I want to write, but the words just aren't flowing. I would rather take the time getting it right than just throwing something up here to keep a timeline. I think you all deserve the best for following my story!

Still, this is more of a filler chapter than anything really going on...more word action than physical action. I'm hoping the words will come easier after this.

As always, thank you so much for the kudos and the comments you leave!!!
She sat on the roof of Piper’s place, arms wrapped around her legs, eyes focused on the stars that flickered on and off, much like the fireflies she used to chase as a child. If only she had such easy access to the stars as she had to those fireflies and could run through them like a child, free herself of all the responsibilities of being an adult and just soar.

When she was really little, she had been endlessly fascinated as the stars twinkled brightly in the night, thinking they were winking at her from far away. She would gaze in wide-eyed wonder as they zoomed across the inky black sky, leaving a trail of stardust behind them and her imagination would run away with her, fantasizing that they were traveling to far off places. It was like another world to her, a place to get away and forget the life she had, forget all the things that were wrong with her for a while.

When she was older and able to read, she brought home books from school by the dozens and read everything she could about the constellations. She learned that the Greeks and Romans named them after gods they thought lived in the heavens and also how farmers had used them like a calendar to know when to plant. Alice taught herself how to tell the time of year as well as direction by using those same stars, soaking up every bit of knowledge from guides on how to read the stars and myths she read.

Astronomy became her gateway to another life, one where she was smart and self sufficient; the only thing she ever felt she was good at. Alice knew all the constellations before the bombs fell, would go outside with Nate and they would sit together, him listening in fascination as she pointed them all out and told him stories of each one. After Shaun was born, she would carry him outside at night after his bath and, even though he was too young to understand, she would tell him all the stories she knew, one by one, promising him that she would show him what she knew of how to read the stars. She never got the chance.
Sitting here right now, she wondered if one of those stars was Nate. If he was up there right now, twinkling in the night sky, watching over her. The peace she had begun to feel ended abruptly as thoughts of Nate gave way to a slowly burning anger. She missed Nate but she found that as more time passed, she was less saddened by thoughts of him, that emotion being replaced with fury and resentment. How dare he leave her to fend for herself! She wasn't equipped to deal with this, wasn't the parent that could go after their son and save him. That should have been Nate's job. She should have been the one to die. She should have been the one to carry Shaun to the vault, the one to try and keep those people from taking him. She was his mother! Try as she might not to hate him, it still bubbled up and boiled over.

Trying to distract herself from what she considered a betrayal of her husband's memory, she rubbed her leg through the material of her jumpsuit. She was amazed at how fast her injury had healed with the use of the stimpaks. Nate had used them in the Army and had tried to explain to her how they worked when he came back from the war. His explanation was adequate but seeing them work first hand was nothing short of miraculous. Walking and especially climbing the ladder to get up here was still uncomfortable, the muscles in her leg tight, but she did this nightly, trying to strengthen the muscle and loosen it up. It was important she be ready to head out again -- if Piper would take her.

Over and over again, she would peel off her jumpsuit at night, all she had left after the attack, and marvel at her leg and how it was already healed, though there was still a scar. Piper explained in a little more detail that minor wounds healed much faster and usually without scars. Alice’s wound had been more severe and had taken more than one stimpak; she would likely carry a scar forever. It was a match for the scars she carried on the inside.

Alice hated the neon blue jumpsuit, a memory of her time in the vault that she would just as soon forget. It made everyone stare at her whenever she went out, so she didn’t go out often. Being the center of attention frightened her and had her ducking for cover like a scared rabbit. She had handed over all her caps to Piper to help buy supplies, so there was nothing left for clothes. At least she had the suit; things could have been worse.

Time had dragged on for the past two weeks giving Alice time to think about her life, from exiting the vault up until this point. During the day her mind was always occupied on the events that had happened since leaving Sanctuary and all that she still needed to do to find Shaun. At night, she dreamed of Nate. As she healed, she dreamed of him less and less often, her dreams changing and warping, being replaced by frightening nightmares, causing her to cry out in the dead of night. It bothered her that she woke Piper and Nat up constantly. Sleep had become something she feared.

Sometimes, as she sat up high in Diamond City, her thoughts would turn to Danse, how he had hurt her with his words. He was gone by the time she was up the next morning and had never said goodbye. What bothered her the most was that she hadn’t thanked him. Regardless of how he thought of her, she was appalled at how she handled things. It was only right she thank him for getting her here. It didn’t matter that she had been hurt, she was alive. Guilt ate at her for the missed opportunity and for the caps he had spared for her care.

It was completely possible she would never see him again. She could always go back to the police station but there was no guarantee he would even be there. Alice made a vow that she would not only pay Piper back every cap she had spent on Alice, she would also pay Danse back. That is, if she ever found a way to make money.

On top of everything, Diamond City overwhelmed her. The marketplace was a hive of activity, traders selling their wares, calling out to those who entered to stock up on ammo, get a haircut or buy some trinket for their loved one. Settlers and caravans and the odd trader here and there from
outside were always walking in and out. The noise could be deafening and Alice longed for the peacefulness of Sanctuary. She would even take just traveling the Commonwealth again. Well, maybe.

The smell of the place was even worse than the cacophony. The fumes from the generators, the ripe smell of unwashed bodies, butchered meat out in the open and lack of basic plumbing was enough to make her want to throw up. She had taken to wearing a bandana over her face, not that it helped much.

Because of all of these things, she rarely ventured out, instead walking around in circles or climbing the ladders inside Piper’s to try to keep her leg from stiffening up. It worked, mostly, but she knew she needed to really stretch her legs. Just the thought of going outside again in her neon blue jumpsuit made her cringe. The stares from everyone around her just made her shut down completely.

Towards the end of the two weeks, Alice had had enough, slipping out of the house while Nat and Piper were gone. The sun was out today, the sky a pure deep blue. Today was only mildly warm and surprisingly, there was a breeze blowing through town, taking most of the smell with it.

Looking down at Dogmeat, tongue hanging out, trotting at her side, she thought he was just as happy to get out as she was. Reaching out, she slid her fingers through his soft fur, scratching behind his ears. It was good to be out and about.

“Time for some fresh air, right Dogmeat?”

“Woof.”

She smiled, almost laughing at the absurdity of ‘fresh air.’ Not that air pollution wasn’t rampant before the war but here and now, with radstorms every so often, that phrase was pretty much anathema to what she had known.

The first few days she had been tired and withdrawn what with everything that had happened. Being inside, away from everyone and everything had never been a hardship. Now though, it felt like a jail sentence. She had hoped that by leaving Sanctuary, she could leave her old life behind and start over, become stronger, more resilient. Apparently, there were some things that never changed.

In her case, it meant the person she had been was still in there; a frightened, neurotic one. She didn’t feel like an adult most of the time. If she did, she could overcome all this and take charge. Right? Sighing in defeat, she knew that even though she had hit a wall with hiding inside, she was still not the person she wanted to be.

Her thoughts wandered to the detective, Nick, wondering if he was back in town yet. Piper had gone to his office while Alice was recuperating, asking for his help. She had let Alice know that when she visited the Detective Agency and talked to his secretary, Ellie, that Nick was out on a case. Ellie couldn’t say when he’d be back. Another road block.

Shaking off her depressing thoughts, Alice focused on the area ahead of her; the gardens of Diamond City where they grew mutfruit and tatos. Checking to see if anyone was watching her, she realized the residents of Diamond City were too involved in their own lives to notice her at all. Besides, most didn’t venture this way.

It was quiet back here in the area of the garden plots, easily the most peaceful place in town. The hustle of the marketplace was just a distant buzz. Sitting at one of the picnic tables, Alice closed
her eyes and enjoyed the peace and quiet. It was the reason she and Nate had settled in Sanctuary, far from the noise and rat race of the city.

She could almost imagine she was there right now; there was no traffic noise, honking horns, drivers yelling at each other. There wasn’t even the noise of planes flying overhead. She could still hear the brahmin in their pens occasionally bawling out loud, the muted buzz of voices. Not the sounds from before the war for sure.

The sound of gunfire outside the walls startled her into awareness and her heart sped up. Clenching her fists, she closed her eyes again, trying to shut it out. It was as much to find that peace again as to berate herself for always being startled. Would it never end?

Once again, she was startled, and opened her eyes, only this time it wasn’t by gunfire.

“Hey there. What’s a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this? You come here often?”

Alice knew she was blushing a particularly awful shade of red and turned to look up into the dark sunglasses hiding the eyes of the bald headed guard. He was always messing with her, leaving her flustered and unable to speak coherently. No one ever paid any attention to her and she wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to him. She was almost positive he didn’t really like her, just did this to tease her.

“Uh….hi.”

Tongue tied, the conversation stalled while her mind frantically tried to think of something witty to say. She was saved from looking completely idiotic as usual, barely, by the arrival of another person.

“Leave her alone. Stop harassing her and go back to work.”

“I’m just looking out for the fine citizens of Diamond City.”

“Yeah, yeah...whatever. Go.”

The bald headed guard strolled away casually, whistling off key as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Sorry about that Alice. He’s a pain on a good day.”

Danny Sullivan sat down across from her as the other guard walked away. She liked Danny. He was always casual and for no reason she had been able to figure out, he put her at ease. With Danny, she had never suffered her usual anxiety at being around strangers.

“It’s okay Danny. He wasn’t bothering me.”

He looked at her and smiled, “He was, you just won’t admit it.” There was a pause after his words as if he waited for Alice to deny it. When she didn’t, he continued. “So,” he glanced at the paper laying on the table in front of her, “What’s the news today? More of the same dastardly doings around the Commonwealth that Piper’s managed to dream up?”

Alice looked down at the paper, thought about what was inside. Just as in the days before the bombs, the news that was in the papers, on TV and on the radio was always depressing. There had been nothing but negative stories about corruption, murder and anger overshadowing everything. It was even worse as tempers ran high with the shortages. Everything that was wrong in the world right there for everyone to see. If you wanted happy stories, you had to go find them for yourself.
After all, happiness didn’t get good ratings.

While a lot of what Piper wrote could be looked at in the same vein, Alice had come to realize she just wanted to help people, make sure they were informed and careful. However, people had a way of taking informed and careful and becoming paranoid instead. She saw a lot of that here in Diamond City.

“I think she really cares, Danny. She just wants people to be ready for anything, not to rile them up and make them paranoid. Piper can’t help how people react to what she prints. Her heart is good.”

A little embarrassed at how she sounded, she blushed furiously, thinking Danny would probably laugh at her. Looking up through her eyelashes, she found he wasn’t even looking at her but instead at the paper.

“I suppose you’re right. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to have a little more positivity in the paper from time to time, something to give the residents here some hope and optimism instead of more paranoia or depression.”

Alice agreed but she wasn’t sure Piper would be willing to change her agenda, so she just remained quiet.

“Have you heard anything more on whether Nick has finished his latest job? Haven’t seen him come through the gates yet.”

So much for a sunny day of optimism. Desolation threatened to overwhelm here once again. If Danny hadn’t seen him come back, he was probably not here.

“I haven’t heard one way or the other. Surely you would know, working the gate. I did think it might not hurt to go over there and talk to his secretary again.”

It startled her when his warm hand reached out and covered her own. Did he know the thought of doing caused her anxiety to intensify? Why else would he do that? She looked up, eyes wide with apprehension.

He smiled at her warmly but seeing her distress, he slowly pulled his hand back. “Why don’t I go with you? If you wouldn’t mind the company that is.”

He sounded just as hesitant as she did sometimes. She smiled tentatively and nodded her head, not trusting herself to speak. It would be nice not to have to go alone. She was overreacting.

They both got up and he took the lead as she paused, unsure of where she was supposed to go.

“Just follow me. I’ll get you there safely.”

He was always safe with her. Piper had set it up so he would take her outside the walls and help her get used to wielding a gun, taking out enemies and not be so afraid of defending herself. It didn’t always go well.

“Ready for another day of Defend the City?” Danny smiled and his eyes twinkled with laughter. For him, this was easy. For her, every time she pulled the trigger, she remembered that raider she
had shot but Danse had killed.

She wondered if these flashbacks were what Nate experienced on a regular basis. How did someone become accustomed to it? She thought about what Danse had said about protecting those she cared about but it just didn’t seem to help.

“You think we’ll see anything today?” She hoped for the opposite. She needed this but she hated it.

Even Dogmeat was better at taking down enemies than she was. It was just too easy for him to get hurt defending her, so she was determined to get better.

“Hard to tell. Some days out here it’s hard not to fall asleep standing up from the boredom of it. Then there are days you go home covered in blood, brains and who knows what else because everything out here wants a piece of you or inside those gates.”

Alice did her best not to cringe at the picture he painted. It was just everyday life now in what was left of the Boston she knew.

“Look sharp, Alice. I see movement down the street.”

Alice looked down the street to her left from up on the walkway, her heart in her throat, struggling to catch her breath. The anxiety and fear never went away. How was everyone else able to be calm enough to look, assess, aim and squeeze the trigger? It was something she was beginning to think would never come second nature to her.

Squinting into the shadows, she looked carefully, trying to see what Danny saw to no avail. Must be his years of training and standing guard. At this point, there was no conversation, no chatter. He expected her to be focused on one goal.

She heard a gurgling sound, shuffling and knew at least that it was a feral. Its location, however, continued to elude her. Several minutes crept by and there was no more sounds. Danny moved over to the other side of the walkway, squinting down the street to see where it might have gone.

Dogmeat growled low in his throat, even as he lay by her side.

With a suddenness that took her breath away, the feral exploded towards the opening under the walkway, intent on something. Dogmeat jumped up, barking and growling, which alerted the feral to their presence.

“Aim now, Alice! Take it down!”

She tried but lost focus as it passed underneath them. The next thing she knew, it was rounding the corner and coming up the stairs. How something with its brain rotting from radiation could manage that she would never know. In any case...she froze.

Danny yelled a word, “Go!” and Dogmeat sprang forward, grabbing onto an arm and pulling it down. Danny had come up behind her, placed his hands over hers, aimed and fired repeatedly until the feral fell backwards, halfway down the stairs.

Alice’s head rested right underneath Danny’s chin and she could feel his heart pounding rapidly against her back. Was it also from fear or was it in anger? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. In any case, today hadn’t been a good day for training. If she was still in school, she would have flunked this test...with flying colors.

He took a deep breath and let go of her hands, stepping back. His placed his hands on her
shoulders when he saw her starting to lean to the side.

Taking a deep breath, he spoke raggedly, “I think that’s it for today. Let’s head back inside.”

She did get better after that but still not enough to be out on her own. She would always remember that day with the feral, when Danny had walked past her after she stopped outside Publick Occurrences, holding a hand in the air as a wave, heading straight for the Dugout Inn.

“Calm down, Ellie. Start from the beginning.”

When they had arrived at Valentine’s Detective Agency, advertised by a red neon sign in the shape of a heart, Ellie’s answers had been short and she appeared frazzled. Thankfully, Danny did all the talking.

When he questioned her, she had started rattling facts off faster than Alice could keep up. Apparently, Danny was having trouble as well. He tried to calm her down long enough to get the information they needed.

“Look, Nick had a case about a missing girl. Apparently, she was kidnapped by Skinny Malone and his gang. Their hideout is the Park Street Station in downtown Boston. Didn’t mean to be so short with you and then spout off like that. I’m just worried. It’s not like Nick to be gone this long on a case.”

“Who is Skinny Malone?” Alice cringed as two sets of eyes turned to her. She hated being the center of attention, wasn’t even sure why she had blurted that out.

Ellie looked thoughtful, “Well, I really don't know much about him. I do know he's from Goodneighbor, and that means he’s in the well-pressed suits and machine guns school of thuggery.”

Alice felt her legs go weak and she leaned against the desk in front for support, grateful no one noticed. It appeared this might be another roadblock in her search for Shaun. Would there ever be a good opportunity to come her way?

“Damn. Goodneighbor, huh? That’s one tough neighborhood.” Danny tried but didn’t quite succeed at looking hopeful. “I’m sure Nick can find his way out of that situation. Right, Ellie?”

Ellie sighed. “I’m not sure about that this time. I think it was a trap. I tried to talk him out of going but he just smiled and walked out the door.” She looked around the room, a look of misery on her face, a long sigh slipped from between her lips. “Looks like I’ll be closing this place for good.”

Alice’s heart dropped. What would she do now?

The metal door opened suddenly, squeaking loudly and surprising them all. Alice would bet all three of them were hoping it was Nick. None of them were lucky.

“So this is where you are. I figured I’d find you here. Danny put you up to this, didn’t he?”

Piper and she didn’t look exactly surprised to see Alice here, but she was also laser focused on Danny. Alice’s whole world was falling apart...again. Of course, it had never been together since she came out of the vault.
Danny looked sheepish as Piper’s eye narrowed in on him, intent on their target. “Did you bring her here? She needs to rest!”

Before he even had a chance to explain, Alice got in Piper’s face...or neck as it were...surprising them all, including herself.

“I’m healed. You can’t keep me locked up forever, Piper. I’ve been wanting to come here, see if Nick was back. Danny just came to keep me company.”

Piper’s anger deflated like a balloon when you poked it with a pin. She even looked mildly embarrassed for her outburst.

“She’s just ready to leave.”

“I’m ready.” She looked over at Ellie. “So, where is he?”

Ellie went through her explanation again to bring Piper up to speed.

“Nicky’s missing, huh? Can’t believe what he’s gotten himself into this time. Guess he’ll need rescuing then.”

Piper looked at Danny who held his hands up in the air. “Don’t look at me. You know McDonough wouldn’t let me go.”

“Yeah, has to keep you guys under his thumb.”

Danny rolled his eyes in response and turned to Alice. “I’m sorry we didn’t get the answers you needed. I was hoping that maybe he had just slipped by me.”

She gave him a sad smile. “It’s okay. Thank you for coming with me.”

“Anytime, Alice. If you need anything, you just let me know and I’ll see what I can do. Okay?”

She nodded her head and he walked out the door, leaving her here with Piper.

“Park Street Station, huh?”

Ellie nodded in affirmation. “Think you can help him? I don’t have much, Piper, but I can give you a few caps for your trouble.”

“We’ll discuss that when I actually bring him back.” Piper turned to look at her. “Well, kid, looks like I’m going against the old tin can’s advice...with pleasure, I might add. Ready to venture out beyond these walls?”

She couldn’t believe Piper was willing to take her along, considering what Danse had said. Piper apparently could read her mind as well.

“Listen. I know what soldier boy said and the truth is, you’re never going to be able to look after yourself, survive out there in the wilds of the Commonwealth if you don’t get out there and just...well, live. Danny’s been helping you with your target practice and he said you’re not half bad now.”

Alice tried hard not to groan in despair. Apparently, Danny hadn’t told her everything. She was surprised that despite what Danse had said about her being incapable, Piper was still going to help her. Alice was terrified of what was out there but all that mattered was starting over again. She could do this; she had to.

“I’m ready.”
Piper narrowed her eyes at Alice’s response and then laughed. Maybe she should have been a bit more convincing.

“Your words say yes but that body language is far from excited. We’ll work with what we have. Let’s go, Blue.”

Piper had taken to calling her that since she’d been wearing the jumpsuit. They said their goodbyes to Ellie and left. On the way back to Piper’s she threw a curveball.

“You know Danny’s sweet on you, right?”

Alice almost tripped and fell, she was so surprised by Piper’s words.

“What? Why? He can’t be!”

Choking and swallowing the piece of gum she had been chewing, Piper laughed and coughed simultaneously. Alice was trying to figure out what was so funny.

Her voice hoarse, Piper explained, “I would imagined it’s because you’re nice and sweet and also the prettiest looking female he’s seen in a good long while.” She cocked her head, looking down at Alice, “Why can’t he like you?”

“Um, well, nobody ever--I--I’m married, that’s why.”

Piper’s tone was gentle, “I thought you were married.”

Alice’s heart hurt for the way Piper said it as a past tense, however true it may be. For the first several days while recuperating, Nate was all Alice had thought of. She dreamed about him every night, had conversations in her head with him. Nate kept her nightmares at bay.

This last week, she hadn’t thought of him much at all. Danny liking her in that way felt like a betrayal of all she and Nate had together. Danny couldn’t like her….he just couldn’t. It was wrong.

She knew it was coming, so she wasn’t entirely surprised when Piper asked. “Ready to tell me your story?”

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your continued interest in Alice and her story and for each and every comment as well as the kudos. As always, comments and questions are welcome and appreciated!
Alice slipped a little further off that ledge. She couldn’t live here, not in a place like this.

“Hey, Alice. You okay?”

Piper snapped her fingers in front of her face and Alice had a brief moment of clarity, her eyes opening wide. She saw Hancock up close now. His skin looked like it had melted. He had no nose, no lips, no hair. His eyes were as dark as a midnight sky, watching her. It was all too much and she slid off that tiny ledge, falling into the abyss.

I've never written Hancock before and barely Piper so I hope I've done both of them justice. Things are about to get really interesting for everyone :)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

Every noise she heard made Alice shrink in on herself in fear, heart racing, palms sweating; her legs shook, trembling with terror. With each clench of her hands, she could feel the gun starting to slip in her sweat-slicked palms. Placing the gun in her left, she wiped her right palm back and forth against the leg of her jumpsuit. She repeated the action with the left palm. It helped--for a minute or two.

The safety of the walls of Diamond City behind her, Alice felt exposed and vulnerable as she followed Piper into the heart of Boston towards the place called Goodneighbor. They had gotten a late start, Piper telling her that the residents in Goodneighbor tended to sleep later than in Diamond City...or most anywhere else.

Alice was grateful for that. Her mind shied away from the endless possibilities of what they would stumble across in the dead of night, no lights anywhere to guide their way.

As they walked, the sun was at its zenith, casting long shadows on the opposite sides of the ruins. What were once sleek skyscrapers enclosed in shiny metal and reflective glass towering like monoliths, were now just distorted remains of another time. People had once lived and worked here, hurrying along the sidewalks that were now mostly covered in twisted metal, broken glass and piles of bricks. Streets were now just a testimony to life in a city that had bustled with vehicles zipping along, those same vehicles abandoned now with rusted shells.

The asphalt on which they traveled was buckled and cracked; an occasional piece of it pitched upwards, the edges taller than Alice herself. It saddened her to see the destruction, thinking of what
Boston had once been. It also terrified her to think of what dangers might lurk in the shadows and hollows created by the piles of debris that littered their path.

The sun, shining down brilliantly in between the buildings, beat down on them relentlessly. The heat permeated the air around them, so much that even the spots of shade they passed through didn’t offer respite. Just looking at Piper’s long leather coat, scarf, hat and fingerless gloves made Alice several degrees hotter.

Her palms were sweating, though she knew that was from fear. But inside the suit, it felt like her body was encased in a form fitting sauna. Sweat trickled from her scalp down her face and neck, traveling between her breasts or down her back. Her whole body felt sticky with it; her hair felt matted to her head.

It was quiet as they walked, mostly. Around them, the buildings emitted groans as they continued to settle or the wind pushed hard against exposed beams. Alice looked up at them, squinting against the brightness of the sun, wondering if they would topple down and crush them into the street. Once in a while she would hear a quiet rumbling and a puff of dust would appear, most likely more debris falling from up high.

With a suddenness that left her unprepared, a deep throated growl was heard, accompanied by the rapid movement of a reddish streak headed straight for Piper. Dogmeat sprang into action as quickly as the blur had appeared, growling as well. Mongrel. Alice knew at least that much.

Piper aimed her gun but couldn’t get off a shot without possibly hitting Dogmeat.

“Damn mutt. Move out of the way!”

Dogmeat actually listened, having already done considerable damage. The mongrel paused, trying to get its bearings. It would never find them as its head exploded in a spray of blood, bone and brain matter. Before Alice had a chance to check over Dogmeat, they heard more growling. Dogmeat once again took off, defending them both against the threat.

Piper was bringing her gun up to aim at one of the two mongrels but one was too close and lunged for her. She sidestepped but it grabbed her coat, threatening to unbalance her. Not even thinking about what she was doing, Alice aimed and fired, hitting the mongrel in the side. It released Piper’s coat and staggered before falling down, dead.

She aimed for the next one but Piper already had a bead on it and took it down, eye socket exploding as the gun traveled through it and out the back of the head. Dogmeat sat beside the other body, panting, head tilted as if to say “What took you so long?”

Piper laughed at his expression, brushed a hand through his blood flecked fur. “Good boy, Dogmeat. You can travel with me anytime.”

Alice could have sworn he grinned at those words.

“Good shooting, Alice. Guess Danse was wrong, wasn’t he?”

Piper grinned, winked at her and turned around to begin their journey again, leaving Alice there to think about what she said. Going over the events in her mind, Alice was shocked to realize she had defended herself and Piper and Dogmeat as well, had used the gun without conscious thought. Imagine that.

A few ferals further on surprised them but Piper was too busy trying to take them out to notice that Alice hung back this time. She did attempt a shot or two from where she stood, but they were
usually far off the mark and only served to waste valuable ammo. Piper seemed not to have noticed that or chose to remain silent. So much for Danse being wrong.

Alice wondered if they would even reach Goodneighbor before nightfall. She hadn’t thought it was this far. Piper had made it sound like it was only down the street a bit.

After what seemed like hours, they turned a corner...only to find that everything looked familiar. Alice was now beginning to wonder if they would ever find it. The place must be a needle in a haystack.

“Dammit. Every time I come here I take a wrong turn somewhere. I think it’s up ahead though. Just between those two buildings and down an alley.”

That was not reassuring in the least. They had only gone a few more steps when something made Piper pause, put her foot back down gently and come to a halt.

Alice couldn’t see over her head, being much shorter. “What is it?”

“Shhhhhhh.” Piper placed her finger in front of her lips for emphasis. “Super mutants.”

Alice whispered as quietly. “What’s a super mutant?”

Piper turned to glance back at her, eyes widening in surprise. “You don’t know?”

Alice shook her head. “I’ve heard that phrase before but no one has taken the time to explain what it means.”

The sweat inside her suit caused a chill to crawl down her spine as she wondered what this world was going to spit out at her now.

“Well, you’re about to get the inside scoop on super mutants.”

Piper stepped slightly to the side and what Alice saw almost had her running straight back to Diamond City. As her eyes looked upon the scene, her breath lodged in her throat and she forgot how to breathe. She wanted to run as fast as her legs would carry her...in the other direction, could care less if Danse announced to the heavens and all the Commonwealth she was unfit to travel alone. Those walls protecting Diamond City looked particularly inviting right now.

No fading edges to her vision despite her heart beating erratically, this time it remained focused.

Alice almost wished it hadn’t. What she saw in front of her defied all logic.

The figure she stared at was human like in appearance but the proportions were off. It was gigantic in every way, at least ten feet tall and solidly built with muscles that bulged in it arms and legs, hinting at incredible strength. She wondered if power armor could withstand the monstrosity before her.

A tattered bit of cloth covered the lower part of its body, but otherwise, it wore nothing else; no shirt or pants, not even shoes covered its feet. There was no hair on its body that she could see. It had green skin. Not green like the grass in summer but more of an olive color. Was this also the cause of radiation?

As her mind came to terms with what she was seeing, she felt her hands start to shake. Her legs felt ready to collapse underneath her. Would it attack? What if it did? How were they supposed to fight something of this magnitude? They were just two women and a dog. Make that one woman and a dog. She doubted she would be of any use to Piper. The familiar warning signs were there that a
panic attack was imminent. How convenient.

To her surprise, she heard a voice whisper through her mind and her eyes closed against their will. It was a voice that had been silent for so long.

_Breathe, baby. Deep, slow breaths. In then out. That’s it. Focus on my voice, calm your heartbeat. You can do this. You’re my Sparrow. Soar high above the fear._

Nate. He had come to help her when she needed it most. Without thought, she followed the instructions of the ghostly voice. Somewhat in control again, her eyes snapped open.

This time, instead of feeling calm and in control with his voice in her head, she felt anger. He had left her here, abandoned her to this chaos and disorder. Looking up, she focused on the super mutant again.

“Gonna fight humans!”

“Oh-oh, looks like they made us. Find cover and start shooting now!”

Piper dashed to the right, dodging a pile of debris and taking cover in a doorway, shooting as she ran.

Alice stayed where she was, not processing the action taking place in front of her. None of this could be real. She could see it, sure, but she still didn’t believe it. Images from the Alice in Wonderland book she read as a child swam through her head. She really had fallen down a rabbit hole into another world.

Hearing a yelp from Dogmeat snapped her out of the daze she was in. Alice looked down the alley just as the super mutant backhanded the dog away. Dogmeat slid but somehow managed to stay upright on his paws, legs absorbing the impact. He charged again, defending her. She had to help him.

Planting her feet just like Preston had showed her, Alice raised her arms, aiming her weapon at the big green target and fired. Her 10mm made a hole in the giant’s chest, a spot of red appearing at the entry wound, slowly started to trickle down. This only seemed to enrage him, like a man angry at a mosquito.

“Ow, my chest!”

So...they could feel pain. Dogmeat grabbed the mutant’s arm again and his body, so small against that of the green giant, was shaken back and forth like a ragdoll. Still, he refused to let go.

“I’m gonna eat your dog!” The green beast roared in rage.

“NO!” Alice screamed. She couldn’t lose Dogmeat too.

She aimed and shot again, hitting the mutant in the leg.

“My leg!”

Another super mutant appeared in front of the other one. “DIE, stupid blue lady.”

As Alice watched, Dogmeat was tossed to the side, whimpering in pain and breathing hard. Alice wouldn’t be able to make it past the super mutants to get to him. Piper kept shooting at the first super mutant, finally bringing him down.
All thoughts of what Alice could do to help Piper or to save Dogmeat fled as her eyes widened in fear; the second mutant had started to run in her direction. He hadn’t noticed Piper in the shadows.

“Hurry up and die! I’m hungry!”

Oh dear God. They ate people? Nope, she couldn’t do this.

Turning, she raced away as fast as she could, not an easy feet as she stumbled and slipped over everything in her path, climbing up a mound of debris taller than she was and sliding down the opposite side. Her ankle twisted awkwardly and she cried out in pain. She hated this place and everything in it.

So, this was it. She was going to die here. Let it come, sweet oblivion. She leaned back and closed her eyes, unable to calm her breathing, unable to be quiet. It was almost like the calm before the storm, waiting for the end she knew was coming. Just let it be quick, please.

Her arm was jerked up painfully and she cried out. Distantly, she realized someone was screaming at her.

“Come on, Alice! We need to keep going. I managed to take down the second mutant but I don’t know how many more might be around. They were probably alerted by the noise. Oh, and I saw Dogmeat. He’s okay, just winded. He’s a smart dog, he’ll follow.”

So quiet Alice almost missed it, she added, “I hope.”

Slowly coming to the realization that it was Piper helping her and not some huge, oversized green monster ready to eat her, Alice managed to get her feet underneath her, stumbling as pain shot up her leg.

Half running, half stumbling, fear overriding the pain from her ankle, she followed Piper as they zigzagged through the maze of streets, between buildings, down alleys until what they saw before them became the most glorious site ever. A bright neon sign flickered and crackled, almost blinding in the darkness, advertising what they had been looking for all along...Goodneighbor.

Pausing, they leaned against each other, trying to catch their breath. They thought they were safe now.

The distant sounds of barking and growling, followed by angry, incoherent shouts reached their ears. Dogmeat wasn’t far behind them and was likely followed by the mutants. Piper pushed Alice back behind her.

“Get through that door, now! I’ll hold em off until Dogmeat gets by me.”

Alice wavered. She wanted to run but she wanted to help Piper, wanted to be strong and tough like Piper. That would never happen if she turned and ran every time. Her decision was made, she was staying.

She limped over to the doorway, leaning against it for support. Raising her arms, she aimed her weapon, waiting for those green monsters to come around the corner. They never came.

Dogmeat came bounding around the corner instead, tongue hanging out. He rushed up to Alice and sat at her feet, panting heavily. Gunfire echoed down the alley but it didn’t get closer. They heard the unmistakable sound of the mutants yelling their disjointed English followed by insults from raiders. They were engaged in combat with each other.
Piper turned and walked quickly towards her. “Thought I told you to head inside?” When Alice didn’t answer her, she continued, “Told you Danse was wrong about you.”

Walking into Goodneighbor, Alice didn’t have time to observe her surroundings when a tall, bald man with a scruffy beard, wearing leather from head to toe, confronted them. Dogmeat growled low in his throat at the man’s approach. Putting her fingers in his ruff, Alice tried to calm him. It wouldn’t do to antagonize the residents immediately upon entering their town.

The man looked Alice up and down, by the look on his face, not impressed. He barely glanced at Dogmeat, didn’t even acknowledge Piper.

“This your first time in Goodneighbor?”

“Y-yes.”

“Go away, Finn. We don’t have time to talk to you.”

“Shut it, reporter. I wasn’t talking to you.”

He turned back to Alice. “Can’t go around walking around this place without a little insurance.”

Alice didn’t have to feign confusion. “Insurance?”

“Yeah, that’s right, insurance. Did I stutter? I’m talking about ‘personal protection’ kind of insurance.”

Alice looked back at Piper. Did she know what he meant?

“Oh my God, Finn. Would you give it a rest? Get lost or something.”

Looking daggers at Piper, he repeated, “I told you to shut it, didn’t I?”

He turned back to Alice once again. “Tell you what, hand over everything you got right now. That way, accidents don’t start happening. Got it? Big, bloody type accidents. You wouldn’t want that now, would you?”

Alice was terrified. What would he do to her? She didn’t have anything! Why had Piper even brought her here?

As she froze in fear, unable to even tell him she had nothing with her, Piper stepped in front of her, opening her mouth to say something. She never got the chance.

“Whoa there, Finn.”

A raspy voice whispered out of the darkness, followed by man wearing a tricorn hat, a red frock coat with a patriotic sash. Confusion knitted Alice’s brow. Wasn’t Halloween over now?

“If someone comes through that door for the first time, we treat them as guests. You need to lose that extortion angle. I won’t say it again.”

As the man walked into the low light, Alice wasn’t sure but...it almost looked like he had been burned. Horribly burned. Was that why he wore the costume?

“Why do you care, huh? They ain’t one of us. Not even that reporter chic.”

“I said, let ’em go. Have you lost all love for your mayor?”
The drama intensified between the two. It was like watching a train wreck. You didn’t want to see the crash but you just couldn’t look away. The emotions in the air were thick with tension. Alice felt her knees go weak and Piper grabbed her, all but dragging her over to a bench in front of the low brick walls.

There was no way to even get around the two men as they faced off.

“I could use some popcorn. The show’s gonna be good. Nobody messes with Hancock.”

Alice stared at her, appalled by her nonchalance but just as quickly, her eyes were drawn back to Finn and the other man, Hancock.

“Shit, you’re getting too soft, Hancock. These outsiders come in here, walk all over us.” His eyes narrowed as he looked Hancock up and down. “Ya know, one day, there’ll be a new mayor.”

“Uh-oh. Wrong thing to say, Finn.”

Piper, always with the comments. She must know them both well and knew that Finn’s choice of words and tone of voice wouldn’t sit well with Hancock, although Hancock himself didn’t seem very upset as he walked closer to Finn.

“C’mon, man. This is me we’re talking about, Finn. Let me share something with you.”

He threw his hands out, almost like a welcoming gesture, then reached around Finn’s head to pull him closer. Finn’s head had turned to look at the hand going around his shoulder. He didn’t notice it but Alice saw a flash of metal and a knife appeared in Hancock’s hand, stabbing Finn deep in the gut. He fell to the ground, limp, blood slowing spreading out beneath his body.

She felt lightheaded, darkness creeping around the edges of her vision. He had killed the man in cold blood. He was ruthless...and they were stuck here for the night. Her hands clenched into fists, ragged nails biting into her palms, desperate to hang onto consciousness.

“Why’d you have to go and say that, huh?” He continued to talk to the dead man as if he could still hear him. “You broke my heart, man.”

His hand went to his heart as if he was sincerely upset. Alice had her doubts about that.

He spared another brief look at the body of Finn and then his eyes traveled over to her and Piper. He turned and walked their way. If Alice could have scrambled away, she would have. She saw him now, in the waning light of day. He was a ghoul and ghouls attacked. Her mind was in fight or flight mode, didn’t register any differences between him and all the ones she had encountered before.

“You all right there, sisters?”

“Yeah, we’re good. Thanks for taking care of that nut.”

“He was asking for it.” He turned to Alice but didn’t seem to notice her distress. “Sorry about that. Don’t let this incident taint your view of our community here.”

Incident? Alice was desperately trying to hold on to some semblance of reality but she could feel everything around her becoming distorted; she was on the edge and about to tumble down.

“Goodneighbor’s of the people, for the people. Ya feel me? Everyone’s welcome here.”
“Giving your new guest the welcome speech, huh, Hancock? She might need more of an explanation; she’s a little new around here.”

“Be glad to share. We put this place together, all of us freaks and misfits that don’t belong anywhere else. You’ll find out. Make enough friends, you might even call this place home.”

Alice slipped a little further off that ledge. She couldn’t live here, not in a place like this.

“Hey, Alice. You okay?”

Piper snapped her fingers in front of her face and Alice had a brief moment of clarity, her eyes opening wide. She saw Hancock up close now. His skin looked like it had melted. He had no nose, no lips, no hair. His eyes were as dark as a midnight sky, watching her. It was all too much and she slid off that tiny ledge, falling into the abyss.

“Well damn.”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Remember when I said she was new to the area? Well, she’s really new. As in, she lived before the war and was on ice in a vault until now. She basically just crawled out of the freezer.”

“Damn, that’s rough. Guess she didn’t know what to do when she saw my pretty face, huh?”

“Save it, Hancock.”

He picked her up in his arms. “Damn, she don’t weigh a thing. Let’s get her inside the state house. She’ll be safe there.”

“Not from the fumes.”

“Maybe it’ll help her calm down. Looks like she could use a little relaxation.”

Like a diver swimming up from the deep, Alice emerged in stages towards consciousness, sounds coming to life around her; the hum of low pitched voices, footsteps pacing back and forth across wooden floorboards, the sound an old spring makes when it’s sat on. There was a strange aroma in the air, thick, pungent. She couldn’t place what it was, maybe incense.

Opening her eyes, she didn’t know where she was, couldn’t even remember what had happened. She didn’t want to move and alert whoever was here with her that she was awake just in case they were enemies. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to tense, not to let her frantic thoughts cause her breath to become shallow, ragged gasps for air.

Within her limited line of sight, she noted the darkness around her, deep shadows dancing in the meager light from flickering lanterns. Boarded windows? Despite her determination, her heart seized in fear. Where was she? What had happened? Where was Piper? Dogmeat?

A low raspy voice drifted towards her from the right, one she recognized from earlier. Why did it sound famil--wait. It was that...it was Hancock.

“Looks like Sleeping Beauty is back in the land of the living.”

Alice turned her head and there he was, sitting on a couch across from her. She sat up carefully, pulling her legs up underneath her, sinking into the corner of the couch she was on, an unconscious attempt to protect herself by becoming as small as possible. The move wasn’t lost on Hancock.
Turning towards him, she endeavored to keep in her line of sight alarm bells going off in her head. A little voice inside her head spoke up, Don’t turn your back on him. It wasn’t Nate this time. She studied him as he studied her, though she could hardly tell if he was. Still, it was unnerving.

He sat casually on a well-worn couch, frayed around the edges. At one time, it might have been a deep red. His arms were outstretched, resting along the back. His hat was tipped low on his head, obscuring most of his face, keeping it cloaked in shadow. It made her feel marginally better not to see that face and how much different it was. Had it hurt? What happened to him? His legs were crossed in front of him, boots propped up on the coffee table littered with items Alice didn’t bother to look at. Her eyes refused to stray from where she thought his might be.

Sounds alerted her to others nearby but still, she couldn’t take her eyes off him. She continued to wonder about the smell in the room, finding that it was oddly calming. She tried to resist the effect of it on her, wanting to be on guard around him...it...this thing, whatever he was.

“Can’t help staring, huh?” When no answer was forthcoming, he continued, “Cat got your tongue?”

She could almost think he was laughing at her by the tone of his voice but how was she to know for sure? She had never had occasion to speak to a ghoul before.

“Wh...what are you?” She blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Looks like my dazzling personality got another one...”

“Really, Alice? That’s all you have to say to the man who saved your life?” Piper spoke up from behind her, obviously frustrated by her choice of words.

All Alice heard from that sentence was one word. Man. But...he was a ghoul! Wasn’t he?

“Relax. I think maybe she’s just a little confused is all.”

To her he said, “What do you think I am?”

He seemed genuinely curious, not at all insulted. Tilting her head fractionally, Alice studied him or what she could see in any case. As she turned it over in her mind, she came to the conclusion he wasn’t like any of the other ghouls she’d encountered up to this point. He was intelligible, articulate, didn’t seem to be a mindless remnant of a human being. What that made him, she still wasn’t sure.

“You...you’re not like the others.”

“Give the girl a prize for being observant.”

She looked up over Hancock’s head at those words to see a woman casually leaning up against an old stereo cabinet behind him, arms crossed as if she was bored. Despite that look, there was an intensity about her. Maybe she was his bodyguard.

“Fahrenheit.”

Was that her name? Alice took note that with just one word, Hancock effectively held her to silence.

“You’ve got a good pair of eyes on ya, for sure. So...what others are you referring to?”
“The ones that attack.”

Hancock’s legs uncrossed, boots hitting the floor, his arms coming together in front of him as he leaned towards her. They stared at each other, Alice herself too scared to move. He pushed his hat back with one hand and the light touched his eyes, as much as they could, making them glitter in the half light.

Unconsciously, she pushed back into the couch, trying to get away from him.

“You’re right. I’m not like the others. I’m a ghoul, but I’m not feral.”

Alice relaxed. Then, he smiled and she tensed up again. A random thought flew through her head that his teeth were still intact and in fairly good condition. Amazing.

“Yet.”

It took a minute for the meaning of that one word to penetrate her foggy brain and connect it with the previous sentence, but when it did, she fidgeted uncomfortably on the couch, not sure of his meaning...or that she would like it if she was.

“Yet?”

“Just set her straight, would ya, Hancock?”

Those words from Piper didn’t urge him to continue. He didn’t even acknowledge them or look over at her. In fact, he continued to watch Alice as if looking into her soul. Apparently coming to a decision, he did indeed set her straight.

“Some smoothskins...that would be the rest of you in this room...when exposed to radiation become ghouls, like me. What you’ve come in contact with have been ferals. They were human once, been exposed to radiation so often that it rots their brains and they lose their humanity.”

A low laugh slipped between his lips and Alice wondered how far he was from turning. She didn’t even know how old he was to begin with and couldn’t even guess when he might turn feral.

“We’re mostly resistant to radiation. In fact, it heals us while it makes you sick. I guess you really can’t have too much of a good thing.”

His eyes left her and looked down at the coffee table. She looked down as well and saw a syringe, a box of something called Mentats, a jar of pills and what looked like inhalers for asthma. People still suffered from that?

“Then again, I might be wrong.”

With those words, he picked up one of the inhalers. Letting out his breath, he put the inhaler between his lips, started to breathe in slowly and pushed down on it. Alice heard a short whoosh and knew that was the medication entering his mouth.

“Care for a hit?”

Not asthma then. They were drugs. Alice shook her head no. She now knew what the smell in the room was. It became stronger as he took another hit.

“You look like you could use a little pick-me-up...or rather something to relax you.”

Again, Alice shook her head no.
“Suit yourself.”

He leaned back against the couch, one leg propped on the other, hands resting comfortably in his lap. Finally, his eyes left her and wandered to where Piper stood.

“So, what brings you two to Goodneighbor?”

Piper walked out from the shadows and came to sit on the couch next to Alice. “It’s Nicky.”

“Nick? What’d he get himself into this time?”

“Somebody’s missing daughter. Only now, he’s the one that’s missing. Ellie says he went after Skinny Malone and his goons after they kidnapped some girl. She thinks it was a trap and well...he hasn’t come back. We need his help...well, Alice needs him.”

Those eyes, darker than any sky Alice had ever laid eyes on, looked back at her and she felt like she was falling. She wasn’t entirely sure what to make of him but she knew one thing; it would not be a good idea to ever be on his bad side.

“If anyone can point you towards your boy, it's 'ol Nick.”

He turned back towards Piper, “So, what do you want from me?”

“I know you and Nick are friends. I -- we -- were hoping you could maybe help us out?”

“Where is he?”

“Park Street Station, downtown Boston.”

“Right in the middle of everything. Well, I was getting a little bored, sitting around here. When do we leave?”

“Leave Goodneighbor just like that? You’re the mayor. You can’t just take off!”

Alice couldn’t believe those words had come out of her mouth. What was happening to the meek and quiet Alice? She wanted that one back. Didn’t she? She looked up to see Fahrenheit come forward, but couldn’t read the expression on her face.

“Think I'm getting too comfortable. See this tri-corner hat? It’s gettin kinda heavy. Need to get out there, hone the razor. Besides, if I don’t leave every once and awhile, the power's gonna change me. Can't have that.”

“You sure about this, Hancock?” Fahrenheit didn’t look pleased by the prospect of him leaving.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Let me just have a little chat with my community first. Give them the news. Goodneighbor’s all about doing your own thing; they’ll understand.”

He stood up and walked out of the room, all eyes on him. Fahrenheit looked down at each of them in turn but for reasons unknown chose not to say anything, turning and following Hancock.

“That’s settled then. With another gun on our side, we can go rescue Nicky. You ready?”

“What do you think he’s going to do when he finds out I’m more of a liability?” Alice paused taking a deep breath, “That everything Danse said was true?”

“Whoa, whoa, Alice. Relax. We’ll get through this. You shot that mongrel, you shot the super
mutant. What do you call that?” When there was no response, Piper went on. “What Danse said is really bothering you, huh? Why do you care what that tin can says?”

“I...I don’t know. I can’t stop thinking about it though. He’s right, though. I’m useless.”

“No. You’re. Not. You just need a little more confidence. I swear if soldier boy was here right now I’d pry him out of that tin suit with a can opener and punch his lights out.”

Despite her mood, Alice found herself laughing and stopped in surprise, her eyes widening. She hadn’t laughed in too long.

“Liked that, huh? Well, remember that whenever you think of his words. You can do this, Alice.”

“Do what?”

Alice jumped in surprise. Hancock was stealthy and silent; she hadn’t heard him come back inside. Glancing at Piper she saw that she hadn’t been startled by his entrance. Maybe she was used to it. She did give an exaggerated sigh though. Maybe Hancock wasn’t supposed to hear that exchange.

“Well? You all right?” He was looking at her.

As she opened her mouth to say something, anything, Piper jumped in. Being a reporter, she probably always had a backup story. So, when she told Hancock the truth, Alice was more than a little surprised.

“She...isn’t the best with a gun.” Barely a pause went by before she rushed to explain, her hands coming up and gesturing wildly as if to reassure him. “But she’s getting better!”

Fahrenheit huffed in response from behind Hancock, looking straight at her. “I knew something wasn’t right.”

“That true?”

Frozen in place by those eyes, Alice could do nothing but nod. Even if she tried to deny it, he’d find out soon enough.

“Well, here’s what we’re gonna do. I think a little target practice is in order, ya feel me?”

Alice nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She thought he might refuse to go with them.

“Let me get a few things together. Meet me outside by the gate.”

As Fahrenheit watched him leave, she turned to them. “Hancock can take care of himself but either of you do something stupid to fuck that up, you’ll answer to me.”

Hancock met them at the gate in no short amount of time.

“Let’s take this show on the road, ladies.”

They had barely made it out of the gates of Goodneighbor when a low growl started in Dogmeat’s throat. Nose to the ground, he took off on the trail of something...or someone. Right behind a building next to the entrance was a nest of raiders.

Piper and Hancock both took cover, Hancock behind some sandbags and Piper behind the base of a light pole. Dogmeat headed straight for the raiders, attacking whatever body part he good grab onto. As he held on, Piper and Hancock would take aim and bring them down.
Alice looked for a spot to take cover, saw the frame of a car beyond Hancock, undercarriage buried in dirt. She use the roof for support, found a target and took aim.

What happened next surprised them all.

Chapter End Notes

Whew....trying to push through the sudden writing block. Thanks for sticking around and waiting :) I'm farther along in the story in my head and I'm finding I have to step back a bit.

As always, thank you for comments and kudos!!
Learn to Survive

Chapter Summary

She forced a breath, inching into the squeeze of the trigger. The grip punched her palms, the barrel driving skyward.

Eyes squeezed shut, all sound succumbed to a relentless ringing.

The surrounding gunfire was reduced to muffled pops. Dogmeat's howls all but disappearing from her perception. Time warped into a slow motion sequence.

Fingers tightened again around the grip, sweaty palms struggling for purchase. She rode an edge of hysteria, firing away.

Chapter Notes

Fight scenes are...hard! A shout out to the awesome @shellbacker for helping me with the beginning scene!

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She forced a breath, inching into the squeeze of the trigger. The grip punched her palms, the barrel driving skyward.

Eyes squeezed shut, all sound succumbed to a relentless ringing.

The surrounding gunfire was reduced to muffled pops. Dogmeat's howls all but disappearing from her perception. Time warped into a slow motion sequence.

Fingers tightened again around the grip, sweaty palms struggling for purchase. She rode an edge of hysteria, firing away.

Aftershocks of the recoil suddenly absent, time sped forward, disorienting her.

Her eyes opened slowly. Looking down, she saw the magazine was empty. All twelve rounds spent. Her hands were numb from the assault.

Had she hit her target? Fear took hold at that thought. What if she had actually killed that raider? That meant she had taken human life.

Her mind shied away violently from that scenario. It didn’t matter it was the result she wanted. The only thought that circled in her head right now was that she hated herself, hated Nate, hated the man who had killed him and taken Shaun for putting her in a position to take a life like this in the first place.

Glancing beyond the car’s roof, she didn’t even see him. The sounds of gunfire had moved further away. Piper was at the end of the street, taking out the last of the raiders. Hancock was standing on
the other side of the sandbags in front of the car, staring down at the pavement.

Moving from behind the car, she stumbled, her legs weak and trembling. She saw what Hancock was looking at. It was the raider. Oh my God….what had she done?

Feeling faint, her legs buckled beneath her and she bonelessly slid down to the pavement, hitting hard, not even noticing the pain.

The last time she had shot a man had been hard; the thought of what she had done nearly destroying her. What she was feeling now was so much worse.

The image would be imprinted in her mind forever. The raider lying in a pool of blood, a gaping hole in his throat, lifeblood slowly draining out onto the pavement. Only a few feet away from the body, she could hear his rattling breath.

He wasn’t dead.

No, she had committed him to a slow, agonizing death brought on by her ineptitude with a gun. It didn’t matter that he would have shot her without a thought; she didn’t have it in her to be that callous.

Trying to rise on unsteady legs, she knew she had to shoot him again.

Bile rose up the back of the throat, tears filled her eyes. This went against her very nature, killing someone in cold blood as they watched her do it. But to let him suffer, no matter who is was…that thought was worse.

For one brief moment, her thoughts turned to the raiders. Did they have second thoughts about killing? Who they killed? Did they feel anything at all?

Alice felt hopeless and terrified. She wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and pretend she was anywhere but where she was. Her hands shook so bad, the gun wobbled back and forth in her hands.

Hancock continued to stand over the raider. She couldn’t get a fix on his thoughts or his emotions; he was an impossible read. It had never occurred to her how expressive the skin on someone’s face truly was; the wrinkles, the lines, the fleshy curves around the cheeks. Hancock had none of that.

His head was angled down towards the raider, as the raider stared defiantly back up at him, even as his life drained away. The eyes in that dirty face held a magnitude of hatred. Alice could see it from here.

His personal shotgun hung by his side, finger relaxed around the trigger. Even if those eyes were trained on her, she would not be able to detect what lay within their depths. He didn’t even react as she stumbled, though she knew the sound alerted him.

He didn’t look up. “Ya know, maybe you weren’t cut out for this life.”

Alice felt all the air leave her lungs. His words were loud in the stillness.

Of course, he was right. So was Danse. Piper was the one who had it all wrong. She didn’t belong here, didn’t fit in, and was going to end up doing more harm than good. Just look at the raider, dying a slow horrifying death...all because of her.

Hancock finally turned to her. It didn’t seem possible somebody so pale could lose all color but
there you had it; he saw it with his own eyes. The girl had the look of someone who had given up all hope, threw in the towel and was going to call it day. Forever.

How well he knew that feeling, intimately as a matter of fact, and he’d be damned if he saw that happen to her. No fuckin way.

She was the one who should end this, he knew it, lessons learned and all. When he looked down at her hands, saw how bad they were shaking, he didn’t have it in him to put her through it. So, he did the only thing he could think of. He shot the raider himself.

Her whole body flinched at the blast of the shotgun, echoing in the narrow streets. Frozen in place, that last simple, Hancock taking the raider’s life, snatched her breath away and she collapsed. She couldn’t do this anymore. It was over. Shaun was lost to her….forever.

Stomach roiling with nausea, she fought the urge to empty her stomach. Despite the sweat that coated her skin, she felt frozen, all the way down to her soul. Her mind drifted in and out, spots dancing before her eyes. This was so much worse than the last time she had shot someone.

A hand settled on her back and she flinched, startled and yet too drained to be afraid. She knew if she moved, if she breathed, the nausea would win. Throwing up in front of the Danse, before she knew what he thought of her, had been the worst sort of embarrassment; she refused to give in this time.

“Look, sister. Things got messy here, not gonna lie. This world you find yourself in, it’s harsh, but it’s all we got. There’re some good things too.”

Glancing up, she saw the raider again. She couldn’t stop the flood of emotion as it swept her up and took her along for the ride. Folding in on herself, she let all the pain, the fear, the anger flow over her. She couldn’t stop the tears that fell like rain.

Footsteps sounded close by, quickening their pace as they came nearer.

“Geez, Hancock. What’d you do to her? I can’t leave you alone for five minutes with someone!”

“Hey, I didn’t do anything. She...I think she’s just having a hard time adjusting to our wonderfully chaotic world.”

“Shit.”

Piper sat down next to Alice. She didn’t pull her close, just set her hand awkwardly on Alice’s back and rubbed up and down.

“We’ll get you through this Alice. Don’t give up, okay? You’re stronger than you think you are.”

“No. I’m. NOT!”

Piper leaned back in surprise, pushed away as Alice jumped up, hands clenched into fists. She was taken aback by the outburst and the vehemence in that voice. She hadn’t seen the tiny female so passionate.

“I’m a coward! I don’t belong here. I don’t belong anywhere. Never have, never will!”

They both watched her walk away, not quite sure what to make of her outburst. Hancock wanted to say something but platitudes never worked in a situation like this. Never did for him. Look at where he was now. Sure, he wouldn’t change it but...you never knew what life had in store for you.
He strolled over to where Alice stood near the fence surrounding Goodneighbor. Casually, he leaned against the fence, staring into the distance.

“Ya gotta be real tough or real crazy to survive out here. Least...that’s what worked for me. But only you can decide which one you wanna be. We’re here to help you but you have to want it. Otherwise, all this is just a waste of time and ammo. Is what you’re doing worth it?”

Was looking for Shaun worth it? A question that haunted her every waking moment and often even her dreams.

The other question...did she truly want to live in this world? Was she ready to take all the necessary steps to survive?

Looking back at the raider she shot or more accurately that Hancock killed for her, she wondered. Thinking of Hancock and Piper, Dogmeat...even Danse...was it right for her to drag them all into her mess? They didn’t ask for this. It was a good bet they were just trying to survive day to day without getting shot it, tracking a murderer, trying to find a baby in the Commonwealth.

As she mulled this over, it occurred to her that they didn’t seem to think she was as hopeless as she thought of herself.

It didn’t seem possible to look at herself in the mirror; always terrified, afraid to open her mouth and speak her mind, hesitating to act...and see what they saw.

Yet, Hancock was right. She had to learn to survive.

Taking a deep breath, wiping the tears that had run down her face, she turned to him. Those ebony eyes caused a ripple of anxiety to travel down her spine but she refused to look away.

“It’s worth it.”

A smile, looking more like a grimace, crossed his face. “There ya go, sister. I knew you had it in you.”

If Alice had been wary of every sound from Diamond City to Goodneighbor, now she was on edge and flinching at them as the three of them and Dogmeat continued on towards the subway where Valentine had disappeared.

She alternated between being terrified of an ambush and seeing death coming or using the gun in defense and making someone else suffer needlessly. It was so tiring to balance on this tight wire, to not look down and imagine freefalling with sudden hard stop at the bottom.

Dogmeat trotted ahead of them, sometimes nose to the ground, sometimes in the air. He was like the perfect alarm that enemies were near. As they started to pass the shell of a city bus, he took off like a shot, growling, fur rising along his neck and down his back. The alarm was going off.

Piper backed up to the wall of the building next to the bus, ready for anything. Hancock stopped and motioned Alice to do the same. He stood in front of them both and they all waited anxiously for whatever Dogmeat flushed out. Sounds echoed all around them letting them know before their eyes could see what was coming.

Piper ran out to meet them head on, Dogmeat right behind her. Hancock’s voice next to her ear, made her jump.
“Ready to take down some ferals?”

Was she? No, not really. It had to be done and she had to learn to defend herself as well as be an asset and not a hindrance to those who helped her along her journey.

“Hey, chin up, sister. Remember our little chat? You can do this.”

Her insecurity must have been written all over her face.

Nate laughing as he tried to teach her poker. Her frustration that she couldn’t win. Finally, he relented and confessed to her. You just do not have a poker face. I can tell by your expressions exactly what kind of hand you’re holding.

She had to quit wearing her heart on her sleeve, learn to keep her cards close to her chest as he’d told her.

Taking a deep breath, she took a few steps forward, looking for a feral that she might be able to take down.

Hancock walked beside her, raised his gun. Before he pulled the trigger, he spoke again. “Not gonna lie. This world can eat you alive. Just kick it in the teeth and don’t lose yourself if you go down.”

She knew he was right. Yet, she felt like she was already losing herself. Maybe not all of that was a bad thing. The rest of her thoughts shattered in the loud boom of his shotgun.

When it was all over, Alice looked at the carnage left behind. They would never truly know if any of the kills were hers, if maybe she had just wounded them or shot them at all. It didn’t matter. She had at least stood her ground.

“Thanks, Hancock.”

He shrugged it off like it was no big deal.

“Alright then, let’s take this party down to the subway.”

Just a few yards away was the entrance to the subway itself, at the edge of Boston Commons. She remembered this area all too well. She and Nate had come here early on her pregnancy. It was a memory she had always cherished.

Hand in hand, they had followed the Freedom Trail, meandering along the path through Boston.

“Are you tired yet?” Nate had asked with concern.

Rolling her eyes at his question, the third time in thirty minutes, “No, I’m fine!”

“You sure? I don’t want you tiring yourself out.”

“Nate stop. I’m really, really okay.”

He smiled at her and without warning, snatched her off her feet and carried her the last few yards to an ice cream stand outside Boston Commons. Everyone turned to look at the tall, dark haired man carrying this shrieking tiny blonde woman. Smiling as they heard them both start to laugh.

Ice cream cones in hand, they had crossed the park to the gazebo, resting in the shade, just happy
to be together.

She was startled by Nate’s finger lazily swiping at the corner of her mouth, frowned up at him as he bopped her on the nose, smearing chocolate.

Her frown had turned to a grin, then she laughed seeing the sparkle of humor in his eyes.

The ice cream had been followed by a ride in the swan boat. Nate’s legs were so long, he was scrunched up. Hers were so short, she almost couldn’t reach the pedals. They had laughed so hard at the comical picture they made.

She blinked away tears that threatened to fall.

Hearing the scuffling of boots and the not so subtle sound of coughing, Alice dragged herself back from another life into this one.

It was time to find the detective.

Walking through the entrance and down the stairs, Alice pushed away more memories. Now wasn’t the time to be distracted. Voices drifted upstairs to them from below. It looked like the party, as Hancock put it, had already started.

Leaning up against the side of the escalator, he squatted and soundlessly took the steps down, angling his body sideways. At the bottom, he edged up to the door, watching whoever was in the next room. He glanced up, his eyes findings Piper’s, motioning her down to join him. ‘

Alice waited for his eyes to meet hers, but she was discouraged when he motioned for her to stay at the top of the stairs.

Once Piper reached the bottom, he held up fingers to the count of three and burst into the lobby, Piper right behind them.

Alice heard someone men yelling.

“Give me some cover!”

“They gotta be here for the detective.”

Hancock’s raspy voice rang out loud and clear during a pause in the gunfire. “Looks like this place is in need of pest control.”

Piper answered. “Let’s do some exterminating, Hancock.”

“All clear, Alice. Come on down.”

Dogmeat had stayed behind with Alice, whining the whole time. How bad did it look when even your dog was more eager to fight than you were? Now that finding Nick was a reality, she was eager to meet him.

Looking around at all the destruction, she cringed as Hancock checked the bodies. Why was he doing that?

Seeing her disgusted look, “Never know what kind of stuff they have on em. Might be caps, might be chems. They sure won’t be needin it anymore.”

He was just so...matter-of-fact about everything. Maybe she should travel with him for a while, let
his attitude rub off on her. It couldn’t hurt.

Once Hancock was finished looting the bodies and checking the immediate area, the group continued deeper into the subway, through the turnstiles, down two sets of stairs leading to the platform and the railway below.

Hancock took the lead once again, Piper right behind him. Alice squatted down at the top of the stairs, arms around Dogmeat.

She whispered in his ear, “This time, we’re going to join them. What d’ya say, buddy? Want to take down some bad guys?”

He turned and licked her face, body vibrating with energy. “Guess that’s a yes?”

She would not give in to the fear this time...she hoped. Down below, Hancock peeked over the banister...and chaos erupted.

Alice took a deep breath, “Let’s go boy.” Dogmeat took off like a rocket, Alice hung behind and duck walked down the stairs slowly. Once she reached the bottom, she saw that there were multiple gunman. Bullets flew everywhere, hitting concrete, machines and anything else in the way. Hancock and Piper were taking cover behind concrete posts and a fallen Nuka machine.

She joined them.

Hancock spared a glance her way. “You sure about this?”

Nodding yes, even as fear coursed through her body, she knew if she didn’t do this, it would never get better.

“Once you’re ready, pop up and find a target then duck back down. I’ll cover you. The idea is not to give them the advantage of having you as an easy target. They know where we are, so it’s easy to pick us off. They move fast, so your target might not in the same place.”

Alice edged up over the fallen machine. Within a few yards was a gunman, intent on firing at Piper. She ducked back down, just like Hancock told her to.

Deep breath in, she popped up again, gun aimed towards the gunman. With relief, he was still there. Squeeze the trigger, drop back down.

“Shit! My arm!”

“Ya got it, sister. Keep it up and we’ll have Nick in no time.”

The gunfight seemed to drag on forever. Most of the gunmen were taken down by Hancock, Piper and Dogmeat. Alice knew she had made a few shots count.

Once the area was quiet, they cautiously emerged from cover. Hancock insisted she check the pockets of the men they had killed. It made her squeamish to rifle in their pockets, touching their still warm corpses but she did as he suggested.

“Easy way to get caps. They ain’t gonna need em anyway.”

She couldn’t argue with that logic. Caps were currency now and she needed them.

Bodies and the surrounding area once again cleared, they walked into the subway tunnel.
It was strange to Alice looking around; it didn’t even remotely resemble the place it had once been. Construction had been halted, evident everywhere she looked. This vault had been built deep into the subway tunnels. Why had they not finished it?

Hancock stopped, easing his head around a tall crate on a construction car. He waved his hand at them to stay back while he continued on, staying low. Dogmeat refused to obey, following with his belly dragging the ground.

Just as they both disappeared from view, gunshots rang out. Piper didn’t hesitate, bursting forward into the action. Alice crept forward as Hancock had done, easing around the edge of the crate.

The others were engaged in combat near a vault door, so she followed at a distance, climbing the platform and looking for cover.

One of the mobsters was firing at Hancock while running backwards away from him.

Inhale, aim, squeeze the trigger. The bullet hit him in the neck and he went down in a spray of blood. Hancock walked over and shot him again for good measure. She almost lost her bearings, the scene from earlier coming back to her.

All the gunmen down, they repeated the sweep and retrieve.

“Guess you get the honors of cracking this vault open too.”

Memories...everywhere she turned. It was getting tiresome.

Walking up to the platform, she hesitated. These memories were so strong; it was hard to push them away. As if he could sense it, Dogmeat came up to her and leaned against her.

This dog. If she lost him, she didn’t think she could go on. It would be easy to convince herself Shaun was better off without her and she would just go back to Sanctuary. To do what, she didn’t know but it wouldn’t matter anymore.

Pausing long enough to run her fingers through his fur, she looked again at the mechanism. Easy, just like her vault. Insert probe from Pipboy, remove it and punch a button.

Flashing lights, the sound of metal scraping against metal and the heavy door moved back and rolled away. A walkway was activated and moved forward. It was time to enter the vault.

As Alice and Dogmeat walked forward, a voice from inside rang out.

“That damn door’s openin again. Why the hell is it so loud?”

They called out to the arrivals.

“Hello! That you Skinny? Darla?”

Wrong. Try door number 2.

Before any of them had a chance to think, a gunman started shooting as he sprinted towards them from inside the vault. Hancock moved in front of Alice, shoving her out of the way. Thankfully, the gunman’s aim was off, courtesy of Dogmeat.

Another gunman dashed out behind the first. Piper rushed past her as well. They made short work of both of the gunmen.
Hancock came back “Sorry about that. Wouldn’t do to lose you this soon. We have a job to do.”

Alice wasn’t sure whether to be insulted or grateful.

The rest of the vault continued in much the same vein. It was built differently than the vault she had been frozen in -- more levels, more stairs, more doors. The mobsters were everywhere they turned. Alice was finding it easier to shoot them, though she wasn’t much better at aim. She did get in a few shots here and there.

During one period of rest between levels, Alice asked, “How will we know when we find the detective?”

She watched as a look passed between Hancock and Piper. What weren’t they telling her? Was there something wrong with him?

“Remember what Ellie said? He’ll be wearing his old hat and trenchcoat. He’s….different.”

Alice wondered by the tone of Piper’s voice what exactly she meant by different. Hancock’s kind of different? If so, wouldn’t either of them had said so? It seemed prudent not to ask what else it could mean considering all she’d encountered so far.

It seemed like they had been down here for hours before they finally opened a door to the center of the vault. Cautiously, they all moved inside the area. The only voices were a gunman up on the top level and another voice speaking to him through a small, round window. The door next to the gunman must be locked.

“Looks like we found him.”

“Yep, time to rescue ol’ Nicky.”

So, that was the detective. Alice felt a burst of excitement that at long last she was going to get some help. It didn’t matter who…or what…he was. Maybe she could get some answers at long last as to who might have taken Shaun.

“Alright, here’s what we’re gonna do. I’ll take the stairs. Alice, you and the pooch stick with me. Piper, stay down here, close but outta sight. Help me take him down but don’t let him see you. Come on up after he meets his maker.”

“Sure thing. Let’s do this and get out of here.”

Piper headed towards an area right of the stairs, enough things around to stay out of sight but easy access to the gunman.

She, Hancock and Dogmeat quietly made their way up the stairs. Hancock was eerily quiet and walked as close as he could before firing. The gunman was so engrossed in taunting the detective, he didn’t know they were there until it was too late.

Piper aimed a couple of shots from her vantage point and the gunman, who the detective had called Dino, was laid out on the floor. Hancock was messing around with the terminal with no success and Alice gingerly checked the pockets of the dead man.

“Maybe this will work.” She handed Hancock a password.

“Nice work, sister.”
The door slide open on a hiss and Alice found herself confronting another surprise of the Commonwealth.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for the comments and kudos! And for following along and waiting patiently as my muse waffles back and forth with inspiration :P
On the Trail

Chapter Summary

I remember struggling to breathe, the air so icy I felt like my lungs were on fire from it. I couldn’t feel my hands or any part of my body really. As my sight cleared, I looked out the window of my pod. Ice crystals covered it but slowly, it was starting to clear. I could see the outline of Nate’s pod across the aisle...knew Shaun was safe in his arms. Did they feel the cold, too?

The last thing I had seen before everything went dark was his hand on the glass. His way of telling me he loved me, that everything would be okay.

Chapter Notes

Alice is still learning....about the world around her and about herself.

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hancock stepped aside so Alice could enter the room first. She took a few tentative steps inside and stopped.

The only light in the room was overhead, throwing the man who stood there as well as the corners around him into deep shadow. Just as Ellie described, he wore an old hat and trench coat. Upon seeing her, he turned and moved in her direction.

Eyes on his face, she waited, frightened to come face to face with what Piper and Hancock had referred to as “different.” However, they still stood just behind her, so he couldn’t be that much of a threat.

His eyes became clearer as he approached, a luminous yellow, intense in the shadows. They were odd, made her strangely uneasy and she took a step back, bumping into a body behind her.

“Easy, sister.” Hancock’s hand settled on her arm, steadying her.

The gravely, low-pitched voice of the man in the shadows was not what she expected, seeming at odds with those glowing eyes. She expected something more...mechanical.
“Gotta love the irony of the reverse damsel-in-distress scenario. Question is, why did the heroine risk life and limb for an old private eye?”

As the detective spoke those words, he struck a match. In horrid fascination, Alice followed the movement of a metal hand as it lifted an unlit cigarette in skeletal-like fingers to his mouth. The other hand, which resembled a human hand, followed the first with a lit match.

The smell of sulphur filled the air, the flame offering sufficient orange-tinged light to illuminate his features.

Vaguely, she supposed he resembled a human. He spoke like one, had the mannerisms, the body parts but that was where the similarities ended. What covered his body was grey and leathery, gaping open in places. A metal frame could be seen through the holes in his neck. And those eyes….

She began to wonder if he was some kind of modern Frankenstein.

Despite Hancock’s reassurance, Alice’s mouth hung open and she could only stare before finally speaking, stumbling over her words, “W--w--what...are you?”

He sounded impatient. “I told you, I’m a detective.”

His demeanor changed and he went on. “Nick Valentine’s the name. Look, I know the skin and the metal parts ain’t comforting but that’s not relevant right now.”

Alice still didn’t know what to say and the silence dragged on for several seconds.

“I do have a question of my own.” He swept his hand in the air, encompassing the area around them. “Why all of this to come and rescue me?”

She found her voice finally. “I..it’s about my son, Shaun. He...he was kidnapped and I need to find him.”

“Your son’s missing, huh? Well, now I understand why you went through hell and high water. However, this ain’t the right place to discuss this now. Turns out the girl I was hired to find ain’t no runaway and she’s got a serious mean streak that would put a Deathclaw to shame.”

His eyes looked above her head. “Hancock, Piper.” He heard a soft woof and looked down, “Yeah, you too Dogmeat. Listen, I’m glad to help out and grateful you came to get me out of here but time’s wasting. Let’s blow this joint. We’ll talk business once we’re back in Diamond City.”

Getting out, Nick took a different route through the vault. Alice wondered just how many entrances and exits there were in this place. It was so different from the one she had been in. A person could get lost in this one. They stopped at a large open dining area, finding more gunmen. Hancock stepped out and drew their fire, Piper following close behind him with Dogmeat. In a matter of minutes, they were dead.

Unused to the constant activity, Alice was getting tired and her previously injured leg was aching. She felt like she’d collapse if they climbed one more flight of stairs. Someone would have to carry her out. There never seemed time to rest and relax anymore. As they turned a corner to find just what she dreaded, more stairs, she heard Nick almost eerily echo her thoughts.

“More stairs? Who built this damn vault? A fitness instructor?”

She would have laughed...if she had the energy for it.
Another set of stairs, another locked door Nick thought he could get past. Alice hoped they would find themselves by the main vault door. Nick worked on unjamming the mechanism for the door and they all heard heavy footsteps beyond. It looked like that timely exit wasn’t going to happen after all. As soon as Nick got the door open, they walked out and found their way blocked. Standing in front of them was a mobster, his girl and more gunmen; it was Skinny Malone and Darla.

“Nicky, Nicky, Nicky. What’re you doin, taking out my guys in my own house? This is gonna cost me big, but it’s gonna cost you even more!”

“Skinny, I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for your two-timing dame over there. You should really write home to your parents more often, Darla.”

That dame narrowed her eyes, tightening her hands around the bat she held. The high-pitched, nasally made Alice cringe, the sound like fingernails on a chalkboard. “Awww, poor little Valentine. You got beat up by a girl and now you’re upset. Suppose you think I should just run home to daddy now? Think again!”

“Should have left well enough alone, Nicky. This ain’t the old neighborhood anymore. Right here, right now, I’m king of the castle. You got that? I ain’t gonna let no private dick shut down my business. Things are going good here and it’s gonna stay that way.”

Darla glared at her lover, “Didn’t I tell you? We shoulda just killed him from the start! You were the one getting all sentimental on me. ‘Old times’ you said. Hmph.”

“Darla, let me handle this. I always got things under control!”

She rolled her eyes and looked back at Alice, eyeing her up and down as if she was of no importance. “Really? Then who’s this lady with him. I bet he brought her here to rub us all out. Ha. I’d like to see her try.”

Arms crossed, hugging herself tightly, Alice nonetheless stepped forward, surprising everyone including herself. These people meant business and if she said the wrong thing, it might be the end of all of them.

“Darla, I know you don’t care who I am, I’m nothing to you. Just, please...listen to me?” Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Alice continued. “Think about what you’re doing, why you’re doing it. You have a home to go back to -- a real home with parents who miss you and want you back. Don’t throw your whole life away hanging out with these...guys. Go back to your parents, find a man who truly loves you and treats you like a princess. I think you know this isn’t the life you really want.”

Darla stared her down, twisted the bat round and round in her hands. Alice thought for sure she was going to feel it upside her head just for opening her mouth. Not even sure how, apparently luck was on her side. Darla paused, face softening. It appeared she was indeed thinking about Alice’s speech.

Those eyes stared at Alice, really seeing her this time. “I just...ya know...the excitement, the adventure. I got all caught up in it. I guess you’re right. This life just isn’t worth it, constantly on guard, always worried if you’ll see another day. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

Skinny turned to face her, eyes wide with surprise. He tried to talk her out of it, stumbling over his words.

“Darla! Wh...where’re you going? You can’t just leave me like this. I need you!”
“I’m sorry, Skinny. I’m going home. I should have never left to begin with. This is goodbye...for us.”

Dropping the bat, the sharp sound of it echoing around them all, Darla ran out of the vault. Stopping right before the door, she turned and looked right at Alice, mouthed the words, “Thank you.”

Skinny narrowed his eyes at Alice and turned to Nick. He started whining like a child who had dropped his ice cream.

“C’mon Nicky! Youse guys killed my men, and your girl over there cost me my girl, leaving me high and dry.”

“Listen, Skinny. My friend here did you a favor. You may not see it that way yet, but you will eventually. Your taste in women has always been, shall we say, faulty. But since she’s gone, maybe you’ll show some sense. She really brought out the worst in you. So, what d’ya say you let us walk. You still owe me one, ya know.”

“You smug, overconfident ass!” Skinny struggled for words. Seconds ticked by, then “Fine! You got until the count of 10 but you better hightail it outta here and be gone when I come looking. Consider us even, Valentine.”

“You heard him. Let’s go, and fast, before he changes his mind.”

None of them needed any prompting as Skinny started his countdown, racing out the vault door. They all followed Nick to a side room and up a ladder, leading to the surface somewhere in the midst of Boston. Alice was never more surprised to see a dog climb a ladder.

_____________________________________________________

He stood there amidst the ruins of this once great city, looking up at the night sky.

“Just look at it. Never thought I’d look forward to seeing something so ominous.”

Alice followed his eyes skyward. The moon rode high amongst the stars, all around it a deep navy blue. She couldn’t comprehend what was so ominous about that. Then again, she could lose herself in the stars every night given a chance.

He turned, looking at each one of them, even Dogmeat. It made her happy to see how Nick always made sure to include him. That alone put her at ease around this...machine? She wasn’t sure what he was.

“I just wanted to thank you for getting me out of there. Nice to know I have some friends in the Commonwealth who don’t care I’m a synth.”

So, he was a synth. She had no idea what that was. Maybe she could question him later. “How did you all know where I was? I didn’t exactly broadcast my whereabouts…”

When no one answered, Alice spoke up. “Ellie sent us.”

“She did? Well, then, suppose I should give the girl a raise.”

Piper agreed without hesitation. “Of course you should. She’s worth her weight in gold.”
“Hmmph.” Those gleaming eyes zeroed in on Alice. “You mentioned something back in the vault. Said you’re son went missing? Head to my office back in Diamond City. I’m going to need a detailed explanation. Anything you can remember, no matter how insignificant you think it is, could help us out. That work for you?”

“It does.” She wasn’t sure what this mechanical person could do for her but she didn’t have any other options. If he was as good as everyone said, this was her best opportunity.

Hancock spoke up behind the group. “Well, I know I need a rest. Tell ya what, when ya know where you’re headed, come find me. Be glad to travel with you again.”

Turning to him in surprise, Alice blurted, “You’re leaving? B-but why?”

“Diamond City ain’t exactly welcoming to ghouls. Mayor kicked em all out. I’ll head back to Goodneighbor. If ya want my company, ya know where I’ll be. Don’t forget about me, sister.”

She gave him one of the first natural smiles since leaving the vault. “I won’t, I promise.”

He’d kind of grown on her and she was no longer afraid of him.

Saluting her with 2 fingers to the tip of his tri-corner hat, he walked off into the night.

“I think you made an impression on him, kid. Not easy to do with ‘ol Hancock.”

Watching him walk away was harder than Alice thought it would be. She had never had friends, never had anyone stand beside her or help her...except Nate. This was all so new to her.

“Ready to go, ladies?”

At a woof from Dogmeat, he added, “You too, Dogmeat.”

And here they were, walking through Boston in the dark, something Alice had previously been grateful to avoid. With a bit more confidence as well as Nick, Piper and Dogmeat at her side, it wasn’t as terrifying as she had expected. At least that’s what she told herself while jumping at every sound.

It didn’t take long to reach the signs pointing the way followed by the guards stationed around Diamond City.

As tired and sore as she was, Alice jogged the last little bit alongside Nick and Piper, Dogmeat loping up ahead. He reached the gates first, a glance over his shoulder as if to ask why they were so slow. Once inside the gates, they parted ways; Piper to Publick Occurrences, she and Nick to his office.

“Since you’re in good hands, I’m gonna stop here, check on Nat. Set up a story or two for the paper. Let me know if you need my help and Blue...don’t forget you’ll be in the paper!”

With that, she was gone.

As soon as the office door shut behind them, Alice collapsed into the nearest chair. What she wouldn’t give for a hot meal, a shower and a bed. A week’s worth of sleep might cover her
exhaustion. Nick had insisted on hearing her story despite the late hour.

Resting her eyes as well as her body, Alice only heard Ellie and Nick’s reunion. To her ears, it was a joyous and relieved reconciliation. Her tired mind couldn’t push away the thought...would that have been her and Nate once those pods had opened? She refused to allow the tears fall from the image that followed, didn’t want to dampen the happiness in the room.

Pulled out of her musings, Alice realized Ellie was speaking to her. “I can’t thank you enough for bringing Nick back! You saved him, my job and this agency. Here...for your trouble.”

Alice opened her eyes, feeling something clink as it settled in her lap. Looking down, she saw it was a bag full of caps...there must be at least a hundred in there. Wide eyes looked back up at Ellie.

“I--uh, thank you.” She would have found a way to rescue him even without payment. Well, maybe. It wouldn’t have been possible without Piper, Hancock and her best friend, Dogmeat. He was resting, head on paws and eyes closed. Pooped pup.

“Whenever you might have extra time, Nick could use some help with a backload of cases. Keep it in mind, okay.”

Her, a detective? Ellie had no idea what a bad notion that was.

“Hey there, Ellie. I just got back. One case at a time, okay? Alice here needs our help right now. Let’s take that case first.”

“Oh, sure! Sorry.” She grabbed a clipboard and a pen.

“So, you’re looking for your son, you said. Shaun? Well, details are the meat and potatoes of a case. Anything you can remember, whether it’s small or not, could be important. I realize this won’t be easy. In fact, probably downright painful but try and tell us everything you can. Ellie here’ll take notes.”

Alice looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. Slowly, painfully, just as Nick had mentioned, she recalled that day in the vault, her memories just as clear as they were then. Where did she start?

Dogmeat padded over and leaned into her side. He looked up at her whining softly. Her head turned towards him but only saw those agonizing memories, yet her hand found its way into his silky fur.

She began to speak.....

I remember struggling to breathe, the air so icy I felt like my lungs were on fire from it. I couldn’t feel my hands or any part of my body really. As my sight cleared, I looked out the window of my pod. Ice crystals covered it but slowly, it was starting to clear. I could see the outline of Nate’s pod across the aisle...knew Shaun was safe in his arms. Did they feel the cold, too?

The last thing I had seen before everything went dark was his hand on the glass. His way of telling me he loved me, that everything would be okay.

I heard voices coming down the aisle. I was wondering...was this it? Was our decontamination over? I remember being so incredibly happy. I would get to see Nate, hold Shaun. We’d all be together again and could start a new life, even if it was deep in the earth.

Then figures appeared in front of the window, the voices seemed to be a man and woman though it was somewhat muffled.
The body shape of one looked to be of a woman in some type of hazmat suit. The other was most definitely a man. He wore just regular clothes. His head was bare.

My thoughts still weren’t quite clear, fuzzy from whatever process they had put us through. Not sure what was going on, I couldn’t understand why they didn’t let us all out. They stopped at Nate’s pod. Why would they want Nate?

The man ordered the woman to open his pod. As soon as the door swung open, Nate started coughing, choking. Shaun started crying. My baby….he was so scared!

Nate talked to them, wanted to know if everything was okay. I wanted to go to them! Hold them both.

The man told him everything was fine.

The woman...she grabbed for Shaun, tried to take him from Nate. Why would they want our baby? Nate struggled, refusing to give him up.

The man ordered him to give up Shaun...pointed a gun at my husband and my son!

I was helpless, locked inside this frozen cage and I couldn’t. Do. ANYTHING! I couldn’t save them!

Nate yelled at them both, refused to give Shaun up. His last words...“I won’t give you Shaun!”

The woman kept reaching for him...and...and...

The man...he..sh--sh--shot...Nate. The woman took Shaun.

That man, he leaned in and scrutinized me through the window, his lips moved...and slowly everything went dark again.

She came back to the present, Dogmeat’s head in her lap. He had licked her hand trying to provide comfort. His fur was wet. Her face was wet as well; she’d been crying. Embarrassed by her display of emotion, unable to control the feelings once immersed in the memories, she reached up and wiped her face with the heel of her hand.

Ellie walked over, offering a supportive hand on her shoulder. Nick was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed, eyes on the ceiling. Head swiveling towards her, he spoke up.

“That’s one hell of a story. So, let me line up the facts. You were on ice, deep below the ground. It would take a good bit of handiwork to get past the safeguards and security to reach that area. That means they were most likely professionals and knew what they were doing. When they felt things went wrong -- your husband refusing to give them your son -- they killed your husband in order to kidnap him.”

“He’s less than a year old!” Arms wrapped around herself, Alice rocked back and forth, beseeched Nick. “Why would anyone take him?”

“A good question. Babies need a lot of care at that age, best given by their parents -- only they didn’t want either one of you. Why go through all that trouble? Sounds like whoever did this had a specific plan to carry out and were intent on succeeding no matter what. There are a lot of groups around here in the Commonwealth and most wouldn’t hesitate to kidnap, especially for caps.”

“What groups?”
“Well, there’s raiders, super mutants, gunners, and of course, the Institute.”

“Gunners?” It was the only term she hadn’t heard yet.

“Big time mercenaries. They’ll take any job... no matter what it entails. Most likely would be working for someone though.”

“So... the Institute? I heard Piper talking about them.”

“I’m sure you have. Her stories in the paper have been centered around them, trying to make people take notice. The Institute gets blamed any time something goes wrong. They have early model synths, the first prototype, that leave destruction in their wake. Then there are Gen 2s and 3s.”

“I heard you use that word in the vault and you said you’re a synth. Isn’t that the same as a robot?”

“As I stated earlier, there are Gen 1, 2 and 3 synths. The very first prototypes are just the barebones. Creepy if you ask me... and I'm a synth. They most resemble what you’re probably thinking of as robots. I'm a special prototype of a Gen 2; upgraded, enhanced, in addition to this layer of synthetic skin. Supposed to resemble a human more than those first gens... though I'm not sure who thought this get up was even close. I have memories implanted in my brain from a prewar detective. Most Gen 2s merely respond to a target in some manner. With me so far?”

At her nod of assent, Nick stopped to light a cigarette. The wispy smoke drifted upwards in a curling dance.

“That brings us to Gen 3 synths.”

“You said they could look like me or Ellie? They're that lifelike?”

“Oh, absolutely. No one ever really knows if the person they're talking to is a replacement for someone or just a random synth trying to live a life in the Commonwealth.”

Seeing fear enter her eyes, Nick chastised Ellie. “You're scaring the poor girl, Ellie.”

She didn't apologize. “This is important for her to know, Nick!” Propping her hip on the desk, she grabbed Alice's hands in her own. “Look, I know this world can be frightening and all too often overwhelming. I just think you need all the facts to be ahead of the game,” turning to give Nick a baleful glare, “not flying blind.”

Alice took a deep breath, fighting a fear which threatened to break through her carefully erected dam and flood her senses. “I... I... Thank you.”

“Well, anyway... that leaves us with those Gen 3 synths. Yes, that lifelike, they need to be in order to fit into the Commonwealth so seamlessly. However, they’re still programmed to a degree. The ones that escape have shown remarkably believable human emotions, thoughts, actions. Quite uncanny, if you ask me. Wouldn’t surprise me if they’re working on making canine synths next.”

Alice ran her hands down Dogmeat’s head, scratching behind his ears. He had tilted his head at Nick, letting out a soft woof. Would it matter to her if he wasn’t real? No, not at all. This dog was all heart.

“It’s been alluded to that they snatch people and replace them with a synthetic model, using them to infiltrate and get information. No one knows the exact reasoning behind it or even where they’ve planted these synths. I don’t even know and I’m a generation 2 synth, though they tossed me on the
“You...don’t know anything?” If he came from this...Institute...but didn’t know anything, how was he going to help her?

“I guess it’s some kind of failsafe, a way to keep their knowledge out of the hands of those who’re looking to do them harm, which would mean just about anybody. I doubt any of the settlers in the Commonwealth have them worried too much, though. But we’re getting off track here. Is there anything at all you can tell me? Did they say anything else, did you get a look at either of them?”

It hurt so much to remember, like someone was trying to rip her heart out through her chest. If it wasn’t for her sitting in the chair, she’d be on the floor curled up in a ball.

His use of the word say anything brought that memory from before, the man’s lips moving. Her head jerked up to stare at Nick wide-eyed.

“The man...he said something like, ‘We still have the backup.’ ”

“Hmmmm, not sure what that would mean. Might make sense as we go. Did anything stand out about him, details that would make you recognize him again?”

“His voice,” it gave her chills just thinking about it. “So cold-blooded. It was low, gruff...cruel. He...he put his face up to the w--window when he said those words.” Alice took a minute to go on, forcing herself to go on. “He was bald. Had a scar right here, on his face.”

Her fingers traced the area over her own face where that deep, ugly scar had been. She would never forget his face, that voice.

“Wait a minute...that sounds familiar. Did you happen to hear the name ‘Kellogg’?”

“I...I don’t remember. Do...do you think he took Shaun?” Was it possibly this easy after all?

“It’s too much of a coincidence to think otherwise.” He turned towards Ellie. “We still have those notes on that case?”

“All up here, Nick. As well as in a file.” She tapped her head, looking back at him with a wink before becoming serious again. “You just described a man who is one of the most notorious and dangerous mercenaries. Just as you described, he’s bald, has a scar down the left side of his face. The only thing nobody has ever been able to find out is who he works for.”

“Ellie, didn’t he buy a house here in town? He had a kid with him, too, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes to both. Nick, you never forget a thing. That house was up over the West Stands, that area has been abandoned for a while now. I think the boy was, oh...about ten years old or so.”

Alice was shocked. “He kidnaps kids and now babies?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. Kellogg will do anything. It’s possible the kid could be his. In any case, they’ve both been gone for a good long while.”

He stood up and walked around the desk. “Why don’t we take a walk, head on over there and take a look. Maybe will find something that relates to your case.”

Ellie’s parting words made Alice uneasy, despite having Nick and Dogmeat by her side. “Security doesn’t go over there anymore but I’d appreciate the two of you being careful. Okay, Nick?”
“I always am…”

He didn’t see Ellie roll her eyes at him before they walked out the door.

Alice followed Nick and Dogmeat out of his office, running into Piper on the way.

“Came to see how things were going over here. Nat will be getting up for school soon.”

Alice could hardly believe the amount of time that passed. It was still dark outside, but Diamond City was stirring, everyone slowly getting ready to start their day.

“We think one of the people who took her baby might’ve been Kellogg, from her description.”

“No kidding? Ain’t that something. Headed up there?”

“We are.”

“I’ll tag along then, for moral support.”

“Hmmph.” Nick’s only response.

Alice was too keyed up to say a word; anxious, excited, terrified. They headed up a metal walkway to a house above Diamond City security. Nick went to the door, after asking Alice to keep an eye out, and tried to jimmy it open. No luck.

“The only other option is to go to the Mayor and depend on his goodwill.”

“Ha. Nothing good about a balloon full of hot hair.”

“Piper….” There was a note of warning in Valentine’s voice.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. C’mon Alice, let’s go see if we can persuade our esteemed Mayor to hand over the key.”

Leaving Nick and Dogmeat behind, they walked across Diamond City, taking a lift up to the Mayor’s office, which had been called the Press Box Suite back before the war. Alice wondered if Piper knew that.

Inside, the Mayor’s secretary sat at her desk. “Can I help…” her words died slowly upon spotting Piper. “Well, if it isn’t Diamond City’s least favorite reporter.”

“Nice, Geneva. Think of that all by yourself? Where’s the Mayor? Alice needs to talk to him.”

Wide-eyed, she looked at Piper. No way. She was not good with new people, never knew what to say. And a Mayor? Oh no, this was not going to end well.

Geneva looked at her. “He’s back there, honey. Go on in,” she pointedly looked at Piper, “alone.”

At Alice’s look of fear, Piper reassured her. “Go ahead. You’ll have better luck without me.”

As Alice forced her feet towards the back office, she heard Geneva mumble under her breath, “No doubt about that.”
Hesitantly, she walked in the room. The Mayor was just sitting in a chair, doing...nothing. She wasn’t exactly sure what Mayors did but had expected to at least see some kind of paperwork on his desk.

He looked up at her approach. “I think I remember you. A soldier brought you in, such a horrible injury. I see you’re better now, thank goodness. All thanks to our fine city and capable doctors.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond without insulting him so just nodded her head.

“Hope you’re enjoying your stay. Diamond City is glorious, isn’t it? Now, what can I do for you?”

“I--I--” Alice’s words halted. She wasn’t sure how to begin, how to ask for what she needed.

*When you talk to someone, just be yourself. Just...say what you mean. You’d be surprised how just being you can open doors. You’re cute, you have an innocent look about you. Who wouldn’t give you anything you wanted?!*

Nate’s words echoed in her mind. They really, really needed that key. What could it hurt to just...ask.

“I need a key to one of the houses here.” She inwardly cringes as her words rushed out of her mouth in a run-on sentence.

He chuckled, giving her a huge smile and it brought to mind a shark, eyeing up prey.

“We don’t have keys to every single house here. My goodness! Where would we put all those keys?” His hearty laughter sounded face and forced and then he became serious again. “Here in Diamond City, every citizen has a right to their privacy. If I did have keys, only the owner could rightfully ask for it. Now, that’s my final word.”

Alice wasn’t sure what to do. She had failed at the only thing Nick asked her to do. She turned to leave. *Maybe if I plead with him.*

“Please, Mayor McDonough.  This man, Kellogg, he kidnapped my son. He’s just a baby. Surely that means something? I need to find my son!” Alice put every ounce of emotion into her words. He had to believe her...had to help!

His mouth opened and Alice thought he was immediately going to deny her request again, but then he studied her before making a decision.

“I suppose it won’t hurt to give you the key. He’s actually been gone for months and I’m not sure if he’ll be coming back. However, I would appreciate you not telling this to anyone.”

“I won’t say anything at all.” Beyond the fact that Piper and Nick knew why she was here. “Thank you, Mayor. This...means a lot to me.” Alice was so relieved, she could feel tears forming. She had done it! Now, maybe they could find something about this man that would help her search for Shaun.

“Thank you. I will do anything I possibly can to help you overcome this tragedy.”

Alice blinked as he handed her the key and walked away. Those words had sounded rehearsed. Looking down at her hands, the key felt like a lifeline. It also felt heavy, as if weighted with the importance of this task. Something so simple and yet of great importance.

Heading back out into the reception area, she saw Piper, a hip propped up on the desk waiting for
her. The secretary was gone.

“Well? Did you get it?”

Alice held up the key and couldn’t help the smile that stole across her face. Piper responded with the same.

“I’ll be damned. You did it! I knew you had it in you!” She came over and put her arm around Alice. “Ya know, I could use someone like you to help me get information for my newspaper.”

She continued in the same vein all the way back to Kellogg’s.

“I take it you got the key.”

“She did. I could sure use her talents with my paper.”

No one had ever said she was talented or wanted her help. The feeling that swelled inside of her was new and almost frightening in its intensity. A feeling of belonging, of having friends, of having people believe in her. Just as Nate had.

“Great. Let’s head inside then, see if there’s anything we can find. Alice, you do the honors.”

Inserting the key into the lock, she was surprised to hear no sound at all, not even upon opening the door.

“He kept everything in good working order it seems. Hard to crack, well oiled. Kellogg must really have something to hide.”

Someone turned on a switch as they entered and the room was bathed in light.

Chapter End Notes

As always, questions, comments and kudos welcome! Thank you all for hanging in there and watching Alice adjust to her new world ;)
Past the Limit

Chapter Summary

“I...I’m just worried. If this Kellogg is really as dangerous as Nick says he is, well…”
She held her arms out from her sides, looked down at herself. “I’m not exactly much of a threat.”

“That tough, Sunshine. Give yourself more credit. Besides, now you got me and Nick here to back you up. We’ll help you kick his ass and wipe the floor with him.”

Chapter Notes

Alice is starting to grow stronger and with baby steps, trying to learn to take control of her life.

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He watched them unawares from his vantage point. It wouldn’t do for him to be seen by the rest of Diamond City security watching instead of...securing; it also wouldn’t do for those he watched to be secured. Though, from the intel he’d gathered, the place they were checking was abandoned and had been all but forgotten.

Staying to the shadows as they went inside, he resisted the urge to light a smoke. Valentine’s glowing eyes would no doubt spot the inconsistency of the tiny light even at that distance. He could hear their conversation from where he was one with the shadows.

“I take it you got the key.”

“She did. I could sure use her talents with my paper.”

“Great. Let’s head inside then, see if there’s anything we can find. Alice, you do the honors.”

“It appears he kept everything in good working order. That lock was hard to crack, well oiled. Kellogg must really have something to hide. But we’ll get to the bottom of it now with the key.”

He watched as the tiny blonde woman spoke to know one in particular. “How am I going to get word to Hancock?”

“We’ll figure something out, don’t worry.”

“Hey you two, get in here and help me look. Worry about Hancock later. Though, if we find any clues, we may move out without him.”
The conversation was ushered in low tones but he was still able to make out their words. So, they wanted Hancock with them, huh? Looked liked he needed a change of clothes. He adjusted his sunglasses and climbed down. Apparently, he was taking a short trip.

Alice squinted, the light glaringly bright after the darkness of the night. The sky had just started to lighten, awash in purple and bluish hues, seen from their vantage point just over the walls of the stadium. Rose, pinks and oranges would chase the blues away but she wouldn’t see it.

Eyes roamed around the room trying to take in everything at once; there wasn’t much to see. Turning her body in a circle, she observed a desk located near the stairs, some items scattered haphazardly on top of it. A TV rested on the floor, a couch and table in a corner and boxes of folders and papers were strewn about the room.

Feeling her hopes deflate like a popped balloon, Alice recognized with a hint of despair that this search would not get her any closer to finding Shaun. Looking over at the stairs, that hope sparked again. Maybe there was something up there.

Climbing quickly, all she found was a bed, sleeping bag and two tables with a coffee pot, some pots and a cluster of candles. Just as quickly as the flames of those long ago extinguished candles, hope spiraled up in smoke. She could hear Nick and Piper downstairs, moving papers, every tool and roll of tape, even checking in the corners. Nick called up to her.

“Did you check out that desk yet Alice? Look in the drawers, even underneath. Anything you find might be important.”

“I’m not finding anything, Nick.” Piper paused in her search, opened a piece of gum and popped it in her mouth.

“This place is rather small, wouldn’t you say? Mercenary of Kellogg’s caliber, you’d think he’d have something a little bigger, perfect for hiding a multitude of sins.”

Alice would never have seen it from any other angle but it was there as she turned at the bottom of the stairs towards the desk; a red button lit up and glowing like a neon sign from underneath. She walked over and pushed it in eagerly.

All it once, every pair of eyes turned to stare as another room came into view, the wall soundlessly opening along a well oiled track.

“Now that’s more like it. I expected something like this from Kellogg.”

The room was small but well stocked with everything a mercenary needed right there at his fingertips; it appeared he was well paid. A grungy but well cushioned chair was placed in the middle of the room, a low table next to it. Surrounding this incongruous effort at comfort and domesticity, were shelves along one wall loaded with food, drinks, ammo and weapons.

“Everything a merc needs right here. His own personal stash.”

“It’s a smorgasbord for sure.” Piper echoed.

Alice walked over to the table by the chair. From the indentations in the cushions, it appeared
Kellogg had sought this room often to sit and relax, maybe plan his next assignment. On the table were a couple of empty bottles of Gwinnett Stout, some cigars -- San Francisco Sunlight brand -- some bullets.

“None of this stuff will lead us...what have we got here?” Nick had wandered over to see what Alice was looking at. “Grab some supplies, whatever you think you’ll need. And those cigars, too. I have an idea.”

Alice stuffed as much as she could into her backpack, grabbed a couple of stimpacks on her way out of the room wondering what he had in mind. In any case, he was the detective. Ideas were probably always brewing in that mechanical brain.

Dogmeat jumped up as they exited the room, having laid down by the door all this time. Looking up at their actions, he cocked his head at Nick’s voice as if to ask what was up.

“I’ve seen this mutt in action. He’s got a damn fine nose. What d’ya say, Dogmeat, ready to follow a scent?” He got a woof and tail wag in response. “Alright then. Alice, let him smell one of those cigars. I’ll just bet he can lead us straight to Kellogg.”

Fishing one of the cigars from her backpack, Alice held it in front of Dogmeat so he could get the scent. They all filed out the door and watched as he sniffed around the walkway, turning to look at them, issuing a soft woof before turning and running off.

Nick turned to her, “I know this is personal, you probably need to confront Kellogg yourself. Seeing, as we can’t all head after him, just thought I’d let you know -- I’m here if you need me.”

He was giving her a choice. She hated choices. Who was she supposed to take, who to leave behind? Would there be hurt feelings for leaving someone behind? Nick did have a point though. They couldn’t all go. Each of them had their own lives, places they belonged, work to do.

As she stood there, trying to figure out a decision that benefited everyone, Piper spoke up. “Listen, Blue, I’d love to go but I can’t keep leaving Nat with Ellie and go running off across the Commonwealth. As much as I’d like to experience this story first hand, I think I better sit this one out.”

Well, that went better than she’d expected. “Okay. Piper...I...thank you for, well everything.”

Piper walked over and enveloped her with hug. “Sure thing. It was fun. Now, chin up, okay? You really are tougher than you think.” With a smile and a wave, she was walked away, back to her own life.

Alice looked up at Nick, “You would really help me go after Kellogg? As dangerous as you say it is?”

“Listen, if Kellogg really did kidnap your son, he’s more than just dangerous. I wouldn’t mind being there to help you take him out. A man like that needs to be taken down. Now, didn’t you say something about Hancock coming as well?”

“He did say he’d come too. I just don’t know how to get a message to him.”

“I think the best message we can give him is going in person.”

Alice bit back a longsuffering sigh. Another walk through the ruins of Boston to Goodneighbor. The last one had been anything but easy. She didn’t suppose that would change this time around.
“Let me grab some things and let Ellie know I’m heading out. I’ll meet you at the stairs.”

Dogmeat jumped up at Nick’s approach and Alice swore the dog was smiling, ready and eager to head out on another adventure.

They’d barely left Diamond City behind on the way to Goodneighbor when a raspy voice spoke up from the shadows to her right, scaring Alice into drawing her gun with shaky hands. She recognized the clothes first as the body they draped stepped out of the shadows, a face being the last to be touched by the sunlight.

She lowered the gun, heart beating so hard, it felt ready to burst through her chest.

“Sorry! I..I--”

“No worries, Sunshine. Takes a lot more than that to shake up a son of a bitch like me. Besides, I knew you wouldn’t shoot me.” Those words were followed by a cocky wink and confident smile.

“One of these days, you’re going to do that to the wrong person.”

Hancock laughed, spreading his arm wide. “What’s life without a little excitement, Nick?”

“Excitement like that gets a person killed and Alice certainly doesn’t need that kind of excitement in her life.”

There were times Hancock wondered if the old dick’s personality had been transplanted along with his memories. A hit of jet would certainly mellow him right up, if that kind of thing worked on him...which it didn’t. Shame.

“Did you even make it back to Goodneighbor or have you been hanging out in wait this whole time?” Nick still sounded disgruntled.

Hancock had been waiting for them just out of sight, barely, of the Diamond City security guards. It appeared he knew well how to play their game.

“Made it back actually. Just got settled in all nice and cozy when a little birdy flew in and shit all over my parade.”

“A little birdy, huh? This birdy have a name?”

“Might have. Didn’t catch it.”

“What a surprise.”

Those coal black eyes turned towards Alice. “Find anything out in the the not so great Green Jewel?”

“We got inside Kellogg’s house and it had a hidden room.”

“Well, well. Sounds promising. Anything interesting?”

“Not really. Just a lot of supplies. Nick said we could use Dogmeat to track Kellogg using the
cigars he smokes. I have some to take along. Are you still coming with us?"

"Won’t get rid of me that easy. So, the adventure begins. Got an idea. How bout we let Sunshine here get a warm up?"

Nick nodded his head, clearly in agreement. “Have anything specific in mind?”

“Just a stroll through the ruins, maybe take the scenic route, give her some pointers. Opportunities will present themselves as we go.”

“Not a bad idea, actually. Kellogg isn’t exactly going to be easy to take down.”

That confession coming from Nick, along with Hancock’s suggestion made chills run down Alice’s spine. There was no way to know what kind of person she was going to be facing. He kidnapped children, killed people who got in his way. All of that was bad enough but these two made him sound so much worse.

“You all might want to head out soon. Those security guards can have itchy trigger fingers.”

All at once, they turned to the sound of the voice, none of them having noticed anyone approaching. Diamond City security guard, baseball gear worn as armor, gun in hand, wearing sunglasses. Alice knew this one. He’d flirted with her before Danny ran him off.

“You don’t say."

“I’ll show them an itchy trigger finger. Bastards better stay out of my way."

Nick and Hancock spoke at the same time, Hancock decidedly less than happy about this guard’s observation.

“Hey, don’t get your knickers in a twist. This isn’t a place to pick a fight. Just a friendly tip from me to you.”

The guard turned his eyes, hidden by those sunglasses, in her direction. He smirked and she wondered if that was his attempt at being charming. “And there she is, the one, the only…uh, what was your name again?”

“Get lost, Deacon. You’re giving me a headache.”

“Fine...fine. See what I get for helping you out?”

Alice watched as he turned and walked away.

“Who was that? You both seem to know him.”

“A little too well. Don’t worry about him, he’s harmless.”

Nothing more was said, so they headed into the heart of war torn Boston, Dogmeat running ahead of them nose to the ground. He’d follow a scent, bound ahead for a bit, veer off when he smelled something else, then come bounding back to trot beside her before starting all over again. Alice got so much joy just by watching him. The one normal thing in this crazy, upside down world -- a dog.

“Penny for your thoughts, sister.”

It was strange, she didn’t open up to people easily. In fact, most of her life had been avoiding them for one reason or another. Usually, it was because she was worried about what people thought of
her; trying to fit in, saying the right things, being smart and having the right answer. In the back of her mind, her thoughts always created scenarios that most likely never existed but she’s been helpless to stop her mind from traveling down that road. It always brought feelings of inadequacy and eventually pain.

But right now having woken up to a distinctly dysfunctional world, everyone she’d met so far had been kind or at least patient with her. Well, everyone except the caravan guards and the trader with the brahmin...and that soldier, Danse. Though, if she was honest with herself, even he had helped up to a point.

So it surprised her, really, that with those few simple words from Hancock, she was ready to lay everything on the line. Still, the words wouldn’t come. It might have been because Nick was following behind but could still hear their conversation. Deep down, Alice knew neither of them would judge her in any way. For her, it was strange to think that way but it was a gut feeling. Since when had she ever had any of those? In the end, she settled for one thought in particular.

“I...I’m just worried. If this Kellogg is really as dangerous as Nick says he is, well…” She held her arms out from her sides, looked down at herself. “I’m not exactly much of a threat.”

“Tough as nails, Sunshine. Give yourself more credit. Besides, now you got me and Nick here to back you up. We’ll help you kick his ass and wipe the floor with him.”

Despite his words, Alice was not reassured. Looking back at Nick walking behind them, she had the sudden feeling that if she’d ever known her dad, she would have wanted him to be just like Nick. Always so calm and to her at least, he had a fatherly way about him, something she’d never admit to out loud.

Turning forward again, Alice just knew she was beyond grateful they were here with her even as doubts still crowded her mind in spite of their presence.

After several minutes of comfortable silence, Hancock started speaking. She realized it wasn’t advice and wasn’t just conversation. These words resonated with a deeper meaning.

“So, before I became mayor of Goodneighbor, there was this asshole ran the town. Name of Vic. He ran it for...” pausing as if looking back in time and not finding what he wanted, he went on. “Well, not even sure how long exactly. Anyway, most of us hanging around the place were just drifters. Far as he was concerned, we were his own personal piggy bank.”

He was quiet for a bit and she could easily imagine he was actually in the past right then. To her, looking back was always painful -- no exceptions. Was that how it was for him? He was so hard to read and even his demeanor didn’t really give anything away.

It would have been easy to ask him to continue but she was afraid to break the spell. She was beginning to see that everyone she’d met so far, those who’d helped her, they all had their own stories. Life experiences that shaped them into who they were here and now. All of them had come out on the other side, changed but intact, tough in a way that worked for them.

“He had this gang, bunch of goons. Used em to keep everyone in town in line. Step out of that line, there’d be hell to pay. Always a price. Days could go by, nothing happened. Other times, he let go of the leash, like it just slipped out of his hands, ‘whoops’. Wanted them to let off some steam, I guess. They did...on those of us that lived there. He didn’t give a fuck.”

Wincing as much for the picture he painted as the harsh words, she couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of life that would have been.
“Don’t get me wrong. The folks that had doors, well, they could just lock them out...along with everything else going on. Easy for them. But the rest of us, the drifters, we had nowhere to go. One night, drifter spoke up. Guess he’d had enough. They disagreed. Cracked him open like a can of Cram. Rest of us...we were too fuckin scared to do anything but watch.”

Not sure if he expected an answer, she blurted something out anyway. “It wasn’t your fault. You can’t blame yourself. They would have done the same to you!”

The tricorn tilted down and back up with a nod in affirmation. “S’pose you’re right. Still was spineless. Man, I never felt so bad -- less than nothing -- knowing that whole time I’d just watched instead of doing something. When it was done, I went and got so high I blacked out. Not even sure how much time passed, but I came to after a while. Found myself on the floor of that state house blurry eyed and feeling like I’d been run over by a Deathclaw but right there in front of me were the clothes of none other than John Hancock. First American hoodlum that stood up and defended the people.”

This time, the silence stretched longer. Alice didn’t know what to say, only sure he wouldn’t want useless words or pity. Time had passed since then but it was clear he’d never forgotten his actions - or lack of -- that day. This was what had changed him.

A noise erupted to her right and she flinched, unconsciously backing up towards Hancock. Reaching out, he steadied her. Ferals. Must have heard them though they hadn’t been that loud. Their distorted human features sent chills racing all over her body.

“Focus on one at a time. You’ve got me, Nick and the pooch for backup.” He spoke quietly in her ear.

Then he yelled, bringing his own gun up, ready to fire. “Take em down, sister!”

A vicious yank on her arm made Alice cry out in fear. Turning in that direction, she came face to face with a feral. A face now unrecognizable from what had once been human like her, turned ghoul like Hancock then sliding down a sharp descent into the madness of a feral. Dogmeat appeared at her side, jumping up and grabbing the feral by the arm and dragging it down while Alice could only stare, frozen in place.

“Shoot the fucker, Alice!”

Hancock’s crude words, shouted in her ear, prompted her into action. Aiming the gun, she shot it in the chest three times, astonishment making her eyes widen in disbelief. It fell to its death. Dogmeat trotted over, tongue hanging out and forgetting where she was for the moment, she dropped down to his level and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his fur. It didn’t matter that it was covered in blood spatters.

Thankfully, the rest of the ferals had been dispatched as well. The fight was over before it had barely begun. Surprised but alternately pleased and saddened, she was grateful she’d taken down the one with Dogmeat’s help. If she’d been by herself, her body would be there lying dead on the ground, ferals swarming around her body. Her stomach did several somersaults with the thought.

Nick walked over, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You’re alive, Alice. Take that and hold onto it as tight as you can.”

She would. Grabbing the arm he offered, she stood up, refusing to move until her legs stopped shaking. Hancock was now casually leaning against a building, Dogmeat panting nearby.
“Alright now, Sunshine?”

“I think so.”

As the shaking started to subside, she watched Hancock take a hit of Jet, a plume of mist floating upwards, dispersing into the atmosphere. Just once she’d like to try it herself, completely relax as her worries floated away. Seeing his smirk, knowing her thoughts glowed like a sign on the Vegas strip, she hung her head down to hide them. That was a road leading only to disaster.

With a suddenness that surprised even her, words burst out of her mouth. “No, I’m not, dammit! I’m so tired of being afraid, of being useless!”

Pulling at her hair in frustration, she paced back and forth, in and out between the bodies of the ferals. She stopped, kicking one as hard as she could just because it was there and then immediately felt guilty. They had been people once; had been mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters. Alice kicked another one anyway, angry at what they had become through no fault of their own.

“Should we tell her they’re already dead?”

“Nah. Gives her a sense of purpose, ya know? Makes her feel better. Just watch the show, she’ll tire herself out soon.”

“I heard you both. They were people once.” It disturbed her deeply to know they thought of these ferals as just a joke.

She looked up at them, eyes throwing off sparks of anger, hands on her small hips. For all the world, looking like a tiny girl trying to play grown up.

“That’s what I’m talking about, that shit right there.”

She blinked a few times, her brain taking several minutes to register his words. Confusion replaced anger. “What’s the shit...what?” Hanging around Hancock was going to give her bad habits.

“Temper. Knew you had it in you.”

The look of confusion cleared, now replaced by a blush creeping up from her neck to cover her whole face, her eyes cast downward in embarrassment. “I...sorry.”

Nick walked over and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder once again. “Don’t be. We all get there sometimes. This place is known for pushing people up to and well past their limits.”

“Agreed. But, now this party is over, let’s continue our grand adventure.”

Heading deeper into the ruins, Hancock continued his story. “So, where was I? Oh...yeah. The clothes.”

Alice looked at them. When she’d first seen him, she figured it was just a costume. Not entirely sure why he was still wearing around the time she met him, he now made it sound like they were so much more than just a charade. Turned out, they were.

“So, I came to eventually but still fuckin high as a kite and those clothes...well, they spoke to me. Like they were telling me I had a job to do. Stood there, looking at em for a while. Then, looked around me...no one else was there. I smashed the display glass and put em on. They’re a little more worn now but as you can see, they fit me perfectly, like they were made for me. Started a new life that day...as the one and only Hancock.”
“You never looked back?”

“Not gonna say never but I had a new purpose, something I felt called to do. Cleaned myself up, got organized. Hell, I even hit Kleo up about loaning me some hardware. Gathered a few drifters into some kind of fuckin semblance of a group. We headed out into those ruins and trained. Made sure we were good and ready for anything. Figured the next time Vic let his boys loose, we’d be ready for em for a change. Shake things up a bit.”

Alice had a tendency to hide her head in the sand so to speak. A lot of things slipped by her but it wasn’t because she was stupid. She was a dreamer. Then, there was the fact that conflict made her uneasy and if she was honest, it terrified her. Standing up for herself wasn’t something she was good at. More often than not, she tried to please everyone around her, forgetting who she was in the process. It hurt to disappoint anyone, though she couldn’t have given a reason why.

Hancock wasn’t like that, at least not anymore. She figured without so many words what the outcome had been.

“You won. You had to...you’re here now.”

“That’s right, Sunshine. We did. Got loaded that night...Vic’s boys were fuckin hammered. Us drifters, we burst from the windows and rooftops where we’d been hiding and annihilated them. Fuckers never saw it coming. Course, we didn’t have to fire a single shot to take em out, massacred the bastards anyway. Cleaned house that night. We strolled into the state house, strung Vic up and threw him over the balcony...for all to see.”

A gasp escaped her lips at the brutality of it all. Even after such a short time in this world, Alice wasn’t sure if she’d ever get used to it, ever understand such a concept. Maybe Hancock was right...maybe she wasn’t meant for this world.

Nick walked up beside them. “Think you ought to take it easy there with the gruesome storytelling, Hancock? Alice isn’t used to how things work around here.”

“Well, she’d better get used to it. Rather me sugar coat a pile of shit and see what happens when she steps in it? She’s tougher than she looks, Nick. Might as well jump in feet first. I didn’t...and look what fuckin happened to me.”

Nick said nothing to that. He knew Hancock was right. The sooner she accepted the harshness of the Commonwealth, so different from her own world, the better off she’d be. It wasn’t going to do any good to let her ease in slowly. Still, a little tact would’ve been nice.

“I’m okay. I...go on, Hancock. Tell me the rest of your story.”

With a wide sweep of his arms as if he was in a theater, performing for the crowd, he continued. “There I was, gun in hand, Vic’s body hanging down in front of me, clothed in Hancock’s very own outfit and all the people of Goodneighbor down below looking up at me. Shit, I had to say something. So...I did...with words falling from my lips that felt like someone else was speakin through me, ya know? Gave me chills. ‘Of the people, for the people.’ My inaugural address, I guess you could say. Became Mayor that day. Made a vow to myself then and there as well. I’d never fuckin stand by and watch. Ever again.”

Those last two sentences...they gave Alice chills. Echoed around inside her head. Could she make that vow? Make it stick? His story resonated deep inside her. She wanted to believe she could change...maybe not quite as bloodthirsty as he was but...to never back down, to be an asset and not a liability. An exhilarating feeling to be sure. Something still bothered her though.
“After everything you did to become Mayor, why did you leave?”

“Not the ponderous type, ya know? Instinct speaks to me. So, when it does, I tend to listen. When you came around, it all but yelled at me. Said ‘follow her’ and here we are. Simplicity at its finest. Think instinct had the right of it in any case.” He paused, thought about his next words before continuing, “Listen. My story probably sounded harsh and ruthless, maybe even a bit barbaric. We were dealing with an asshole who didn’t see reason. Hope ya understood that part of it. I ain’t out to harm anyone who don’t deserve it. Ya feel me?”

She did actually, which surprised her. This world was nothing like what she was used to, these people were nothing like Nate had been and certainly not like her. She hoped in some small way she was adapting.

This world made her think of the books she’d read about the wild west when it was settled -- an eye for an eye, vigilante type justice. Was she capable of that? The image of the raider she’d shot in the neck reared its ugly head. Refusing to cave into feelings that image wrought, she pushed them away. Maybe she was halfway there, which led her to another thought.

Stopping in mid stride, she turned to Hancock. “You said you trained.”

“I did.”

“Will you train me?”

Those dark obsidian eyes seemed to study her intently, making her doubt speaking up in the first place. His words surprised her.

“Something tells Kellogg ain’t going anywhere right now. Might be a showdown on the horizon.” He looked over her head at the detective. “What d’ya say, Nick? In a hurry to get back to Diamond City?”

“I only have a few cases. Nothing life threatening. Can’t hurt to give Alice a few pointers.”

Hancock rubbed his hands together, looked around them. “Well, this walkthrough may take a little longer then. Let’s do this, sister.”

He led the way, on the outskirts of the ruins, only stopping when they approached a specific building. It was as if he knew exactly where he had wanted to go.

“Hubris Comics? You planning on giving her pointers with Grognak the Barbarian? Not exactly sure it’s what she needs. Unless they have a training manual written by The Silver Shroud.”

Hancock stood in front of them, hands on hips, head tilted as he took in the old building.

“Back when we trained, us drifters looked for a place to hole up, base of operations I guess you’d call it. Not so close to Goodneighbor. Didn’t want Vic catching wind of what we were doing. Thought we’d go inside, check it out. Had to clear out a shitload of ghouls first. Place was mostly intact. Hopefully, still is.” He turned to look at them. “Just...stay away from the elevator.”

“Lead the way then.”

Alice remembered coming here once with Nate. She’d been seven months pregnant and he’d dragged her here to get a specific Grognak comic book, Jungle of the Bat-Babies. In fact, by some miracle, it had survived the bombs and Alice had put it down in the root cellar for safe keeping. This place looked nothing like it had before...much the same as anything else in this wasteland.
“Your should have fired your interior decorator, Hancock. Doesn’t look like they did much in here.”

“Was just a place to hole up, Nick. Wasn’t like we were moving in permanently. It served its purpose. The second and third floors were mostly where we stayed. Might be that some of our stuff is still up there.”

Hancock took off, walking around the old magazine display racks sitting at odd angles on the main floor. Piles of trash and rubble littered the floor everywhere you looked. Alice followed him, taking in the old cardboard cutout and the posters clinging to the walls advertising The Silver Shroud. Nate would have loved this, though he would have been sad to see them in their current state.

“I’m going to do a run through down here, make sure nothing lurks in the shadows.”

Hancock chuckled. “Trying to channel the Shroud, Nick?”

He threw up a hand in response as he went through one door and Hancock ushered her through another. They made their way upstairs without incident, checking all the floors for ferals or raiders. Hancock had explained how he knew super mutants hadn’t taken up residence. Alice made a note of that -- bags of bloody body parts hanging around the perimeter -- trying not to shudder at that picture in her head.

“Well, here we go. Ain’t much but it’ll keep out the rain, rads and other unsavory characters. No sound from below, looks like no one else has taken up residence here.”

He plopped himself down in a chair and took a hit of jet.

“What do we do now?”

For several moments, he didn’t move or speak, just sprawled casually, head leaning against the back of the chair, eyes closed. She could almost imagine the look of pure bliss on his face.

“Fuck that really feels good. Sure you don’t want a hit?” His head came back up, black eyes drawing her own to them.

“I’m sure.”

“Suit yourself.” He stared off through windows too dirty to see out of it. “What do we do? Learn how to take a gun apart, clean it and put it back together. Think it’s a start anyways.”

Alice looked at him like he’d spoken a foreign language. Take a gun apart? She couldn’t even shoot straight! How was she supposed to do anything else with a weapon? This was not going to go well.

Getting up from the chair, he wandered around the whole floor like he was looking for something, mumbling quietly to himself. Wandering into another room, she heard an excited exclamation and wondered what he’d found.

Turned out it was a 10 mm, just like the one she carried. There were also some rags and a small green toolbox in his hands. Apparently, he’d found some of the stuff he and the other drifters had left behind. Laying everything on a table, he told her to grab her gun and bring it over.

“Time for your first lesson, Sunshine. Do exactly what I do. I’ll go slow the first time, so you get the rhythm down. Before long, you might be leading me.” He winked at her as he said that.
It took a minute for the words to register. Eyes widening at the double meaning, a blush crept across her cheeks and he grinned, knowing she’d understood. Back to the job at hand, he started taking the gun apart step by step. Alice watched closely, mimicking everything he did with only an occasional fumble. By the time Nick joined them, both guns lay in pieces on the side by side tables.

Again, one step at a time, Hancock proceeded to show her how to clean the gun, then reassemble it. They did this together several more times. Stepping away to take another hit of jet, Nick then took over watching as she attempted to put the gun together on her own, giving her a few pointers here and there when she missed something and became frustrated.

Dark crept inside the building, the only light from lanterns placed around the room. With very little light to work by, Nick told her to stop for the night. Grateful as she was mentally exhausted with minutiae of this exercise, Alice left everything on the table, found a couch in another room and laid down.

Dogmeat lay down next to the couch and her hands ran through his soft fur. A heavy sigh came from him as he settled down for the night. For once, she drifted off to sleep, too tired to think.

Voices, quiet and low pitched, were the first sounds that came to her upon waking up. Eyes remaining closed, she strained to listen but gave up when she couldn’t make out the words. Might as well get up. Today was the day she was hoping Hancock was going to teach her what he knew to help her survive.

Walking into the room, conversation stopped making her feel self-conscious. Had they been talking about her? New life, new attitude. At least, she was working on it, anyway. Shrugging off her anxiety, not an easy thing for her to do at all as it insisted on hammering at her, she saw that they had found a coffee pot and brewed some coffee. She helped herself, grimacing at the cup that was still somewhat dirty. Grabbing the edge of her shirt, she wiped it out. A little dirt wouldn’t kill her. The rads certainly hadn’t...yet.

Pouring herself a cup, she turned and leaned against a counter. “Are we training today?”

“Certainly eager, aren’t you. Figured I’d give you some time to wake up properly but we can head out whenever you’re ready.”

“Let me finish this.”

As soon as she’d downed her coffee, they all headed into the ruins once again. Nick and Dogmeat took point, on the lookout as they walked, giving Hancock and Alice behind them the time to get into position. It didn’t take long for an opportunity to present itself.

The distance had opened up between the two groups and Alice and Hancock heard the sounds of Nick up ahead firing on a group of ferals along with the growls and yips from Dogmeat. It was now up to Alice and Hancock to provide backup. Before she could react to the scene before her, Hancock walked up behind her, startling her as he moved in close and wrapped his arms around her own. Resting his hands on hers, they held the gun as one. Together, they aimed at a feral.

His breath whispered past her ear as he spoke to her. “Loosen up, Sunshine. Promise I won’t bite.”

Alice tried to loosen up but her attention was scattered in too many directions, not the least of which was Hancock wrapped around her like a well worn coat.

“Maybe just nibble a bit.”

With those words, she tensed up again but his low chuckle in her ear made her realize he was
teasing her. She tried focusing on his actions rather than his nearness. His breath tickled her ear as he exhaled, surprising her that it didn’t smell of death and decay but rather like…grape candy, not at all unpleasant like she’d expected. Even his skin didn’t feel like she’d anticipated, smooth instead of rough.

“All right, Sunshine. I want you to watch Dogmeat closely. When he grabs one of those ferals, aim for it and fire. Don’t hesitate, don’t second guess yourself, don’t even think. Hold your breath, aim and squeeze the trigger. They’re fast but I’ll help you keep the gun steady.”

The grape scent of his breath alone calmed her like nothing else, bringing back one of her few happy childhood memories. She could use that to her advantage.

Keeping her eyes trained on Dogmeat, she waited until he latched onto a feral, pulling its body down low to the ground. A perfect shot right at the chest. She aimed and squeezed the trigger. With Hancock’s hands helping to steady the gun, she watched as the scene unfolded before her.

Chapter End Notes

Once again…I apologize. Words have been elusive lately! Nothing like knowing what you want to write, having the ideas all right there but…blank documents xD I apologize in advance for any mistakes…Google Docs doesn't always pick them out for me.

Thank you for waiting patiently and as always, comments and kudos are welcome :)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev
One Step Closer

Chapter Summary

One tiny vault dweller and her canine, a ghoul and a detective set off after Kellogg. Along the way, they encounter someone they've all met.

This sounds suspiciously like an intro to a bad joke.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As if she was in a slow motion action scene, Alice’s eyes tracked the trajectory of the bullet towards its target, watching as the bullet found its mark and blood spurted from the wound. The feral jerked backwards, limbs flailing in a macabre dance of death.

As astonishing as it was that she had actually hit her intended target, there wasn’t time to dwell on that as another feral was alerted by the noise of her pistol and headed straight for her and Hancock. Nick and Dogmeat were engaged in their own dance with ferals and had no time to cut in on her own tango.

Gripping her hands in his own, Hancock moved the gun’s aim towards the oncoming feral. Alice focused, aimed, fired. She wasn’t sure how, surely it was only the cause of Hancock’s own reflexes, but the feral’s head exploded as the bullet met its skull, blood and brains splattering outward, upward and all over her, causing her to flinch and then gag.

“Hold it together, Sister. Now’s not the time for hysterics. Got a job to do here.”

Two ferals were still alive. Nick was fending off one and the other was attacking Dogmeat. Alice could tell he’d taken several hits, looking tired, and yet he still refused to back down. How could she do any less?

She never noticed Hancock’s arms pulling away from hers as she stepped forward, upset that her four-legged friend and protector was at the mercy of this feral. Squinting her right eye and focusing on the mutated human before her, all extraneous details fell away into the background.

She positioned herself in a shooting stance, raised the 10 mm in her arms, aimed the weapon. Inhaling then exhaling to focus. As the breath slowly left her lungs, her finger pulled back on the trigger. A bright red flower of blood blossomed on the feral’s chest, unfurling into the air.

Elation was a heady feeling as she watched its grotesquely deformed body hit the dirt, ragged clothing fluttering around it.

The skirmish was over.
Alice rushed over to Dogmeat, falling to her knees and running her hands through his fur and over the rest of his body to make sure he wasn’t seriously hurt. The voices of Hancock and Nick were muted behind her as she gave all her attention to the canine, hugging him close, grateful he’d made it through this fight unscathed and would continue to be by her side.

Hancock and Nick stood back watching the affection the tiny woman bestowed on the dog.

“Pushed aside and forgotten in favor of a four-legged mangy mutt. Fuckin cryin shame.”

“Jealous, Hancock?” Nick took a moment to light up a post conflict cigarette.

“Hell yeah I am! Wasn’t I the one that had her back against those ferals?”

Nick coughed in response. “I don’t think the way you had her back is quite the same in her book as it is in yours.”

A slow grin spread across Hancock’s face, “Yeah, well…my book’s a better read.”

Alice’s skill with the pistol steadily increased over the next few days. The group traveled throughout the ruins. Hancock and Nick started hanging back, letting Alice take point. Dogmeat never left her side. A decision was made between the two men that Alice should try using a different weapon. In the scenario that she would ever run out of ammo, she could grab one from a dead raider or super mutant and continue to defend herself.

The first weapon they came across was a double-barreled shotgun. Alice picked it up, balancing the weight in her hands. Looking to Hancock for instruction, she saw that the gun he held at his side was similar. She’d been so busy trying to learn how to fight, she’d never noticed it before now.

Walking over to him, she held the shotgun she carried side by side with his for comparison. It was immediately obvious, at least in appearance, how they were different.

“The barrel on your gun is shorter.”

“More damage, Sister. Instant gratification. Kinda like the jet.”

Alice thought about that for a minute. “Is it even worth trying to learn how to use this?”

“Hell yeah. Need to broaden your horizons, try different things.”

He winked at her as he said that and Alice could feel a blush creep up over her face. There seemed to be two personalities to Hancock, serious or sarcastic and cocky playboy. The playboy side of him appeared more often than not.

“Okay…” Alice deliberately changed the subject. “So, how do I use this gun?”

Walking over to the dead raider that had been using the shotgun, Hancock squatted down, removing a belt fastened around the waste. As he stood back up, Alice noticed the belt held bullets along its length. How convenient. It brought to mind old western shows on TV.

“Be happy to show you how to handle the gun, Sister.” Again with the innuendos, complete with a wink and a smirk.

“Maybe you should focus more on teaching her what she needs to know about staying alive, Hancock.”
“Such a killjoy, Nick.” Finally getting serious, he handed her the belt and explained, “It’s a cartridge belt. Holds ‘em right at your fingertips.”

Cradling his own weapon, Hancock stood next to Alice, showing her how to hold the shotgun and crack open the barrel from the stock in order to load it. Grabbing his own ammunition, he demonstrated grabbing the cartridges and loading them into both chambers at the same time, snapping the gun closed and finally bringing it up to fire. Stock flush against his cheekbone while wedged against his shoulder.

Once the practice began, she managed to drop more cartridges than load, fingers unused to the size and shape as well as the mechanics. Eventually though, she got it correct more often than not, though her fingers were numb and tired from repetition.

Hancock had intended for Alice to get some target practice, learn how to reload several times to cut down on her fumbling with the new technique while being attacked. Things didn’t go as planned.

While she did manage to get off a few rounds, indeed fumbling often, the sounds of gunfire alerted the dregs of society that lurked within the ruins. This time it was raiders. Unlike the ferals they’d encountered on most of their treks, raiders were armed and shot back, upping the stakes. Even having encountered them before, Alice was woefully unprepared for this attack, an unfamiliar weapon in her hands.

“Got some company. Let’s show em what we’re made of!” Hancock stepped forward, taking out two raiders right away.

Alice barely had time to react before they hit the small group with everything they had. She tried using the shotgun but her reaction time was severely slowed with trying to reloading an unfamiliar weapon. Her aim also wasn’t nearly as accurate as it had gotten with the 10 mm. Maybe it was time to switch.

“Change guns, Alice. Let’s take care of these raiders.” It was like Nick could read her mind.

Gratefully switching back to the familiarity of the 10 mm, she was able to take out a couple of raiders. Before long, it was quiet once again. The one thing she took away from her limited training with the shotgun was that it was much easier to load a clip in the 10 mm, especially under fire.

“So bout that, Sunshine.” Hancock took his hat off and wiped his brow with his sleeve. “Shoulda guessed we might attract some unwanted attention.”

“Everyone alright over here?” Nick headed back towards them, having gone to make sure there were no more unwanted visitors.

“We’re okay. You?” Her eyes trailed over him from fedora to trenchcoat, seeing no visible holes. He wasn’t smoking...well, other than his usual cigarette. That meant nothing vital had been hit.

“All systems in working order. I was spared any major equipment malfunctions.”

Thankful that they’d come through that all in one piece, they continued with the plan as usual. Over the next couple of days, Hancock let her get more practice in with the shotgun. It payed off but Alice decided using the 10mm was just more comfortable to her.

A new week dawned and it was time to move on.
Time to find Kellogg.

Under cover of night, they headed out of the ruins. Alice was still apprehensive but not nearly as much as the last time she’d traveled this route. This time, she was confident in her ability to defend herself and react without freezing up...at least she hoped so. Night time did present a different challenge but she also knew that Nick, Hancock and Dogmeat were with her. It was an unfamiliar feeling to her -- being able to depend on herself as well as to depend on others.

They made it past Diamond City, guards none the wiser that a ghoul was in their midst. A few of the guards glanced their way but deciding they weren’t a concern, went back to their pacing, eyes alert for more pressing dangers beyond the ruins. Once the group neared the large green metal gates of Fenway Park, they veered towards the left and headed out towards the Commonwealth.

Passing underneath a security walkway, Nick instructed her, “Grab one of the San Francisco Sunlight cigars out of your pack, Alice, and let Dogmeat get a whiff. That nose will lead us right to him.”

Alice held one of the cigars in her palm so Dogmeat could get the scent. He took off then, nose to the ground, stopping just up ahead of them and waited impatiently. As soon as they reached him, he barked and ran ahead of them again, like he was playing a game of cat and mouse.

Over the last rise of the road heading out of town, they heard Dogmeat barking excitedly. Alice ran ahead of the other two wanting to see what he’d found. She came to a stop next to a small pond of water. Nick held up his lighter, the flame casting a meager orange light over the area. A pallet floated lazily, half in the water, half on the bank, just barely held in place by a tree stump. Precariously on that was an upside down chair, resting on a crate.

Alice looked at Dogmeat. “What is it boy? There’s nothing here.”

Nick spoke up from behind her. “Check again, on the seat of the chair.”

Looking there, Alice noticed what she’d missed in her eagerness -- an ashtray with a cigar wedged firmly in one of the grooves. It must be the same brand to have made Dogmeat so excited. They really were on Kellogg’s trail. She all but shoved the cigar in the dog’s face.

“You have his scent again, Dogmeat?”

An excited bark and he was off again. Running after him, she didn’t even wait for Nick and Hancock.

“Look’s like someone’s eager to meet out some fuckin justice. Let him have it, Sunshine.”

Following the canine down the railroad tracks, Alice paid no attention to her surroundings -- not that she could see them anyway. Still, she was marginally careful of where she stepped. Finally, she was going to come face-to-face with the man that had stolen her son -- no, their son, her’s and Nate’s.

Running along the track behind Dogmeat, she didn’t notice the ground erupt to her left, completely focused on her inner thoughts and feelings. Even the sound didn’t register.

“ALICE, look out!!!”
Not knowing who had yelled out behind her, she glanced over her shoulder, now registering movement to her right.

When she turned to see what it was, a tail was sticking up in the air, the body of the creature burrowing into the ground. This was something she’d seen before. Molerat! She skidded to a halt, got into position and aimed her weapon, waiting for it to surface again.

*Crack!*

Blood spurted from the head as she hit the intended target’s head as it erupting from the ground. The molerat’s body dropped in mid flight. Before Hancock and Nick could reach her, she felt something push against one of her legs from behind.

She faltered but she didn’t fall. Looking down, she saw large ugly yellow teeth. Pointing the 10 mm downward, she fired. Warm red liquid erupted all over her. Wiping it from her eyes, she looked around.

Several more molerats were scattered around them. Dogmeat fighting off one of them, mostly growling with just an occasional yelp. Alice kneeled down, aimed her weapon. When the opportunity was clear, she shot. The molerat dropped to the ground dead, letting Dogmeat catch his breath.

Nick and Hancock quickly dispatched the rest.

Breathing hard and covered in molerat blood and guts, Alice’s heart raced so fast she felt like throwing up. Having had this feeling several times since leaving the vault, she was getting better at ignoring it. Hands planted somewhat firmly on her shaky knees, she leaned over, taking deep steadying breaths to calm her nerves and her nausea. Nate had been her rock -- his voice in her head -- for so many months but that had faded over time. Now, she’d learned to rely on herself.

A familiar raspy voice spoke up, a hand coming to rest on her back. “Another rule to remember, Sunshine. Always be aware of your surroundings. Don’t wanna get your ass handed to you while you’re out here. It’s a nice ass...keep it that way.”

Despite how she tired she felt, a short laugh escaped from between her lips. “I don’t have an ass.”

A sharp slap made her stand up abruptly, shocked and unable to form words, though it didn’t prevent the blush from spreading across her face. The lecherous ghoul’s own face was sporting a wide smile.

Refusing to acknowledge him or his antics, she stalked off towards Dogmeat who was up ahead, panting from exertion but ready and waiting for them.

Muttering to herself, she used the same word on him but in a different meaning entirely. “What an ass.”

A low rumbling laugh was confirmation he’d heard her but of course, he had to have the last word. “Sure is.”

The trio followed Dogmeat past an abandoned train then through a concrete culvert, dead bodies and bloody rags evidence that Kellogg had come this way. Alice started up the steps behind Dogmeat to get out of the culvert when she lost her balance and fell against the wall. Someone had
grabbed her arm, yanking her hard.

Wanting to rant at whoever had yanked her back, she felt cold metal fingers wrap around her lips to keep her quiet. The familiar feeling of panic took over, heart speeding up to bang painfully against her ribs, palms cold and clammy, legs shaking. A blanket of darkness would be waiting to cover her if she didn’t wrestle control of her anxiety now.

Forcing herself to look up, her eyes met those of Nick’s, neon yellow aglow in the shadows. Her body started to slide bonelessly down the wall in relief, almost taking him with her despite how slight she was. The only thing that stopped them was his arm as it slid around her waist to keep her upright.

Along with the relief came the question as to the cause behind his actions. A sound in the distance stopped her train of thought. Gunfire? No. The sound was steady and rhythmic, mechanical in nature. Almost like a protectron with its penguin-like walk...but what would one be doing out here? It didn’t make sense.

From above them, they all heard Dogmeat start barking. Alice’s eyes widened in fear, looking first at Nick and then at Hancock, frightened for the canine. However, on closer inspection, they didn’t look worried at all. In fact, Hancock’s eyes narrowed until they were just slits as the noise came closer to where they waited.

Dogmeat barked again. Alice then realized it wasn’t a warning bark and he hadn’t growled. In fact, he sounded excited, maybe even happy.

“Son of a bitch. Can’t believe our bad fuckin luck to come across one of them.” The mayor of Goodneighbor sounded more annoyed than anything.

“Not exactly the type of wildlife I’d planned on encountering on this case. Still, we can’t stay here forever.”

Their voices were whisper quiet, so she whispered as well. “What are you talking about?”

The answer was simultaneous. “Brotherhood.”

Alice cocked her ear to listen again, understanding now why the sound had seemed familiar to her, though she’d pushed the thought away. It wasn’t like she’d been awake in this mixed up world long enough to recognize anything. The sound was unmistakable though, now that she thought about it. Power armor. Immediately, an image of Danse came to mind.

As if conjured by the thought alone, that distinctive deep voice floated to them over the air.

“What is this canine doing out here in the wasteland unaccompanied?”

Hancock rolled his eyes. Clearly he was holding back the urge to say something sarcastic, though she wondered what the soldier had done to warrant such a reaction.

Soon, the clicking of Dogmeat’s nails as he crossed the concrete could be heard, the stomping footfalls of the soldier in his power armor close behind.

Looking at the other two companions in her group, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out they had no desire to cross paths with this soldier.

Taking a deep breath, Alice climbed the stairs out of the culvert. The rapid beat of her heart and clammy palms brought on by fear made her want to turn and run but she cut the idea off abruptly.
She had to get over her fears to survive. Besides, it was Danse. He wouldn’t hurt her.

Reaching the top, Alice walked towards him. He hadn’t noticed her yet, which seemed odd considering he’d had complete command of his surroundings when he’d taken her to Diamond City. She’d expected him to begin questioning her as soon as she stepped out from the culvert. This brief pause of unawareness gave her a moment to observe him unobtrusively.

Towering in his power armor, he made her feel like a child again -- tiny and insignificant. No helmet protected him this time but instead a fitted hood wrapped snugly around his head. The full head of thick, dark hair was hidden from sight. The scars, dirt and those deep brown eyes were all that was visible. He held a laser rifle in his arms, finger cradling the trigger guard.

She walked forward to meet him, stepping on a branch as she moved closer. The resulting crack was as loud as a gunshot. Before she could process movement, that laser rifle was aimed directly between her eyes, finger now wrapped around the trigger itself.

Heart leaping into her throat, she raised her shaking hands into the air, trying desperately not to collapse in a faint. At her side now, Dogmeat growled at Danse, ready to defend his mistress. Alice didn’t dare move...even to take a breath. The outcome could end this pursuit...and her life...more effectively than anything else up to this point.

The two at a stalemate, a voice spoke up from behind them.

“Brotherhood of Steel, huh? Like to see what you could do without all that power armor.”

The soldier’s head snapped up like a puppet on a string. Eyes narrowing, his facial expression contorted into hatred as he observed the ghoul behind her.

“Trust me freak. You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t bet on that. So, you carry that laser rifle to intimidate innocent women? Can’t get em any other way?”

Letting the jibe wash over him, Danse looked back at who he held the gun on, recognition dawning in the depths of his eyes, widening in surprise.

“Alice?”

“Looks like something finally penetrated through that hood. Was thinking maybe it kept out more than just the weather and radiation.”

A look of contempt crossed Danse’s face at the ghoul’s words, a sneer lifting one corner of his mouth. His words were for her, though. “Why are you with this...freak?”

“Let me guess tin can, it’s my dazzling personality that’s won you over, right?” Hancock just wouldn’t give up.

Ignoring his words, Alice’s forehead puckered in confusion, remembering those uttered by Danse instead. Looking over her shoulder at the mayor and then turning back to look at Danse, she couldn’t understand why he’d used that term. Sure, he looked different but...he was still human, not a freak. Besides, Hancock had been the one to help her, showing her how to survive.

“What do you mean...freak?”

“He’s an abomination! Synths, super mutants, ghouls….all of them. The Brotherhood cannot allow
them to live.”

Danse had certainly gotten her attention with those words, her mouth dropping open in astonishment. “Can’t allow them to live? You...kill them?”

“They’re dangerous. They simply can’t be allowed to exist.”

Alice couldn’t believe what she was hearing. How could a military organization kill people just because they were different? Had nothing changed in all this time? *War. War never changes.* Nate’s words as he’d practiced them in front of the mirror for his speech, right before the bombs fell, echoed in her mind. Apparently nothing had changed.

“Danse, just because he looks different doesn’t mean he’s dangerous. In fact, *he* showed me how to survive.”

She watched a blush settle across the soldier’s cheekbones, her words appearing to cause him embarrassment. It almost made her feel guilty but she wouldn’t give into it. He should feel that way after what he’d said to Piper and done nothing to help her at all, simply walked away.

The tip of the laser rifle tilted slowly towards the ground as she watched him consider her words. However, it swung back up, although no longer pointed at her, as another set of footsteps announced the arrival of the last one in her group he hadn’t seen. *Oh boy, he’s not going to be happy about this either.*

Again, his eyes narrowed at this intrusion before turning back to her in barely concealed surprise. “A synth as well? They aren’t even human, Alice. They’re created by the Institute!”

“Quite the observation there.” Nick lit a cigarette as if he had all the time in the world.

Hancock snickered. “Bet they pay him a lotta caps for that information.”

Ignoring them both, Danse continued speaking. “You’re new to the Commonwealth so I realize you’re unaware of the dangers. Associating with these...abominations...is distasteful. I’ll help you arrive at your destination.” He looked towards her two companions. “They can leave.”

“Hmmmm....I heard from Piper how you helped Alice get to Diamond City. Quite the soldier you are.”

Nick’s words were followed by complete silence. If there’d been crickets, Alice was sure they’d be singing a chorus right now.

Pain was beginning to build behind her eyelids; sharp, stabbing, insistent. Not prone to headaches, she could only guess this one was the direct cause of the men around her. What she wouldn’t give for Nate to be here right now, calm and rational, able to fix this standoff with mere words. She was out of her element and had no idea how to proceed.

As they all continued to bicker back and forth, she decided she’d had enough.

“STOP! All of you!”

Danse stopped mid sentence, Nick looked down at the ground and Hancock looked at her with admiration and...was that humor? It was so hard to tell and yet, maybe she was starting to be able to read the incredibly subtle nuances in his facial expressions.

“None of this is helping us find Kellogg any faster! I’m going if any of you care to follow.
Otherwise, I’ll do it myself.”

Her face flushed with anger, she stumped off down the train tracks following Dogmeat as he took off and ran ahead of her. She didn’t wait to see if anyone was behind her.

Anger clouding her mind, she walked several yards before her usual feeling of mortification chased the anger away. Had she really said that? Reacted that way? Maybe Hancock was right, there was a temper deep down inside of her.

Endless thoughts rattling around in her brain, she didn’t notice Dogmeat’s low pitched barking at first. When she did, it was actually Danse’s frantic yell from behind that stopped her in her tracks.

“Alice! Watch out!”

Startled out of her reverie, Alice looked up...and froze at the site before her. Dogmeat had cornered a bear. At least, she thought it was a bear. It was enormous, with a strip of short brown hair running down its back. The rest of its hide was nothing but pinkish colored skin...and it was angry. The only thing that stood between her and the bear was a toppled tree.

Nick yelled out to her, trying to get her to move. “Run, Alice!”

Before the words could register in her brain, the bear spotted her and, swiping Dogmeat to the side like an annoying bug, it veered past the tree straight towards her. It was surprisingly fast.

Everything after that was a blur. Hancock filled her on the sequence of events as he held her trembling body, not quite sure how to comfort her. Somehow, they’d ended up on the ground. He’d tried getting her to take a hit of jet but she’d refused. Although, the temptation had been great.

“Damn, I really hate to admit this but it wasn’t a bad thing, running into that tin can soldier. He saved your life, Sunshine.”

From what she could piece together, her thought process still foggy, was that Danse had rushed past her, pushing her out of the way of the Yao Guai to take the full force of the hit as its body collided with him. In a full suit of power armor, the bear hadn’t even budged him. However, it had stunned the bear. Danse and Nick had shot until it dropped to the ground, the last breath shuddering through its body. Seeing that they had the situation under control, Hancock had gone over and tried to help her stand but her legs gave out and here they still were.

A dark shadow fell across them and she looked up.

“You can’t go walking off like that and not pay attention to your surroundings, civilian! You become a danger to yourself and everyone around you.”

Not waiting for a reaction from either of them, he’d stalked off. So much for showing him how capable she was of taking care of herself.

Nick wandered over to her and Hancock. “Well, the delivery could have been a lot smoother but Danse does have a point, Alice. Regardless of the circumstances, you can’t take off like that again. There are too many dangers lurking out here, ones you haven’t encountered. You’ve come a long way in a short amount of time but we need to stick together.”

Words of wisdom from Nick Valentine. His words were much calmer than Danse’s had been, but they still stung. Mostly because Alice knew he was right. They both were.

Her heart heavy once again at having been a disappointment, she lay her head against Hancock’s
chest and closed her eyes. This world was just so exhausting.

Danse kicked at the bear with the toe of his power armor, watching as it rocked slightly back and forth. It was most assuredly dead. Several bullet holes from the synth’s gun visible as well as the charred spots from his own laser rifle attesting to that fact.

Gazing out over the landscape, he wasn’t really seeing at it but instead contemplating his own reactions to the whole catastrophe of events that had unfolded upon encountering Alice and her...companions. Having engaged in countless skirmishes as well as the battle of Adams Air Force Base, he’d always been level-headed and calm in the face of danger. Always known exactly what needed to be done and saw each mission to its end.

Yet this one small insignificant civilian had managed to make his heart stop upon the realization that she was frozen in place, Yao Guai charging toward her at full speed.

Instinct had taken over as he’d pushed her aside and charged the bear, grunting with the impact. The outcome that she was safe and the bear was dead. Pushing the images away, he looked up to see her in the arms of that….that ghoul. How could she let it touch her?

He’d managed to upset her with his words again, not quite sure why. He had been straightforward in his assessment. Would state it again if asked. Even with the synth, the ghoul and that dog, she was ill equipped to travel across the Commonwealth. Why was it such a hard concept to understand?

He released a frustrated breath at the stubbornness of this vault dweller. It was foolish to put her trust in them. Running a hand through his head in irritation, he wondered if it was possible to make things right, though he didn’t understand his need to do so. There was no need to explain himself. He was a soldier; he had a job to do. Each mission required attentiveness and planning.

Ultimately, he made the decision to offer his protection and training on this quest and readying himself to talk with her, he saw that she was wrapped in Hancock’s arms, head resting on his chest with her eyes closed.

Irritation burned through him, annoying him that he didn’t know the cause. Why should he care who Alice spent her time with? She was just another civilian unable to take care of herself in this wasteland.

Danse turned back around and stalked off, not caring in which direction he went, one nagging thought refusing to stay behind. Had he driven her into the only comfort she could find? Into the arms of that ghoul? He wasn’t sure he truly wanted the answer.

The journey continued, albeit in a more subdued manner. Nick and Hancock walked up ahead, the occasional smell of jet or cigarette smoke wafting backwards on the air. Danse walked behind, always alert for any signs of danger. Alice walked in between them all, for once happy to not to have to hold a conversation with anyone. Dogmeat kept ahead of the detective and the mayor, nose to the ground in search of Kellogg’s scent. They all seemed to be lost in their own thoughts, except Dogmeat who was probably thinking about chasing….whatever existed out here.

She was left with the reminder of what Danse had said. His words still stung, effectively wiping out all the confidence she’s gained and what she’d learned in defending herself since leaving her in Diamond City.
The river was up ahead, another bridge to cross. Like all the rest, it was littered with abandoned vehicles. Nick and Hancock stopped to check their weapons. Alice passed them, checking her own 10mm as she went, making sure it was loaded and the safety was off. This time, she’d be ready.

Towards the end of the bridge a semi created an obstacle course where danger could lurk underneath and inside. Dogmeat trotted forward and Alice watched him closely, saw his hackles start to rise, legs shortening in a crouch close to the ground. A warning growl rose up from deep in his throat. Something was around that semi.

She crouched down as well, advancing forward with an awkward duck walk along the side of the bridge. There was just enough space for a body to pass between the trailer of the semi and the railing.

Distantly, she heard her companions call out behind her-- Nick sounding anxious, Danse wanting her to pull back. Hancock the only one to cheer her on, telling her to kick ass and show whatever was waiting around that corner what she was made of. He alone gave her the courage to move forward on silent feet.

Up ahead, Dogmeat rounded the edge of the semi and chaos ensued. The familiar gurgling sounds of ferals assaulted her ears and she edged cautiously closer to the sound.

There it was!

She kneeled for stability. Inhale, site the target, aim, exhale, squeeze the trigger. The feral went down in a gush of blood from its chest. Another one was getting up beyond Dogmeat and even before he could react, Alice had taken aim, shooting it in the neck. It turned in her direction, mindlessly ready to take her down.

Fear blossomed inside her. She refused to let it consume her, pushing it back as much as she could. Dogmeat lunged at the feral, jaws clamping on the leg, keeping it in place.

Again Alice aimed, eye on the target. Inhale. Exhale. Squeeze the trigger. Blood exploded from its chest in a shower of red. It hit the ground with a muted thud.

Dogmeat shook himself as if rising up out of a pond, spatters of blood arcing out, sticking to anything in their path. Alice covered her face with her arm in reflex. As if that would keep the blood off her hands...or anywhere else.

Standing up on somewhat steady legs, she waited for the rest of the group to catch up. Dogmeat stood near her, tongue hanging out, panting.

“Good boy, Dogmeat. You’re such a good boy.” Reaching down, she threaded her fingers through his fur, still soft despite being damp with blood.

“You okay, Alice?” Nick voiced concern, golden-ringed eyes peering at her from under his fedora.

Wiping her forehead with her arm, she managed to smear blood the length of it. “Yes, thanks.”

Hancock moved around the truck, gave out a yell. “Damn, Sunshine. Fucked them ferals up, didn’t you? Knew you could do it!”

She felt her face glow red from his enthusiastic praise, still unused to it pertaining to her. Then she felt guilty for feeling pleased about that praise, stemming as it did from killing another human. Glancing down at her feet... well used to be human.
Surprisingly, there was enough room for Danse in his suit of metal to make it around the semi, though he had to maneuver sideways. Hearing barks and growls as well as yelps from Dogmeat up ahead, Nick and Hancock took off after him, leaving Alice and Danse alone.

He looked at the feral at her feet, glanced sideways at the one beyond them. She waited, her breath stuck in her chest, for what he would say.

“It seems I owe you an apology.”

Her breath escaped in a quiet whoosh. Maybe he wouldn’t be so quick to judge her now.

“You stood your ground. Well done.” Then, he turned and headed towards the sound of the fight up ahead. “Still, I would advise you to continue to let Nick and Hancock take point while I follow behind. There are still dangers you haven’t encountered yet.”

He left her there, mouth hanging open in disbelief. As she went over his words in her mind she tried to pick out whether it was an apology or praise or something she didn’t quite understand but was left even more confused than before. Infuriating man.

By the time she caught up to everyone, the remaining ferals had been wiped out. So much for being a part of the team and doing her share. Frustrated at how events were unfolding, Alice started to walk away again before remembering Danse’s warning followed by Nick’s agreement with his assessment. Dogmeat ran on ahead. Must be nice to be free of restrictions.

Hancock and Nick walked by, the ghoul mayor glancing at her as they passed. She wanted to explain why she wasn’t taking point but with Danse hot on her heels, it would just cause an argument. It was easier, and all too familiar, for her to just push away her own opinion and give in to the what someone else wanted.

Three short, sharp barks came from up ahead, echoing around them. Dogmeat had found something.

Not caring what Danse thought this time, Alice ran towards him to see what he’d found. She could almost imagine those dark brown eyes lasering in on her, eyebrows slanted down in consternation. Right now, she couldn’t be bothered to care.

“What is it, boy? Did you find something?”

He had. She squatted next to him, a broken protectron on the ground in front of them. They had been used just about everywhere before the war; tour guides, greeters, firemen, policemen, even as medics equipped with defibrillators. It had never occurred to her they would still be around over 200 years in the future. In some ways, it was like finding a piece of her past intact, though this one was anything but. Someone had taken it out.

“Attention, assailant. Lower your weapon immediately.” A flat, tinny voice drifted down the road.

Lifting her gun up, she approached the area cautiously, secure in the knowledge that she had backup. Dogmeat still reached it before her.

She heard Nick speak up from behind her, as he and Hancock beheld the destruction around them. “This must have been one hell of a party. Look at this place.”

“And I wasn’t even invited. What kind of shit is that?” Hancock’s words oozed sarcasm.
“This was no party. Surely, you can’t be that oblivious.”

Alice could clearly envision Hancock rolling his eyes at Danse’s words.

“Think you’ve been spending too much time in that tin can of yours. Should probably remedy that. Ya know, get out and connect with the people more.”

“I fail to see any humor in this situation, ghoul.” Danse spat that last word.

“Alert. Critical signs.”

“What is this?” This was a robot Alice didn’t recognize but she soon found out courtesy of Danse.

“An assaultron. Based on records and manuals the Brotherhood has recovered, it was built by RobCo and sold to the US military. It was intended for use in frontline combat.”

Alice remembered Nate talking about them and how dangerous they were in combat. A few hits to the head could disable one but you’d better stay out of the way of it’s strong laser beam in the meantime. This one’s fate had ended it, head torn from its body. Alice was surprised it could manage any kind of communication.

“Error. System corrupt. I can’t feel my legs.”

A snort from behind her had Alice turning to stare at Hancock. “Sorry. Just reminded me of a time I had several hits of jet, on top of a bottle of whiskey. Couldn’t feel my legs either...or much of anything else now that I recall.”

“Putting yourself in a situation like that could get you killed.” Danse watched as the ghoul gazed back at him, taking a hit of jet in defiance. “Disgusting habit.”

“Yep, just like your thoughts on ghouls and synths.” Two fingers tapped the brim of his tricorn in a sarcastic salute.

Danse glared back at him, the two in a silent contest of wills. Hancock refused to look away, daring the soldier to be the first. He won that round as Danse turned and stalked away.

Out of patience with their pissing contest, she looked down and saw another cigar. It appeared the devastation that surrounded them was caused by Kellogg. Looking around her at the complete and total destruction, she wondered again if going after him was wise -- even with her companions. They were much better suited to this pursuit than she was but it would be on her head if anything happened to them. How would she live with herself after that?

Looking at each of them in turn, including her trusted canine companion, it occurred to her that none of them would allow her to do this by herself. They all meant so much to her and she didn’t know how to process these feelings. It was all so new. Even the prickly soldier in his power armor had joined the group, despite his obvious prejudices to her other two companions. There was no way she could ditch them and go on alone. All of them were much more capable than she was and would likely track her down in a very short amount of time.

Not able to figure out how to leave them behind, she let Dogmeat smell the cigar left behind. Once again the group followed the canine as he pursued Kellogg’s trail. They encountered no other obstacles as he took them further down the road, climbing up a hill until they came to a fence with more bloody rags. Did they belong to Kellogg? If he was hurt, they might actually stand a chance against him.
There was no time to continue her reflections as Dogmeat took off again. Up over a rise beyond the fence, was a group of buildings. Most were completely or partially destroyed. One sat further down the street, completely intact. Alice could hear the turrets whirring from here. With that much protection, it had to be where Kellogg was.

“He’s taken refuge in Fort Hagen.”

“You know this place?” She shouldn’t be surprised a soldier knew about a military base.

“My squad was sent here for reconnaissance. We scouted this area for a possible base of operations but didn’t make it this far west.”

There was something in his voice. Some emotion but not knowing him well enough, it eluded her. Maybe if they traveled together longer, she could ask him about it. Right now, there were more important things to consider. As if he read her mind, he continued.

“We’ll make the Red Rocket our base of operations. I’ll do some surveillance on this area and rendezvous with you there.” Before any of them could say a word, Danse was walking away.

“What would we do without the Brotherhood of tin cans at our back.” Shaking his head, Hancock headed for the Red Rocket. Alice and Nick followed him, Dogmeat bounding ahead of them all.

The time had come to face her nemesis.

Chapter End Notes

Good grief....I feel like I apologize for every late chapter. So, I won't anymore xD

It's been hard trying to get the right feel for the characters with their interactions and I agonize over every word. From now on, they will just be whenever they are done. Just know I haven't abandoned Alice, nor will I!

Disclaimer: I did manage to fall in the Mass Effect black hole and found Kaidan and femshep...so, I may be distracted on occasion too...lol

Thanks as always to those of you who stick around, leave comments and kudos and just all around enjoy Alice as she evolves into the person she's meant to be. Love you all <3
Chapter Summary

“All The King's Horses”

“All The King's Horses”

Chapter Summary

“Outstanding. Move out.”

“Wait a damn minute. Who the hell put you in charge, tin can?”

“It’s Paladin. I’m in charge because I have the most experience. If that’s a problem, you can go back where you came from ghoul.”

Hancock. The ghoul’s black eyes narrowed to slits, a storm brewing in their depths, “Listen, buckethead, this is Alice’s show. You don’t get to call the shots. We work as a team -- or not at all. And then you can hike your tin can metal ass back to where you came from!”

At each other’s throats again, Alice intervened. They were like children; it was exhausting. Nate said he wanted more than one. Clearly he was delusional.

Chapter Notes

A lot is happening with Alice in this chapter. It was seriously long, so I broke it up into 2 and posted back to back. If you can read that many words in one sitting, I think it's better because this chapter is just nonstop with everything that's going on. However, the option is up to you. Either way, I hope you enjoy!

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, that went well.”

The smell of smoke and oil permeated the air, a light midnight breeze swirling the scent around them. All turrets located on the roof of Fort Hagen lay in ruins. Thankfully, no one had been injured.

The hissing sound of a jet inhaler was loud in the silence following the aftermath of their destruction. Hancock appearing entirely unfazed by the events of the last half hour -- as if he destroyed turrets on a daily basis. Of course, high on jet, it was no surprise he was nonchalant about the whole affair. Alice doubted he’d even felt anxious through the whole ordeal.

“You could have gotten us all killed.”

Danse on the other hand was anything but calm. The soldier vibrated with barely concealed anger at the carelessness of the ghoul.

“For once, I have to side with the suit of steel over here,” Nick’s thumb pointed back over his
shoulder at Danse, “against my better judgement.” Those last words spoken so quietly only Alice heard them, standing as close as she was.

Unmoved by the grudging support of a synth, Danse stalked off. The sliver of moon gave off just enough light, glinting off the edges of his power armor, drawing Alice’s eyes. As fastidious and particular as he was, she was surprised it didn’t shine like a beacon. Then again, maybe he blended with his surrounding better this way.

A few straggling clouds passed overhead, blotting out the light. They were plunged into a red-tinged darkness, lights from the Red Rocket a muted glow around them. Once the clouds moved away, Alice could see that Danse stood on the roof of the next building. Checking the perimeter, he made sure all turrets were disabled and there were no more surprises.

Hancock called out, unable to leave him alone. “Careful, tin can. Don’t wanna fall through the ceiling and ruin our surprise.”

Danse whipped around so fast, Alice was surprised he didn’t topple over. It was nothing short of amazing at how the soldier could maneuver in that heavy suit of armor.

His face was shrouded in the shadows but that gruff voice rang out into the night, “Our element of surprise was gone the minute you carried out this hair-brained scheme. No doubt this Kellogg individual has eyes and ears everywhere, knows exactly who and how many we are. Being stealthy now is a mute point.”

Alice closed her eyes in resignation. Traveling with these three might be the death of her before they even made it to Kellogg. Frustrated at their inability to get along, she walked away, crossing to the roof of the next building over. Given a choice between Hancock and Danse, she’d prefer to deal with Danse at the moment. Hancock was acting like a 5-year-old.

A set of heavy steel doors was located on the roof where Danse currently stood. He looked up at her approach. Seeing the question in her eyes, he explained, “This was likely an escape route in the case of an emergency.”

“Can we use it?”

“That would be ill advised. It could be a trap.”

“But how will we get in?”

“During my recon, I located a parking garage beneath this structure. We can gain access there and mobilize inside.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to split up?”

“Not advisable. We have no idea what this Kellogg has in store for you.”

A frisson of fear snaked its way down her back, making her tremble.

“You ready for this, Alice?” Nick spoke from beside her, voice laced with concern. She hadn’t heard him walk over.

She thought about that, wondering if she truly was ready. In all honesty probably never would be if it was left up to her alone. Go after the man that had killed her husband and stolen their baby? She imagined most people in her position would want revenge, would crave it. Revenge was a powerful emotion, could eat you alive from the inside out.
Here she was, about to walk down that path of exacting revenge. Yet, all she really wanted was information, anything that would lead to her son. Revenge just wasn’t in her nature.

A weary sigh slipped from her lips. Was it too much to ask to be able to avoid violence this time, that instead it would end in conversation? It was probably naive to think that way. Without a doubt any of her companions would be all too happy to point that out. This man they were going after, he probably wouldn’t be looking at things from her perspective either. He was a mercenary after all. Violence was in his nature.

“I guess so.” If she didn’t act now, she’d lose her nerve.

“There’s no room for guessing. If you don’t think you can handle this, we need to pull back now.”

With a flair for dramatics, Hancock placed a hand on his heart. “Such compassion and understanding. I’m overwhelmed.”

Danse was clearly unimpressed by the ghoul mayor’s sarcasm. “Compassion and second guessing will get us all killed.”

Nick stepped forward, no doubt ready to defend her, but Alice spoke up, “Fine. Yes, I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

“Outstanding. Move out.”

“Wait a damn minute. Who the hell put you in charge, tin can?”

“It’s Paladin. I’m in charge because I have the most experience. If that’s a problem, you can go back where you came from ghoul.”

Hancock. The ghoul’s black eyes narrowed to slits, a storm brewing in their depths, “Listen, buckethead, this is Alice’s show. You don’t get to call the shots. We work as a team -- or not at all. And then you can hike your tin can metal ass back to where you came from!”

At each other’s throats again, Alice intervened. They were like children; it was exhausting. Nate said he wanted more than one. Clearly he was delusional.

“Enough! Both of you! Danse is right.” Looking from Hancock to Nick, she went on, “There’s no doubt you both know your way around the Commonwealth. The fact you’re still alive after all of your travels is a testament to that but we need Danse’s expert knowledge of military strategy.”

Seeing that they were listening, albeit reluctantly, she turned towards Danse. “They’re my friends. They both have my best interests at heart and would never let anything happen to me. If that is a problem for you, then you either shelve it away for the time being or you can leave right now.”

Those deep brown eyes stared back at her. She couldn’t fathom what he was thinking. No emotion showed on his face and there was nothing in his posture to suggest whether he was angry, resigned or would turn around and leave.

Time stretched on as they stared at each other, though in reality it was probably more like minutes.

“Move out.” He walked away, headed down towards the basement he’d spoken about earlier.
The smell hit her first, so putrid it made her gag. As they headed down a set of stairs, it intensified to the point where Alice was sure she was going to be sick. The others didn’t seem to notice. How could they not? It crept up her nostrils, invading her sense of smell. She thought it was surely being absorbed by the fibers in her clothes, that it was coating her hair and sinking into the pores of her skin.

“It appears we have a tango uniform up ahead.” Danse’s deep voice echoed off the concrete walls around them.

“Those dents in your helmet obviously damaged your brain. What the hell does that even mean?” Hancock seemed incapable of resisting sarcasm where Danse was concerned.

“It’s a military term for a dead body.”

“Hate to point it out to you but ‘tango uniform’ doesn’t translate to ‘dead body’ -- unless I’m missing something.”

There was a discreet cough, a pause and Alice wasn’t entirely positive but could have sworn she heard the words ‘tits up’ muttered quietly followed by more words. She couldn’t see Danse’s face in the shadows so the nuances of his demeanor escaped her. And yet, he almost sounded embarrassed.

She’d actually heard much worse from Nate after a few beers or sometimes in the middle of the night, during a nightmare. That seemed mild in comparison.

“Damn, maybe I should go military, learn some of these important terms. Tell me more.”

Danse’s face darkened like a threatening storm. “A ghoul would never be allowed in the ranks of the Brotherhood.”

“Testy, testy. Relax, tin can. Brotherhood’s got too many rules for me anyway.”

As they rounded a corner, the rancid smell got so strong Alice had to struggle to breath. Legs buckling beneath her, Alice tried to fight the urge to pass out, briefly wondering why she should. If she did, the smell wouldn’t bother her anymore. However, the thought of fainting in the midst of all this testosterone kept her from giving in, barely. Arms reached around her in support, keeping her from smacking into the cold, hard floor.

“You’ll get used to that living here in the Commonwealth.” Nick’s voice was matter-of-fact, as if he was discussing the state of some crops. He let his arms drop but stayed close to steady her, as he helped her over to some crates so she could sit down.

Get used to dead bodies? So much so that she no longer smelled them? What an appalling thought. And yet, observing her three companions, they seemed to take it all in stride. Maybe she was missing something. The sound of a match strike was followed by the flare of orange light. Smoke drifted hazily through the air in front of Alice, a welcome barrier -- even if minimal -- to the odor of death.

In the corner of the darkened room, a lantern shed a halo of golden light outwards, the warm light incongruent with the scene of a woman sprawled on a chair, dead and lifeless. An ordinary woman, blonde hair artfully styled but clothed in simple jeans adorned with rips and what may once have been a white t-shirt. Beside her was the damning evidence of her untimely end -- chems. Her chair was situated next to a chem station, her bed against the opposite wall.

As Alice took in that scene, she knew without a doubt she could be looking at a version of herself.
As abhorrent as chems were to her, there’d been times she’d envied Hancock the ease he exhibited in taking them, not completely oblivious to the world around him but instead coasting by on the fringes, not letting anything get to him. Yes, indeed, she absolutely envied that.

However, the alternative, death by the very thing that was sought for an escape, was very real. The scene was right in front of her. Alice closed her eyes to shut it out. She simply couldn’t stand to see this poor woman’s end for one moment longer.

The opening and closing of drawers and cabinet doors assaulted the quiet of the moment. Try as she might to shut them out, they refused to go away. Opening her eyes, she observed Hancock rummaging through a cabinet and then crossing the room and doing the same to a med kit right next to the body. Had he no sense of decency? A bitter laugh, quiet enough not to draw attention, slipped through cracked lips. Of course he didn’t, not when it came to chems.

Finding what he craved, Alice watched as he stuck the inhaler in his mouth, depressing the canister, face relaxing as he inhaled the aerosol. The bliss that spread across his face as the drug ran through his bloodstream felt like a betrayal, the taint of death still lingering in the room. Turning away, Alice couldn’t watch him.

“That stuff is poison.” Distaste for the chems was prevalent in Danse’s voice. “How do you expect to fight when you’re brain is clouded with drugs?”

“Don’t worry, tin can, I can hold my own.” Observing the soldier through half-lidded eyes, he asked, “What’s your poison?”

“I don’t partake of chems or anything that would cloud my judgement. A good soldier doesn’t need that crap to do their job.”

“Spoken like a true stick in the mud. Do you ever do anything for fun?”

Danse looked back over his shoulder, momentarily stopping his surveillance to focus on the ghoul. “I have a mission to clean the Commonwealth of abominations like you. There isn’t time for frivolous pursuits.

Refusing to acknowledge the insult, Hancock went on, “Fair enough. You clean the Commonwealth,” saluting with his jet inhaler, he mocked, “leave the fun to me.”

“Disgusting ghoul.”

Nick watched their repartee, ready to step in if the need arose. He seemed content to stay at her side, keeping an eye on her before they moved on. Alice could tell Danse was ready to keep going.

Dogmeat lounged near her, head on his paws, one eye opening occasionally when one of them moved. He appeared to be enjoying the impromptu rest.

Hancock’s voice was startling in the silence. “So, buzz cut, I’ve been wondering...what kind of recon were you doing over by the culvert? Seems a little odd for a Brotherhood soldier to be out there all alone, no backup.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

The light from the lantern on the chem station cast the ghoul’s features into a mask of horror, eyes absorbing the light instead of reflecting it. She watched a smirk twist his features, making him look like he belonged in a freak show.

“You don’t. Still, just seems kind of strange, ya know? Then pulling your gun on Alice--”
“Stop it, John.” Alice had never used his first name but right now, she was completely done in, nerves frayed beyond their breaking point. Maybe it would penetrate that hard head and get him to stop the game he played. Sure, Danse was an arrogant ass and prejudiced as well but the way Hancock baited him at every turn grated on her nerves.

“Just trying to get some answers, Sunshine. Seems kind a fishy, ya know?”

Danse moved to look out through another doorway into the garage beyond, refusing to look their way. “Vault 81, I was searching for the location. After meeting Alice, I’d heard about other vaults, that one in particular. I had heard they sold supplies and we were in short supply.”

“Were you just going to charge in there, guns blazing and take them by force? Would have loved to see that.”

This time, Alice kept quiet, curious as well. She’d never expected to see him again, certainly not away from the police station and especially not with his gun pointed at her. Maybe he was the shoot first, ask questions later kind of person. That thought just didn’t feel right, yet Nate had mentioned a few times the darker side of the military and how some soldiers abused their position.

“I found a stash of caps at the police station; I was going to use them to purchase the needed supplies.”

He’d turned to look at Alice, as if he’d known he very thoughts. Blushing, she looked down, letting her hair fall down around her face like the curtain at the end of a show.

“We need to move. The more time we spend here, the better the chance of an ambush.”

Danse took point, striding to a door with a glowing red exit sign. They filed inside, stepping into the dark and musty smelling interior of the building, a stairway giving them the choice of going up into the main building or down into the basement. Danse took the stairs going down. A double set of doors was open at the next landing, a protectron in the corner next to them still enclosed in its docking station. As soon as Danse was out of the way, Nick strode over and began hacking the terminal.

“Hostile sensor readings.”

All heads turned at the sound, staring at the door. Before Danse could form a strategy and get them all on board, Dogmeat growled and plunged ahead, intent on taking down the enemy.

“Damn it, Alice, you need to discipline that canine.” With those words he was through the door, a battle cry ‘For the Brotherhood!’ echoing off the walls.

“Looks like Kellogg brought his backup army with him. Let’s go take them out.” Nick followed the sounds of the fight.

“Might want to hang out here, Sunshine. Not sure you’re ready for these guys. They aren’t anything like Nick.”

Alice pulled her gun, edging backward towards the protectron. The terminal was likely the means to let it out but she didn’t know what to do. Hacking was beyond her. Nick had been working on it when they heard the sounds of the synth. That emotionless mechanical voice had sent chills down her spine. Such a difference from listening to Nick over time.

Watching flashes of blue paint the wall opposite her as the synths fired at her friends, a feeling of helplessness overcame her. That certainly wasn’t new but since she’d started to find some
confidence in herself, she’d begun to realize that she was indeed capable. Maybe not to their standards but so much more than when she’d started.

One thought chased itself around in her mind like a dog with its tail, *Should I help?*

Alice followed the sounds into another room. The fight had moved further away, laser fire itself now reflecting off of bits of metal around her. This building was like a labyrinth with all the twists and turns. She had no idea where she was, where her friends were or where their enemies were. A door to her right was open, so she headed that way.

The room looked to have been some kind of concession area. An overturned Nuka Cola machine, cigarette machines balancing on two legs and the ceiling from above created a pile of debris she had to move through. A register sat on a long counter, storage shelves behind that. She could hide back there, stay safe until someone came and got her.

Cautiously moving forward, she was halted upon hearing a noise but wasn’t sure exactly what she’d heard or where it had come from. Moving again slowly past a giant hole in the wall, she turned to get behind the counter when her foot connected with something, sending it scraping across the floor and into the wall. The noise was loud in the silence of the room. She froze, unsure of the outcome.

“Intruder in Fort Hagen.”

Intent on hiding from the fight, it appeared she’d caused the fight to come to her. Looking down, she saw that she’d kicked an abandoned laser rifle. Would this do more damage than her usual weapon? There was no way to know unless she tried. This was what Hancock and Nick had trained her to do. Picking it up, she noticed it weighed about the same as her 10 mm.

She located the trigger, found the safety, but she couldn’t figure out how to tell if it was loaded. There was a yellow canister sitting in a niche in the barrel. Hopefully that meant it was. Dodging behind the counter and past a shelving unit that had fallen over, she hid. Heart beating double time, palms clammy. Her breath caught in her throat at a sound.

“Combat sequence. Eliminate target.”

Was the synth referring to her? Overwhelmed by fear, she couldn’t help the snort of amusement that slipped out. *Not a time to laugh, Alice.* What exactly did this thing mean by ‘eliminate target’? Was it really going to kill her? She already knew the answer; her brain just refused to process it.

She could hear it, coming closer. Something moved just beyond that hole in the wall at the end of the counter.

“You must die.”

Her lungs seized, heart lodging in her throat. It felt like her skin had turned to ice.

“Gone? Hmmmm.”

Wait. What was it doing? Turning around, it stared back out at the room it had come from. Trying to peek up over the shelf unit, her foot scraped across the floor. She ducked back down quickly as it angled back toward the room she was in.

“Stealth capabilities. Fascinating.”

It appeared the shelving shielded her from view. Or maybe it was the shadows she was in. Once
again, it turned away. This time, Alice was careful as she rose from cover to shoot. At just that moment, the synth turned back with a lightning fast movement. This time, it saw her. She fired. A laser arc of red hit it in the shoulder barely making it move in response.

“I must report this assault directly to Kellogg.”

So, Kellogg had the full support of the Institute including the use of an army of synths. At this rate, they would never get to him.

She ducked back down as the synth raised its laser rifle and aimed. The brilliant stream of blue missed, zooming past her to hit the counter above her head -- where she would have been. Wood exploded, splintered up and around her, raining back down. One small piece lodged in her hand like a wide toothpick.

Glancing behind her, a charred black hole was testimony to what the laser could do. Staring at the hole, she wondered if her skin would react that way. An sequence of images ran through her mind of her skin turning red with laser burn, bubbling up into a blister, turning black and flaking off. A shudder of revulsion made its way through her body, stomach knotting in fear. The synth stepped closer; there was nowhere else to go.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself. If this was her last moment on earth, it would not end with her being a coward. Counting to three, she popped up from behind the shelving. She aimed, finger squeezing the trigger, eyes closing as she waited for death. The sound of the laser was loud, a flash of red behind her eyelids. Cracking them open, she saw the synth falling forward into the room.

The sequence of events didn’t catch up to her brain right away. Her finger had been in the process of pulling the trigger but hadn’t actually fired. The laser beam had echoed loudly around the room -- not from her gun. When her brain finally did catch up, she realized someone else had shot the synth. A silhouette of power armor was outlined in the next room.

“Report that to Kellogg.” Danse had come, just in time.

Alice stared at him in a daze. Her life had almost ended here, making it hard to process that she was indeed safe.

“You must be on guard at all times, civilian.”

Once again, Danse to her rescue. Pushing her hair out of her face with a shaky hand, she struggled not to groan in frustration. One step forward with him, several steps back but always managing to appear incapable.

“Move out.” Danse didn’t wait for her.

Alice followed blindly. The incident continued to play over and over in her mind. She’d almost died. Granted, she’d come that close many times since leaving the vault but each time, it was like she’d never before experienced that level of fear and distress. How was it that time removed the residue of pain and fear from some events and not others? Nate’s image flashed through her mind, causing a stuttering beat of her heart. It still hurt after all this time.

Stumbling over something in her way, Alice was brought back from her ruminations, aware of the silence around her. Groaning inwardly at her inattentiveness, she had managed to fall behind. And she was lost again. How was she supposed to find her way around this place?

Hands on hips, she took stock of her surroundings. Part of the floor was raised in a platform with a
hand rail around it, desks and bookcases a herald to another time when secretaries may have sat here busily typing. She walked up onto the platform and looked beyond it. Another hole in the wall, another room.


Again. This Kellogg was determined to take her out as well as anyone with her. That was not going to happen. With so few places to hide in this room, she stood flush against a small piece of intact wall in between two gaps.

“Stealth capabilities. Fascinating.”

She could do this. Counting to three, Alice twisted around. Feet firmly planted, she raised the laser rifle, aimed and fired. The synth fired at the same time. Fiery red and icy blue arced past each other. The synth went down in an explosion of metal and sparks. The impact of the synth’s laser hit her arm. Losing her balance, she fell.

Back slamming against the floor, the breath left her lungs in a rush. She lay there, staring up at the ceiling, rifle held loosely in her hand. The room spun crazily around her. Closing her eyes, a sense of desperation overtook her, a longing for trees and a rainbow of flowers in full bloom, grass a rich deep green, birds chasing each other in the air, their chatter like music in the warmth of a summer day.

Suddenly, it was all so overwhelming; this life, this fear, the killing. Curling up in a ball, right there in the midst of chaos, synths roaming on every floor and Kellogg somewhere inside ready to kill them all, she broke down and grieved for all that she’d lost. Wracked by sobs, she didn’t at first register the noise.

A distant hammering sound was coming nearer. She simply didn’t have the strength to move, to defend herself. If this was the end, she welcomed it. This wasn’t her world. She should have just died in that vault.

The hammering came closer, stopping just beyond her. Just do it! Get it over with! The thoughts screamed through her mind on an endless loop. The sound came closer, now in the room with her. Her heart faltered, came to a sudden stop and she refused to open her eyes, coward that she was. The thought of seeing her life as it ended was more than she could manage.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to @Purple_Martin because without you, I wouldn’t have realized why this chapter refused to be written xD And @Shellbacker because you helped me with wording :)

As always, thank you all for comments and kudos and if you ever have any questions or notice some glaring mistake, let me know!!

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev
And All The King's Men

Chapter Summary

It seemed to Alice that it took a herculean effort to get up and to keep on going -- but somehow she did. Nick had come over and jabbed a stimpak in her arm. Pain ebbing away like the waves going back out to sea, she shook off her melancholy, wishing it would stay away, and took off after Danse.

Guilt hit her hard at the thought of him. He’d been trying to help in the only way he knew how. A flush stained her cheeks when she thought of what he’d said. He was right; there was no time for self-pity. Everything but the end result needed to be pushed aside. It was imperative that she focus solely on what needed to be done to reach Kellogg.

So, that was exactly what she did...focus.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

Danse stared down at the tiny woman, curled into a ball. From what little he could see, she didn’t seem to be injured. It was a mistake coming here. He wasn’t exactly sure what this group had hoped to accomplish but clearly, this civilian wasn’t fit for combat. The words he’d said to the reporter echoed in his mind.

Despite the strides she’d made in an effort to defend herself, it was clearly for naught. She truly was a danger to all those around her. Still, he was a soldier of the Brotherhood of Steel and he had an image to uphold. “Are you hurt, Alice?”

There was no answer to his question. He barely kept a sigh of frustration behind his lips.

“Talk to me. I can’t help if I don’t know what you require.”

His eyes narrowed at her odd hiccuping type of breath. A memory of Haylen came to him, seeking comfort and throwing her arms around him, crying uncontrollably. When she pulled away and swiped at her eyes, she had these similar symptoms. What was he supposed to do with the woman in this state? Personal situations were out of his comfort zone. Being a soldier was not. He demanded fortitude from his recruits and the soldiers in his charge. He expected no less from this woman.

“Look at me.” This was the voice that commanded troops, instilled fear in recruits.

Her eyes opened, trying to focus on him. Even in the meager light, he could see they were red-
rimmed and swollen. No matter, it was time for her to toughen up.

“Get up, civilian. You have a job to do. There isn’t time for you to wallow in self-pity. Dry those tears and let’s go.”

He held his hand out to assist her in getting up. She stared at it, as if his hand was a snake, ready to strike.

Tired of waiting for a response, he’d had enough. Yelling at her as he would to any raw recruit, “On your feet!”

Before he could discern if the tactic had worked, they were interrupted.

“What did you do?” Of course the ghoul assumed he’d done something to her himself.

“I didn’t do anything.”

The ghoul’s soulless black eyes narrowed as they focused on him. Eyes that disturbed him deeply, though he’d never admit it. “Of course you didn’t, because you don’t function like a normal human being. Step aside, tin can, we’ll take care of her.”

Hancock brushed past him, causing him to stumble back. A smirk crossed his face in response. Danse clenched his hands into fists, refusing to be baited by this thing. Refusing to let him see how his careless words had truly affected him. He could only stand by and watch as Hancock spoke softly to Alice, ghoulish fingers gently brushing her hair back from a tear stained face. And she was responding to the touch -- to the ghoul.

Before his temper got the better of him, he looked around the room, eyes landing on the synth -- who stared back with a knowing look. What did he think he knew? Having had enough, Danse stormed into the next room. Pushing on, he cleared the way ahead.

It seemed to Alice that it took a herculean effort to get up and to keep on going -- but somehow she did. Nick had come over and jabbed a stimpak in her arm. Pain ebbing away like the waves going back out to sea, she shook off her melancholy, wishing it would stay away, and took off after Danse.

Guilt hit her hard at the thought of him. He’d been trying to help in the only way he knew how. A flush stained her cheeks when she thought of what he’d said. He was right; there was no time for self-pity. Everything but the end result needed to be pushed aside. It was imperative that she focus solely on what needed to be done to reach Kellogg.

So, that was exactly what she did...focus. Several downed synths, a couple of broken turrets later, they approached a set of double doors. A voice echoed eerily around them, following them through those doors as they continued on.

Alice was determined to end this and the sooner the better. Fear ate at her, threatening to consume her but she thought about what Danse had said and pushed it away. Not an easy task for her but she refused to allow it to drown her in its depths. No, she would come out on top this time.

The voice, presumably Kellogg’s, continued as they pressed on, an endless commentary. Alice felt
fear slick and icy, trail down her back, coating her skin and threatening to freeze the air in her lungs. She struggled to breath. What she wouldn’t give for even a tiny puff of one of Hancock’s jet inhalers right now. A shot of courage. No matter how resolute she tried to be, it kept hammering at her, intent on breaking down any barrier she threw in its way.

“Well, well. If it isn’t my old friend, the frozen TV dinner. Last time we met, you were cozying up to the peas and apple cobbler.”

A burning anger swept through her at those words, a more powerful emotion than the fear. After everything he’d put her through, he didn’t even have the decency to use her name. There was no doubt in her mind he knew exactly who she was. Instead, he had the audacity to label her as some frozen commodity that didn’t even exist anymore.

“Figured the Commonwealth would chew you up like jerky.”

Of course he would. How would someone like her even make it this far? Yet, her she was.

As they moved closer and closer to a showdown she wasn’t entirely sure she was ready for, that quick burst of anger was once again replaced by fear. A fear of this man, of the knowledge he possessed, the level of his insanity. It was exceedingly tiring, fighting fear on a constant basis. The anger had been a welcome change. It was time to battle her fear once and for all. Kill it and bury it forever.

But...could she?

“Whatever you hope to accomplish here, it won’t go down the way you want it do.”

Maybe it would, maybe it wouldn’t. She would never know until the journey ended with them face-to-face.

“Okay. You made it. I’m just past this door. My synths will stand down so we can talk.”

A heavy steel door opened from the other side, obviously controlled by Kellogg himself. It was time.

Staring at the door, thinking of what was on the other side abruptly overwhelmed her. She was going to be sick. No mere butterflies, it felt like molerats were doing cartwheels inside her stomach.

Lightheaded, she staggered backwards, legs buckling as they hit something solid. It was a bed. A bed in this room where they all waited before her big showdown, she wanted to laugh at the incongruity of it but knew is she started, the laughter would never stop. Struggling to breathe, each breath coming faster and faster, the anxiety was about to spiral out of control. She was beginning to hyperventilate but was powerless to stop.

No, no, no. I can’t do this. I just can’t. I’m not strong enough. Oh God. Nate, why aren’t you here? You should be here. It should be you facing this monster. After all, you faced so many in battle. Day after day. I’m nothing, nobody. A stupid panicky, insignificant person. I have nothing to offer this world, nothing to offer our son. I shouldn’t be here.

I. Can’t. Do. This.
Fighting to take a deep breath, tears threatening to fall unchecked, Alice clenched her fists, ragged nails biting into her palms. The pain barely put a dent in her emotions, they just continued to spiral. It looked like this journey really was over.

She’d come so far. Now she was going to turn tail, run as far and as fast as she could. Away from this evil place, away from this man or monster -- whoever, whatever the hell he was. She wasn’t strong enough; she’d deluded herself into thinking that she was.

Danse had been right all along.

Not knowing where the strength came from, she pushed herself up off the bed. Looking around at the expectant faces of each of her companions, she wanted to smile at them, let them know how much they meant to her. The words stuck in her throat. If she opened her mouth, what came out would mark her for the coward she was.

Taking a tentative step forward, she made sure the one thing she took away from this was a semblance of dignity, if you could call it that. How ignoble it would be if her traitorous legs collapsed underneath her. She was such a fool. Why any of these men had chosen to accompany her she’d never know. Sanctuary would be her home from now on. Hopefully, the name would live up to all it implied because she would never again set foot outside of it.

Miraculously, her feet carried her away from that steel door and in the opposite direction without stumbling. Silence stretched out behind her. Until one voice, the one she could feel resonate inside her, broke that silence.

“Where are you going?” The sound of his deep voice whispered along her skin, setting her nerve endings on fire.

She swallowed several times until she could force words from her lips. “Where I belong. Where I should never have left. I can’t thank all of you enough for everything you’ve done for me but...I can’t do this. It isn’t me. I’m a fake, a coward, and it’s time I recognize that. It’s time to go home.”

“So, just like that, you’re going to give up?” He wouldn’t back down.

Refusing to turn around, she threw his words back at him. “I’m a danger to those around me. Wasn’t that what you said? What you’ve thought all along? Well, now you have your wish. I’ll no longer travel the Commonwealth; I won’t be a danger to anyone -- ever.”

“Prove me wrong. Show me what you’re capable of. Show him, Kellogg, what you’re capable of.”

He wasn’t supposed to turn the tables on her. He was supposed to agree with her, damn it. Fisting her hands and taking a deep breath, she whirled to face him. Anger, stronger than any she’d felt before, erupted inside her from some dark place deep inside that she never knew existed. It chased the fear away, chased the nausea in her stomach away, sending it scattering to the dark corners of her mind.

How dare he!

He wanted proof? Fine. He’d get proof. Proof that she was exactly what he’d thought all along. If she didn’t make it out of this alive, it was on his head. So be it.

Marching past him, she held her head high, a determined stride taking her ever closer to her goal. Her hand reached for her 10 mm, the weight and feel of it familiar in her hands. Marched forward, she checked to make sure it was loaded, that the safety was off.
Through the door, up the stairs...and there he was. The man from her nightmare. A nightmare that would be with her always. But maybe, just maybe, she could lessen the fear it brought with it.

“And there she is, no longer frozen. I must say I’m surprised. I never expected you to be this resilient. You’ve traveled a lot of miles to come to my door. So, what is it you want?”

Hearing the heavy mechanical footfalls of Danse in his power armor, the rage that had fled at sight of Kellogg and been replaced by icy fear, returned in full force. *I’ll give Danse a show he’ll never forget.*

“I want to know where my son is. I know you took him. Where is Shaun?” Her voice was steady, strong. She’d never heard herself sound like this.

“Well, you see, I’m just a puppet, much like you are in this play. Granted, my stage is a bit bigger than yours. Your son, Shaun, such a great kid. Would have wanted a son like that, if I’d had one. He is a bit older than you think he is. But...he’s not here. He’s just another puppet and he’s with the one who pulls those strings.”

“Excuses. I don’t believe you. Tell where my son is damn it! Tell me now!”

“What is it they say -- ‘So close and yet so far’ -- heard that before haven’t you? I see by the look on your face you have. Well, that’s refers to your son. Don’t let it worry you, though. After all, you’ll die knowing your son is safe, cared for, even happy in the Institute’s loving home.”

The way he spoke was so matter of fact, like they were just catching up on old times. He was giving her no information of substance. None of this mattered to him, she was just a loose end to tie up.

“I don’t care where he is. I will find him. Nothing is going to keep me from my son!” All this time, she’d wondered if he was better off without her but facing this man, his careless regard for life made her think twice. Shaun was not better off with people like this.

“You are persistent, I’ll give you that. The way a parent should be. It’s really a shame that you aren’t going to get that chance, not in this terrible new reality.”

*Her* terrible new reality. She would see about that and prove him wrong. “Like hell.”

“So be it. This talk’s been taking too long anyway and I’m usually a man of few words. It’s time to end it. Besides, we both know how this act ends, don’t we. So...are you ready?”

Her time was up and the only thing she’d learned was that the Institute indeed had Shaun. It was a start -- if she made it out alive. Was she ready? No. But the men behind her were. Dogmeat was. She’d have to rely on that...whatever the outcome.

“I’m ready. I hope you are. I’ve heard hell is a nasty place to spend eternity.”

Before she finished that sentence, she raised the gun and fired. He was a mercenary, quick and efficient. He dodged, the bullet striking him in the shoulder...then he simply disappeared.

“Alice, take cover!” Nick yelled out from behind her.

Chaos ensued and Alice didn’t know where anyone was, least of all Kellogg. Crouching behind a desk, she covered her head with her arms, shaking uncontrollably and yet elated she’d at least gotten off one shot that counted. How the hell had he disappeared?
She heard the laser rifle as well as Hancock’s and Nick’s guns and another weapon that must have been Kellogg’s. The synths lay beyond her, blasted to ruins. Then she noticed Dogmeat, forgotten in the chaos. He lay on his side, breathing heavy, blood beginning to pool beneath him.

Shrugging off her backpack, she rummaged inside for a stimpak. Her dog was not going to die. She wouldn’t allow it. Scrambling on all fours, she crawled towards him, oblivious to everything around her. Jamming the stimpak into his side, she shielded him. Something heavy smacked into her left shoulder, jerking her backwards. Numbness traveled down her arm. Intent on the on keeping Dogmeat safe, she ignored it.

The canine squirmed to get out from under her, so she sat up and let him go. Getting to her feet, she stumbled feeling dizzy and reached her right hand out to grab hold of a desk. Looking around, she saw Kellogg shimmer and become solid. He was covered in blood but still standing, aiming his gun at Danse. Pointing the barrel at the soldier’s head, he squeezed the trigger.

“No!” Alice screamed, couldn’t look away.

The bullet grazed his ear and lodged in a wall. Kellogg’s head whipped in her direction upon hearing her scream. An evil smile crept over his lips, the same one she saw from in her pod. He aimed his gun at her. He pulled the trigger and she heard a bang. The bullet ripped through her side, spinning her. She went down in a tangle of limbs.

“You’ll pay for that!” Someone yelled at Kellogg.

Alice wanted to scream at the burning pain in her side. Her sight was becoming fuzzy. Fighting not to pass out, she tried to crawl away, get away from Kellogg. She just knew he was coming after her. Frantically, she crawled at the floor but her arm was numb and everything hurt.

Hands grabbed for her and she fought them, screaming at whoever it was to leave her alone.

“Alice...ALICE! It’s me, Nick, calm down. I’ve got you.”

His words finally penetrating her frantic mind, she whimpered in pain. Distantly, she heard other voices, Hancock and Danse.

"Don’t do it. She needs to do this herself."

"She isn’t capable of this. I’ll send him to hell."

“I know. Wanna send him there myself but you can’t take this away from her. This is her show.”

Suddenly, Hancock was squatting down beside her, grabbing her hand. How’d he get here so fast? “Alice.” He waited for her eyes to focus on him, “Kellogg’s alive. Won’t last long though. Three of us here, we’re ready to take him out now but we need to know...is that what you want?”

Through the haze of pain, she heard words, struggled to make sense of them. Trying to sort them out, she finally connected them together, understanding exactly what he was asking. “I...I’ll do it.”

“You sure, Sunshine?”

“Yes, John. I’m sure.”

He and Nick helped her up, steadied her. It took incredible effort, more strength than she ever thought she possessed to push the pain aside. Somehow, she found a wellspring inside her to get it done. Grasping her weapon firmly, her fingers tightened around it in anger. This man would pay
for all he’d done to her and her family, to her friends. Pay with his life.

Alice stood over him, devoid of emotion as she watched his life bleed out on the floor around him. Cold hazel eyes stared back up at her - no fear, no remorse - waiting for the end.

All of Kellogg’s words cascaded over her once again, pummeling her like the hammering rush of a waterfall, threatening to drown her in a pool below.

“Cat got your tongue?” Blood bubbled from between his lips, tracking down the side of his face as he coughed. She watched the deep red liquid dispassionately. Let him bleed.

“Just one last thing before I send you to hell. My name is Alice .”

Leveling the gun down at his head, she fired, not even flinching as the bullet impacted his forehead dead center, spattering her face with his blood.

It was over.

Awareness returned in a rush, the pain in her side and shoulder excruciating in its intensity. She staggered under the onslaught, only held upright by steel arms. Darkness approached at the edges of her vision, the rest of the world fading away. Powerless to resist, she became weightless, letting the darkness wrap her in its embrace.
Lost in the Darkness

Chapter Summary

Guilt. Such a palpable presence in his life that only grew stronger with each decision he made, every outcome that ended in tragedy, weighing him down. This was just one more rock on that pile, the end of her innocence and the conclusion of this mission making it the biggest one of all. It was only a matter of time before the mountain, fashioned of guilt, crushed him underneath its weight, burying him so deeply there would be no way out.

But until then, he would push the guilt aside and continue ever onward.

Chapter Notes

Whoops, time got away from me--Okay, I lied. I've been struggling with words. I'll never abandon Alice but just bear with me as the writing process works itself out.

Also...this chapter is from Danse's POV.

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She looked so small, so frail as she lay on the floor, looking for all the world like a broken and bloody doll. Rust colored freckles, courtesy of the kill shot to Kellogg, were scattered over her face and neck, standing out in stark contrast against nearly translucent skin, which had been pale to begin with.

Kneeling down, he picked her up as gently as possible encased as he was in power armor. The suit of steel had never been a hindrance before. In fact, he wore it with honor and pride but at the moment, he was particularly aware of its shortcomings. Danse did his best not to jar her injuries, though she likely couldn’t feel a thing. It was a blessing she’d passed out after killing Kellogg. He needed to tend her wounds, staunch the bleeding quickly. Stealing a glance down at her shirt, it was sodden with the amount of blood she’d lost.

The cool and shadowy hallway they’d traversed to confront Kellogg seemed to have grown in length, Alice’s body limp in his arms. He remembered there’d been a bed in the room they’d been in, waiting for Alice to lead them. Worry knit his brow as he knew her body was likely losing its heat, worry that soon made his heart thunder rapidly inside his chest with fear. There would not be another person lost under his watch.

His eyes narrowed against harsh light, jarring after the darkened hallway, and his mind was assaulted by the most recent memories, made here in this room. Ghostly echoes of that
conversation whispered inside his mind; goading Alice, inciting the rage that had carried her to the twisted individual that was Kellogg. A headache forming behind his eyes, Danse looked down at Alice’s listless body. *And for what? For her to die here?* No. He wouldn’t not allow that.

As he climbed out of his power armor, not caring how vulnerable he would be around the ghoul and synth, he set about taking care of her wounds, thoughts still churning around in his head.

At the moment he’d been pushing her, his only thought had been to help her. Thought she would regret not facing her fears, regret not facing Kellogg. However, it was clear now as it hadn’t been then. She was not him. Now, as he applied a shot of Med-X, seeing her chest rising and falling so shallowly, covered by *so much blood*, he felt a deepening guilt for the power of the words he’d so carelessly thrown at her, words that had pushed her towards this outcome.

Guilt. Such a palpable presence in his life that only grew stronger with each decision he made, every outcome that ended in tragedy, weighing him down. This was just one more rock on that pile, the end of her innocence and the conclusion of this mission making it the biggest one of all. It was only a matter of time before the mountain, fashioned of guilt, crushed him underneath its weight, burying him so deeply there would be no way out.

But until then, he would push the guilt aside and continue ever onward.

Shaking off such dark thoughts, he reached into his power armor for the basic first aid kit all Brotherhood soldiers carried with them. Debating on whether to take out the fusion core for safety reasons, he decided against it. He’d barked orders at the synth and ghoul to take care of Kellogg’s body and salvage any intel they could find to help Alice in her quest. Surprisingly, they hadn’t argued or made any sarcastic comments. Instead, following his orders as if they were well trained soldiers.

It appeared they would do anything to help this tiny slip of a woman -- even take orders from him.

Only having basic first aid skills, he hoped it would be enough to keep her alive. Ripping off his gloves, he got to work.

Having found a thready pulse, shock was all too apparent and not much of a surprise with the amount of blood she’d lost. Focusing intently on her soaked shirt, white hot anger coursed through his veins like the roar of a deathclaw, threatening to burn away his concentration. The last time he’d felt that way, he’d had to kill--

The path down that road of thought was well traveled. He didn’t have time for it right now.

Lifting the hem of her shirt, the wound in her side came into view. Danse had watched, helplessly, as Kellogg’s bullet punched into her side, knocking her down. The bullet had taken a good chunk of skin, leaving an ugly gouge in her pale skin. The edges were ragged but the wound itself wasn’t life threatening and didn’t explain the amount of blood that covered her. There must be another wound somewhere, maybe more than one.

He had been so focused on his mission of taking out Kellogg -- no, all of them had been that focused on him, they had all but forgotten about Alice.

Another wave of guilt threatened to break his concentration. *Focus, soldier!*

There was no help for what he needed to do, his face flushing with embarrassment. Glancing
around him to make sure he was truly alone, he set out to complete the task. Large fingers, clumsy with awkwardness, fumbled with tiny buttons, coated red with blood. Frustration mounting at his attempts, he grasped the sides of her shirt and pulled. Well worn and soft, it offered no resistance, easily splitting apart as buttons bounced against him and scattered across the floor.

Pulling the two sides further apart, his eyes roamed over her body. Pushing apprehension away, this was no time to be worried about her modestly. Her life was at stake. Deep red blood bubbled sluggishly from a wound on her shoulder. A sigh of relief escaped through his lips, noting it was a through-and-through and didn’t seem to have hit the joint but just underneath. His medical skills didn’t extend that far. Lifting her shoulder so he could see where the bullet exited, he hissed in a breath at the sight of the angry wound, blood flowing more easily on this side.

The most important thing now was getting that bleeding stopped. Both wounds needed to be cleaned and taken care of before he applied stimpaks but he couldn’t do this alone.

Several scenarios ran through his mind, only one of them possible. Still, it went against all he’d been taught in the Brotherhood. But he’d be damned if another life would be lost needlessly while he was in command. Gently as he could, he worked her tattered shirt off, grateful to find the back was still mostly devoid of blood. Wadding it up, he held it tightly to the back of her shoulder in hopes of slowing the bleeding.

Pushing away the loathing he felt at the only option he had, he yelled out in a commanding voice, “Ghoul! I need your help.”

At once, he heard the unmistakable sounds of boots headed his way. For once, this ghoul hurried. A much welcome change from its usual nonchalant swagger.

The abomination skidded into the room, breathless, edges of its coat fluttering in continued motion. It had stopped short at the sight of Alice lying limp and blood on the table, shirt in tatters around her body. It’s black eyes narrowed with accusation, focusing on him intently. “Whoa man. What the fuck is the deal, tin can? Trying to take advantage of a woman when she can’t say no? That’s worse than low. Even I have more--”

“ENOUGH!” Danse roared, cutting the ghoul off in mid sentence. Gritting his teeth, “I need your help.”

The ghoul just stared at him with those unfathomable black eyes. “Well, ain’t this one for the history books. A Brotherhood soldier is asking for help from a lowly ghoul.” Licking a finger and making an invisible mark in the air, he added, “think this goes in the “owes me a favor” column.”

“Shut up, ghoul. I won’t owe you a damn thing. This is to save her life, not for you enjoyment.” At those words, the ghoul did shut up.

“Hold this shirt and keep applying pressure. We need to stem the bleeding or stop it entirely. She’s lost too much blood as it is.”

“Might have done this a time or too. Just get to work, buckethead.”

Struggling not to rise to the bait, Danse knew his will was stronger. Even so, he couldn’t stop his body from stiffening in distaste as the ghoul sauntered over or the look of disgust that crossed his face watching as those hands wrapped around the shirt, fingers touching Alice’s skin,
contaminating her blood.

He wondered if the ghoul’s contact with her blood would contaminate her, infection setting in and turning her ghoul. There was no way to know how close this ghoul was to turning feral and while using the synth might have been a better option, he’d called out for the ghoul instead. It took effort to ignore the voice in the back of his head taunting him, whispering that he was more disturbed by its inhumanity than by the ghoul.

Maybe in applying the stimpaks once the wounds were properly taken care of, it would wipe out any chance of infection. Only time would tell.

If he remembered correctly, a bottle of whiskey had been in the room before. Glancing at a cabinet in the corner of the room, he walked over and grabbed the whiskey to cleanse the wounds.

“Look, buckethead, I know the sitch is tough but drinking on the job ain’t gonna help.” Ignoring the agitated look on Danse’s face, he continued, “At least wait until after you’re done.”

Pouring the whiskey over the wound on her side, Danse winced as the blood mingled with the brown liquid, dripping down her side and soaking into the mattress. Reaching for the first aid kit he’d placed close by, he grabbed a stimpak and jammed it into the skin near the wound, applying a loose bandage to cover it as the stimpak did its work.

“Come over here and keep an eye on this wound.” Moved around the bed, he was careful not to come in contact with the ghoul. A smirk ticked up one corner of its mouth, and Danse’s eyes narrowed in response.

“What’s wrong, soldier boy? Afraid I’ll bite? No worries there. Tin can’s are a little bland for my tastes, no spice at all.”

If he didn’t need the ghoul’s help, Danse swore he would have shot him. It was still a constant struggle not to follow through on that thought.

Checking the shoulder wound, he noticed blood had stopped coming from the entrance site. At the exit though, the shirt had started to stick to the wound. However, he was still able to remove it without too much trouble. A small bubble of blood trickled out upon its removal, having succeeded in slowing the blood loss. Checking her pulse once again, it was harder to find. She was getting weaker by the minute and he needed to finish.

Dumping whiskey over this wound as well, he watched as the liquid carried the blood away showing a small symmetrical hole. If there were any pieces of the bullet remaining, they were too deep to get to. Carefully, he lifted her shoulder just enough to see the exit wound. It was much larger, the edges gaping and ragged, showing muscle and tissue damage. No bone could be seen, so that was a good sign. Dashing whiskey over it, he checked the wound one more time for anything he might have missed before jamming another stimpak in her back near it.

Swiping the back of his hand across his brow, he tried to catch the sweat before it dripped down into his eyes. The bright lights in this room made it unbearably hot. Or, maybe, it was just the combination of stress and anxiety inducing thoughts that were the cause. Regardless, both wounds were taken care of now. However, the situation was still critical and she wasn’t out of the woods yet. There was nothing left to do but wait.

Leaning against a desk, lost in his thoughts as he stared at the rhythmic rise and fall of Alice’s
chest, Danse was startled by a sudden noise. Unusual for him, trained soldier that he was.

“How’s the kid?” The synth addressed him from the doorway.

“Her situation is still critical but I think she’ll make it. It’s possible I may have to perform a blood transfusion.”

Danse could barely believe he was having this conversation with a synth, had had to ask for help from a ghoul. This whole ordeal was bizarre, not even his nightmares could compare to this sequence of events.

Running a hand through his hair, he noticed belatedly that it was covered in dried blood. He was so mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted, his body and mind just couldn’t seem to focus.

“We can keep an eye on her while you go clean up.” The synth eyed him warily, unsure of his mood.

Bristling at the thought of leaving her here in the company of these two abominations, Danse opened his mouth to reply scathingly.

“Shut it, tin can. Been by her side for weeks now. And would you look at that, she’s still alive. Unharmed and ain’t even turned ghoul. Ain’t gonna hurt for you to look presentable when she comes to. Right?” The ghoul lounged against a cabinet, legs crossed at the ankles, hat pulled low over his eyes.

Shadows beneath the brim covered half its face, obscuring those obsidian eyes. It appeared it had been keeping a close eye on Alice’s state of health as well. As much as Danse hated to admit it, the ghoul had a point. But it didn’t make him happy.

Long, angry strides rapidly ate up the floor as he went to his power armor for a fresh uniform and a can of water. It was a waste of a precious resource but there was simply no help for it in this case. Marching past the synth, he went into the other room to clean up and make sure they’d been thorough in the task he’d given them.

As soon as the other room, the synth and the ghoul, actually that whole situation back there fell behind him, Danse breathed a huge sigh of relief. Even if only for a short moment, he could wipe it all away and focus on a bit of normalcy in the chaos.

Checking the area thoroughly, he noted that Kellogg’s body was indeed nowhere to be found; the shells of the synths that guarded him had also been disposed of. Taking in the disarray around the room, he noted half open drawers, empty first aid kits as well as a terminal booted up with a list of messages still on the screen. He would need to analyze any intel gathered and go through it himself to see what would benefit Alice. It was highly likely she wouldn’t even know what was important, better for him to take charge in that area.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure he hadn’t been followed, Danse ducked into a darkened corner and stripped off his soiled and bloody uniform, folding it meticulously despite its filthy state to stow it in the power armor. Grabbing a clean rag and the canister of water, he toweled himself mostly clean as quickly as possible. He’d found himself in worse scenarios, though never with a ghoul or synth in the next room. Donning a clean uniform, he walked briskly back to check on Alice, not trusting them to keep her safe.
He found the synth and the ghoul deep in conversation, their words dying off abruptly as soon as he appeared. Despite his distaste for them and inherent mistrust, curiosity nearly got the better of him, demanding to know what they had been discussing. In the end, he decided it was ultimately of no importance to him and beneath him as a Brotherhood soldier to even waste time on the thought.

The synth addressed him in any case, as if his previous conversation had already been forgotten. “I left everything that was found over there.” It pointed with a skeletal metal finger towards the desk near where Alice lay. “There were a few stimpaks, some Rad-X; I imagine Alice will likely need those supplies to replenish what she’s used. I also found some kind of component in Kellogg’s head; it’s there as well.”

The synth took a moment to light a cigarette, at the last moment remembering Alice was in the room, recovering, and let his arms fall to his sides. “It wasn’t pleasant digging inside his head but that part might be valuable. It appears he was enhanced while working for the Institute. There were more cybernetics in his body than I expected to see in a human. I was able to hack into that computer, which I’m sure you saw, left the messages on the screen. Some interesting info there. Make sure Alice has the chance to read it.”

Turning to stare at the synth, he wondered why it wouldn’t tell her when she woke up. He immediately got an answer.

“I’ve got cases back in Diamond City that need my attention. Can’t leave the citizens waiting forever. I’ll send Piper back in my place.”

Danse opened his mouth to object but once again, was cut off.

“Alice will need another change of clothes and it wouldn’t hurt for her to have a woman’s touch when she wakes. If I were you, I’d take that can of water I found and clean her up.” Before Danse could object, the synth detective held up its metal hand, “I know you think it’s a waste of valuable resources. I get it. But it might cause her a good deal of alarm when she wakes up and sees herself coated in blood. Besides, Piper is liable to read you the riot act if she finds her like that.” He paused, including each of them in his glance, “Both of you.”

Hancock shrugged as if he couldn’t be bothered by Piper’s opinion of him, then touched a finger to the brim of his hat, “Later, Nick. Don’t be such a stranger.”

The synth nodded his head in affirmation and turned to leave. Danse now found himself alone with the ghoul, who he chose to ignore even as those obsidian eyes bored into his back.

Focusing on his task, he found everything just where the synth had left it, and set about cleaning Alice as best he could. A result that wasn’t much better than what he’d done for himself. It would have to be enough. Finding a spare blanket, he covered her, trying to preserve her modesty as best he could.

Her breathing was regular, her pulse now strong and steady thanks to the stimpaks. Even her color was coming back, still pale but not frighteningly so. Thankfully, she would not require a blood transfusion.

Leaning back against the desk, he stared at her prone body without really seeing it. Instead, thoughts circled endlessly in his mind. Why had she left the vault? What had her life been like before? She had been inadequately equipped to charge across the Commonwealth with all of its dangers to look for a son. Why had her baby been taken to begin with? Was there no security in the
vault in which she’d lived? Remembering her reaction to shooting a man on the way to Diamond City, what would killing a man do to her?

So many questions, the answers only able to be answered by her. He would pursue them when she woke up. If he was to remain by her side, another question that had no answer as yet, it was imperative to get as much background information as possible, about who she was and her ultimate destination.

Time passed slowly. The ghoul was nowhere to be found, most likely having found someplace to partake of his jet addiction. Good riddance. Danse was grateful not to be in its presence for a change but with the absence of constantly being on guard, he fought to stay awake. Reprimanding himself every time he nodded off -- he’d gone far longer periods with little sleep -- he rested his arms on the desk. Unable to fight it any longer, he succumbed to exhaustion, his arms a pillow for his head.

“Seriously? I can’t believe what I’m seeing. Good thing Nick sent me down here. He left the kid with the two of you and look at her now. Sheesh.”

Danse sat upright, immediately alert, reaching for his laser rifle, finding the space next to his hand was only empty air. The rifle was across the room, right next to the power armor that he’d gotten out of what seemed years ago. Groggy from a short, fitful bit of sleep, he could only stare at the reporter as she marched over from the doorway.

Across the room the ghoul slouched in a darkened corner of the room. When had he come back in? How long had he been in the presence of this vermin unawares? Flexing his shoulders, he attempted to dislodge the uncomfortable sensation that thought brought with it.

Piper narrowed her eyes at him before transferring that anger towards ghoul, “Both of you need to get out of here.” When they continued to stare at her stupidly, she gestured wildly with her hands, “Go! Take a walk, shoot something...I don’t care. But I’m not taking care of her with the two of you in the room. Kid needs some privacy, okay? Shoo!”

They both got the hint, each of them going off in different directions. Danse thought about her suggestion to shoot something. Grabbing his laser rifle, his eyes unerringly found the ghoul walking out the door Piper had entered through. It was tempting. But alienating Alice was not his intent at this time. Fingers clenching around the laser rifle, he decided it would be wise to have at his side. It was disconcerting to think he’d relaxed his guard so much that it had been left across the room.

He might as well scour the next room one more time and read those messages on the terminal while Piper took over the care of Alice. A blush suffused his face, thinking about what that likely entailed. Definitely the perfect opportunity to leave.

Time dragged on endlessly and just before Danse decided he’d had enough and was about to storm back into the other room, Piper appeared in the doorway looking tired and not a little frazzled herself, hair in disarray and hat threatening to slide off her head. Her coat and scarf were gone, face
shiny with sweat.

“Damn I need a cigarette. You got any?”

Danse rarely smoked, only succumbing occasionally when he couldn’t fight the temptation. However, he had noticed several packs of cigarettes lying around and a lighter that must have fallen from Kellogg’s pocket, something the synth had missed. Grabbing the items, he presented them to Piper.

Flicking the lighter open and inhaling as she brought the flame up to the tip of the cigarette, she exhaled and voiced her thoughts, “That a no then?” When no answer was forthcoming, she shrugged. “Fine.”

“How is she?”

“Still breathing, still unconscious or sleeping or…” her voice drifted off as if something had occurred to her. Looking up at him, she inquired, “What’d you give her?”

Her tone bordered on accusatory. As if she thought he’d given Alice something non medicinal to knock her out. ”Med-X, not that I have to justify my actions to you. If you think I gave her chems, you’d be better off taking that tone with the ghoul.” Not willing to admit to letting his guard down and falling asleep, though she’d witnessed it first hand, he stated, “No telling what he might have given her.” His distaste for the chems as well as his scorn for the ghoul was inherent in every word.

“Alright, on need to get testy about it. In any case, she’s still zonked out but a hell of a lot cleaner and fully clothed.” This was followed by an accusatory stare.

Danse knew it was a fruitless endeavor to waste breath explaining how Alice had come to be stripped of her shirt. At the time, it had been the least of his worries. Piper likely wouldn’t give a damn about his reasons.

Putting her cigarette out on an already scarred table, she turned to head back. Having done all he needed in her, Danse followed her. They could do nothing now but wait for Alice to wake up and keep an eye on her wounds.

Chapter End Notes

I can't thank all of you enough for sticking around to read this fic and for waiting for each chapter, it really means a lot! Special shout out to Purple-Martin87 once again for helping me out when I needed a push ;)

Thank you, thank you to all of you who read, kudo or leave a comment. To know that someone enjoys what a I do frankly surprises me but always brings a smile to my face! As always, hit me up if you have a question or find something that makes no sense!
Out of the Ashes

Chapter Summary

The miles continued to pass, silence once again their companion. For the moment, Alice found herself to be more attuned to what was going on around her, alert for potential dangers. She still flinched at every sound, sure that something -- or someone -- was going to come crashing through the bushes, around an overturned car or be waiting around the next hill. But it didn’t happen. Slowly, little by little, she began to relax and enjoy the little things.

Such as the blue sky above them a few clouds floating lazily by, a sudden breeze whisking away the sweat on her skin, the bright yellow carrot flowers and the deep bluish-purple hubflowers. The silence stopped being terrifying and instead became relaxing and she began to hum under her breath. Music was something she missed terribly from before the war. Of course, it also helped Danse was with her. He was a soldier and not just any soldier; he was a Paladin. It meant he’d seen a lot in his time with the Brotherhood and he was experienced, smart and sharp. He’d keep her safe.

Chapter Notes

Alice, she is a-changing :)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life taking her in yet another direction, Alice’s thoughts returned to the image of the large silver zephyr as it had soared majestically through the clear blue sky, vertibirds swooping back and forth around it like harried subjects around their king. She never seen anything like it and had felt like a tiny child seeing something magical for the first time.

Piper and Hancock had differing views on what they’d witnessed.

“Holy shit.” He’d paused while watching the ship cross overhead, inhaling a mouthful of jet before finding his words. “Lookit there. Now I got evidence the Brotherhood’s full of hot air. Gotta be a buncha assholes on that thing for it to float in the air. But I’ll give em this, they sure do know how to make an entrance.”

Piper’s eyes were fixated on the site before her, mouthing dropping open in wonder.

“Unbelievable.” Her voice was soft, reverent as it uttered that word. Then, it was like someone flipped a switch. Excitement infused her voice, rising higher in pitch with each sentence. “Have you ever seen anything like that? The airship? They must have an entire army on that!”

The difference in their viewpoints had Alice shaking her head. Hancock took a hit of jet while
Piper grabbed a pad of paper and a pencil stub from behind her ear and scribbled furiously.

Danse, of course, had a completely different reaction.

He was effusive in his praise of the Brotherhood and all they stood for as well as their mission in the Commonwealth. Alice couldn’t get over the change from the stern commanding officer into the man who now stood before her. It was like seeing a completely different side of him. The exuberance made him look youthful and energetic, more approachable. He swept her up in his enthusiasm and fervor.

Gazing at the flying silver ship as it glinted brightly in the morning sun, Alice had a premonition that her life was going to be changed forever. She could feel it in the air, a harbinger. But a harbinger of what, disaster or good fortune? The moment caused a chill, goose bumps travelling over her skin. Some of it was most likely her always present fear and anxiety. Yet, for once, she felt the tingling of excitement underneath it all. This time, she would forge her own path -- well, mostly her own -- wanting to see where it would lead. The ship itself seemed to be calling her towards it.

Saying goodbye to John and Piper, Alice walked with renewed purpose, following Danse. Dogmeat was at her side, when he wasn’t running off on a scent of something or other. It was time to take charge of her life now.

A conversation took place behind her, whispers that became quieter with each step. For a moment, she wondered what Piper and Hancock were saying. It was probably about her. For once she didn’t care, her mind chasing her adventure, running from darker memories.

Hancock took a hit of jet. “Well, kid’s got a good heart anyways. Just hope it keeps her from drowning in the sea of steel underwear.”

Piper snorted, “Steel underwear?”

“Has to be why they’re such pricks. Can you imagine the irritation that’d cause? Ouch.” Taking a hit of jet, he turned towards her, mouth quirking up in a smirk, “Can’t have em wearing cotton briefs while running around on that overblown blimp. With all that hot air, they’d catch fire and it’d blow sky high.”

Piper choked and swallowed her gum.

It was a long walk back towards Cambridge in the heat, silence settling over the two of them like a suffocating blanket. Slowly, the energy that had infused Alice after seeing the Prydwen, drained away and the memories she had fought so hard to distance herself from forced themselves back into existence. Without anything to occupy her, even meaningless conversation, there was nothing to stem the force of the tide as they swept over her. Danse had once again become the commanding soldier she was most familiar with, a soldier on a mission with no time for nothing else. Especially nothing as frivolous as conversation.

As time passed agonizingly slowly, Alice struggled with the nightmare images of killing Kellogg. Jumpy, every sound she heard making her shrink in fear, thinking that maybe the Institute had sent someone else to kill her. One darker thought surfaced time and time again; maybe it was Kellogg back from the dead coming to kill her as well in retaliation for not doing that the first time.

All these thoughts brought her mind around to Nate, how he’d been after the war. Surprisingly,
he’d still mostly been the man she remembered. Conversations overheard from wives of other soldiers, in her brief associations with them, attested to alarming changes in personality. So it was in a way, even for Nate, that there moments of darkness creeping silently into their house like a thief, stealing joy and happiness, leaving behind pain and fear. Sometimes it was in the dead of night, the witching hour, coming awake suddenly, knowing something was wrong, Nate thrashing in the bed beside her, lost in dark memories from which she couldn’t save him.

Other times, she would wake in the early morning hours to find that the spot next to her in the bed was empty and cold, an indentation of a body the only proof that Nate had lain there at all. Emerging into the living room, the only illumination from the streetlights, she find him with a bottle of whisky by his hand, staring at nothing or maybe snoring softly, the liquor having given him what he needed to sleep.

That was when she learned about PTSD, the pain and suffering it caused. Life had changed -- they had changed -- but somehow, they managed to take their joy from the good times. Now, here she was at the mercy of that disorder. How she hated that word. As if she wasn’t broken enough.

Danse didn’t notice her inner turmoil, how she struggled as they walked on, completely absorbed by the playback of events in her head and oblivious to everything else. Then again, he was completely focused on the surroundings as they made their way to Cambridge, alert for dangers he knew may very well lurk nearby. Lions and tiger and bears -- she barely bit back an outburst of hysterical laughter. Muties and ferals and raiders -- oh my! No doubt if he knew how distracted she was, he’d take her to task yet again and berate her, giving her a detailed explanation of how ‘lack of focus can get you killed.’

Trying another desperate attempt to keep the dark memories and morbid thoughts at bay, Alice pushed past her own awkwardness and spoke up, “So, can you tell me more about the Brotherhood? What they stand for?”

Danse just kept walking. At first, Alice thought he was ignoring her. But after more thought, maybe her voice was too quiet and he hadn’t heard her. Swallowing past the anxiety and the dryness of her throat, she gathered the courage to ask again, she swallowed her questions as his words drifted back to her.

“We seek to understand the nature of technology. To discern the power it wields, what it means to us as humans. Our order seeks to secure that power and keep it from being abused as it has been in the past.” His arm stretched out to encompass their surroundings. “To keep this -- what you see today -- from happening again.”

Danse still had no idea of her back story, that she had been alive before the war. There hadn’t been a good time to explain. Right now would probably be a really good time but she choked on the words, deciding instead to have him clarify what exactly he meant.

“How was technology abused so badly?”

The steel suit stopped in midstep, turning in a complete circle so Danse could fix her with a look, one that was gravely serious, brows drawn together over shadowed eyes. “Before the Great War, science and technology had become more of a burden to mankind than an asset. The atom bomb, bio-engineered plagues and the FEV, the virus that created the super mutants, are just a few examples of the kinds of horrors that advancing technology can produce.” He stood up straighter, proud of being a soldier in the Brotherhood, in the ongoing fight for what they stood for and worked to procure, “We’re here to ensure that never happens again.”

“But doesn’t that mean the Brotherhood will be in control then? How does that benefit anyone if
only one organization has all the power?"

His look spoke for itself don’t you see? He followed it with platitudes in any case, “We seek to protect it, study it but will not abuse it as have so many in the past. Our order is different from those that existed before the war. You implying that we’ll have all the power is a gross misrepresentation.”

Turning back around, he continued on his way, not waiting to see if she was behind him. She wasn’t, as her mind absorbed his words, doubting the validity of his statements. How could he possibly believe all that? Pushing her thoughts aside for the moment, she ran to catch up to him. If nothing else, maybe ruminating on his words would give her something else to think about besides Kellogg. At least for now.

The miles continued to pass, silence once again their companion. For the moment, Alice found herself to be more attuned to what was going on around her, alert for potential dangers. She still flinched at every sound, sure that something -- or someone -- was going to come crashing through the bushes, around an overturned car or be waiting around the next hill. But it didn’t happen. Slowly, little by little, she began to relax and enjoy the little things.

Such as the blue sky above them a few clouds floating lazily by, a sudden breeze whisking away the sweat on her skin, the bright yellow carrot flowers and the deep bluish-purple hibiscus. The silence stopped being terrifying and instead became relaxing and she began to hum under her breath. Music was something she missed terribly from before the war. Of course, it also helped Danse was with her. He was a soldier and not just any soldier; he was a Paladin. It meant he’d seen a lot in his time with the Brotherhood and he was experienced, smart and sharp. He’d keep her safe.

That last thought had barely entered her mind when something whizzed past her head. At first, lost in her daydreaming, she thought maybe it was a bloodbug and the idea of one made her shudder. She hated all the mutated animals and insects she’d encountered so far. But as her anxiety pushed forward and broke down her barriers, memories shot like a bullet into her mind, Kellogg’s voice ricocheting inside it. It was this that made her freeze in abject fear, all thoughts of survival wiped away in a single instant. She heard something, a buzzing coming closer, might have been words but it was like they were filtered through thick cotton and distorted.

A startled cry flew from her lips as a hand came down hard on her shoulder, forcing her to her knees. Life exploded around her as if someone had pulled her into a war zone; yelling and curse words echoed around her both near and far along with the sounds of bullets smashing into rocks and kicking up dust, the growls of Dogmeat reaching her from somewhere up ahead. Chaos reigned.

She became aware of Danse, standing in front of her protectively, laser rifle flashing with charges of red as he took on several raiders. Occasionally, a loud thwunk rang in her ears from bullets hitting power armor. Several times she attempted to slide out from behind Danse and join the fight, back in her right mind and ready to help. Each time, he yelled at her to get behind him. It was beyond frustrating. There wasn’t time to wonder if he was disappointed or livid at her considering she’d almost gotten herself killed, putting him in the line of fire. No doubt she’d find out once this was over.

A growl in the distance followed by a yelp from Dogmeat made her breath catch in her throat. If anything happened to him, she wasn’t sure what would happen but it wouldn’t be pretty. Another yelp, louder this time, pushed a switch inside her and all she saw was red. Not thinking of her own welfare, she dodged out from behind Danse, rushing to her dog’s aid. From behind her came angry
yelling but she just kept running, dodging behind whatever cover she could find, stopping to get off an occasional shot, ducking as the raiders returned fire. Not even checking to see if the bullets that exploded from her gun connected or not, her only thought was to reach Dogmeat.

Suddenly, he was right there in front of her and he was injured, blood coating his fur. There was no way to tell if it was his or whether it belonged to the raiders. No time to check, she grabbed for a stimpak in her backpack and jammed it into his flank. Within minutes, he was licking her face in joy and then abruptly, he was gone. A raider had snuck up on them while she had been focused on Dogmeat.

He never knew what hit him. The moment was perfectly choreographed between two partners, ones who knew each other completely. Every step, every movement taken without thought. Dogmeat attacked the raider fearlessly, jaws clamping down hard, holding him and forcing his body towards the ground. With no hesitation, Alice aimed and shot. Another raider took that one’s place. Together, they took that one. And took care of her too.

Riding high on adrenalin and the thrill of her and Dogmeat working so well together, she was startled by a loud angry voice.

“Don’t ever rush off into a fight like that again! You could get yourself and--”

He didn’t even have time to finish before Alice interrupted his diatribe. Her arms were wrapped around her dog, not caring about the blood that saturated his fur, “your companions killed. Yes, I know. You may have mentioned that maybe once or twice,” the rest of her words were muffled as she buried her face in the only clean spot in Dogmeat’s coat, “or a million.”

Silence greeted her words and she looked up to see him about to start spouting more nonsense. Standing to her whole height -- all of five feet even -- she stared straight into his eyes and spoke clearly, with no hesitation. No mean feat for her but an adrenaline high was making her bold even as insecurities, never far away, were starting to swell, battering at carefully constructed walls, begging to be released.

“Look Danse, I understand your concern but in the end, there was no harm done. There were no innocent civilians around her that could get hurt. Well, except me.” That thought brought her up short, taking a moment to process it. Once she did, there was a sadness for the loss of who she’d been. And then, that sadness was swept away by the fact that who she had been didn’t belong in this world, never had. “But, I’m not exactly innocent anymore, am I.”

For a moment, there seemed to be a look on Danse’s face she couldn’t quite figure out. Understanding maybe? She couldn’t be sure. It passed so quickly and now all she registered as she studied him was frustration and...disappointment? Mentally shaking her head, her thoughts scattered. It was too much effort to focus on them anyway. Turning, she continued in the direction she was positive that Cambridge lie.

“Cambridge is this way.” He was pointing in a slightly different direction than she had been heading.

Well, at least she’d been close.
eyes caught, squinting to try and discern shapes that might lurk in the shadowed areas as they
passed them. Looking up ahead, she noticed Danse doing the same. It was then Alice realized she
was slowly starting to learn how to survive out here. Always be vigilant and aware of your
surroundings.

Dogmeat jogged ahead of the two of them, nose to the ground. An occasional low, growl issued
from deep within him when he caught a scent, locating a threat. If he didn’t follow, it meant that
threat wasn’t worth investigating. He was her alarm and Alice watched him almost as diligently as
the area around her.

Constantly checking for danger as their footsteps shortened the distance, Alice unknowingly
became surrounded by the Cambridge police station’s exterior fortification. They’d arrived safely
and she hadn’t even recognized the area. She’d been too intent on dangers that might lurk around
every corner.

As her eyes focused on the door to the building, framed by the walkway, anxiety took hold and
refused to let go. It simply refused to be pushed aside this time. What would Rhys and Haylen say
upon seeing her? What did Danse have in mind for her? He’d wanted her to accompany him here
but she hadn’t thought that far ahead as to why. Maybe this was all a mistake. She was useless at
best. When it came right down to it, no one really needed her, no one wanted her around.

Dogmeat pushed against her and she brushed her fingers through his soft fur. It calmed her better
than any drug that existed, in her time or now. Even if there was no one out there who cared about
her, even if they were only ‘fair weather friends,’ she still always had her faithful dog. The only
one who loved her unconditionally and didn’t expect anything more than what she was able to
give.

Walking up the front steps, through the door and into the building gave Alice an odd sense of deja
vu. It was familiar but different. Wait. No, that’s not right. I’m different. That was a hard concept
to wrap her mind around. She simply wasn’t the same person that woke up in the vault, her
husband dead and son gone. Shrugging off the thoughts that continued to circle round and round in
her mind, she focused on the voices ahead of her instead.

“Sir, you’re back! We thought maybe something happened. You’ve been gone for quite awhile.”
Haylen’s voice was infused with excitement with an undertone of relief.

“Find anything out there?” Rhys, on the other hand, sounded bored.

Danse stood across from his remaining unit as they peppered him with questions. “I’m fine,
Haylen, Rhys. Thank you for your concern. My reconnaissance yielded nothing of value until I
found someone we all know.” His head turned just as Alice stepped up into the main room.

Haylen peered around Rhys’ muscular body and yelled out in surprise, causing Rhys to wince and
scowl. “Alice!” She ran over and hugged her tight before pushing her away at arm’s length,
checking her over. “Look at you!” Her excitement turned to confusion, then worry, then anger all
in rapid succession. Turning to Danse, she confronted him, “What happened to her? I know when
someone is in pain.” One eyebrow shot up as she waited for an explanation.

Danse somehow managed to look indignant and embarrassed at the same time, one hand rubbing at
his neck. “I...she...we--”

“I was shot, Haylen,” Alice took pity on the man and explained for him, “but Danse took care of
me. Very well, I might add. I’m almost back to normal, really.”
Turning at the sound of her voice, Haylen inspected her meticulously from head to toe, stared back into her eyes as if searching for a lie. “He better have. I taught him everything I know.” She winked conspiratorially as she turned Alice towards a table in a corner. “Come on, I want to hear everything that you’ve been doing.” Grilling endlessly, Haylen played a game of twenty question, wanting to know all that had happened since she’d been here last, any injuries she’d had and what she’d learned as she’d traveled.

Back at the front of the room, Danse was being similarly grilled by Rhys, though he wasn’t happy about it. Watching as Haylen and Alice conversed in the corner, smiling, laughing, he felt envious.

“Where’d you find her? And why’d you bring her back with you? I thought we were done babysitting.”

Rhys’ voice grated on his nerves and he struggled not to show it. There was a certain point to what he said. They weren’t babysitters but somewhere along the way, Danse realized he felt responsible for her. Whether it was because she had no concept of the world she lived in, because she was so small and needed protection or because she’d been hurt on his watch, he just didn’t know.

“I saw her while searching for Vault 81. There was no trace of it so I’m not sure if the trader’s directions were faulty or if it doesn’t actually exist. Alice was in the area, on her way to confront someone named Kellogg at Fort Hagen.”

“And you just felt compelled to help her out? Since when did we become bleeding hearts for every civilian in the Commonwealth?”

Danse turned on him so fast, the younger man had no time to react and almost tripped over his own feet to get away from the seething anger. “Since when did we decide to leave an unarmed, untrained civilian to the mercy of the Commonwealth? I don’t have time for your prejudice or short-sightedness right now. Get it together, Rhys.”

He stalked into the other room, not in the mood to be questioned by his own Knight.

An hour later, Haylen and Alice all caught up, Danse came back into the main area sans power armor. The two women still sat at the table, Rhys propped up against the wall near them, scowling defiantly.

Clearing his throat, Danse spoke into the silence, three pairs of eyes snapping towards him but his attention was only for one person. “Alice, I’d like to make you a proposal.”

He waited for her acknowledgement before continuing. “Since the first time you were here, I’ve noticed your skills have progressed considerably. The op to take on Kellogg was not without peril and setbacks but you triumphed over them and moved forward. With proper training and the right equipment, I know you’d be an asset to the Brotherhood of Steel. It would be my honor to sponsor you as a new recruit. What do you say? Will you join us?”

Looking at him in surprise, she was speechless. “I won’t--” her voice cracking from strong emotion, she took a deep breath and tried again, “I won’t let you down.” No one had ever believed in her before, especially not to a level like this. When had his views changed about her?

Haylen reached over and squeezed her hand, “You have nothing to prove to me. If Danse says you’ll be an asset, that’s all the proof I need.”

Rhys had come to stand near them. His opinions were different, “So, you decided to stick around then. Let me remind you, we’re not your babysitters. There isn’t going to be time out there when
you’re on a mission for us to hold your hand while you figure things out. We have have enough to worry about taking out the muties and ferals. So I guess, welcome to the Brotherhood. But watch yourself."

“Rhys! That’s enough. Whatever your opinions on the matter, you will have to learn to work together. I expect you to set a good example.”

Rolling his eyes, Rhys glared at Alice one last time and walked away. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of that. She hoped not all the soldiers in the Brotherhood were like that but if Haylen was with her, maybe the transition would be bearable.

“Alice, you would do well to understand that the Brotherhood aren’t soldiers of fortune. We are an army and have a strict code of ethics we live by and dedicate our lives to each and every day. You will be expected to adhere to those same principles without question if you expect to be one of us.”

One extreme to the other. It always seemed to be this way with Danse. He left her confused at the best of times. Did he want her to join or not? “I’ll be careful, follow your lead at all times."

“Good. Now, I’ll get right to the point.”

Isn’t that what he’d been doing all this time? She glanced at Haylen out of the corner of her eye upon hearing a cough, noticing it was more to hide her grin than anything else. If Haylen wasn’t upset by this talk, maybe she shouldn’t be either.

“I only ask for two things from those under my command, honesty and respect. You fall in line and stay in line until told differently. I give you an order, you follow it to the letter. It’s that simple.”

“Yes, sir.” This felt more like a lecture than an introduction. Her surprise and elation at his proposal was starting to wane, and quickly.

“There’s just one more order of business I want to discuss.”

Alice just barely resisted rolling her eyes.

“I’m going to recommend that you be given the rank of Knight. What I saw back at Fort Hagen and today on the road shows how far you’ve come. You’ll have to speak to Elder Maxson first, of course.”

“Does...” she looked back and forth between Danse and Haylen, refusing to acknowledge Rhys who’d come back into the room, “does this mean I’m one of you now?”

“Indeed it does.” Danse nodded along with his words.

“Ad Victoriam, Knight!” Haylen was beaming from ear to ear, clearly happy for her.

From across the room, Rhys scoffed, “She doesn’t even know what those words mean.”

Haylen opened her mouth to explain but Alice held her hand up and spoke up, “It means ‘To Victory’. Glaring at Rhys, she dared him to say something.

Surprise stole over his features, “Damn. I’m actually impressed.”

Alice didn’t believe his words in the slightest. It would probably be a waste of breath as well to explain to him how she’d known. Having read almost everything she could get her hands on growing up, there were a lot of ridiculous things she knew. A smattering of Latin was one of those
Danse proceeded to explain what those words meant to the Brotherhood. “To the Brotherhood, defeat is unacceptable. We fight for the future of all mankind. ‘Ad Victoriam’ is our battle cry and more powerful than any weapon you’ll ever carry. Don’t ever forget that.”

Quietly, she let the words slip past her lips, trying them on, “Ad Victoriam.” It was a heady feeling to be sure, to be a part of something like this. However, she doubted she’d be yelling anything at the top of her lungs anytime soon. That was more out of her comfort zone than she was willing to go.

“I’ve received orders that we are to report to the Prydwen.”

Fear stole her breath away and words got caught in her throat. She couldn’t imagine going up on that thing. It was huge and well, she’d never flown. For good reason. This didn’t bode well.

“It’ll be okay.” Haylen seemed to sense her trepidation. “Danse won’t let anything happen to you on the vertibird and you’ll be strapped in so you can’t fall out.”

Feeling the blood drain from her face, she recalled the vertibirds as they’d flown to and fro around the Prydwen. What if she got sick? A familiar shape brushed up against her legs, soft fur caressing her hand. What about Dogmeat? She couldn’t leave him behind!

Looking up, she tried pushing words past the lump in her throat, to ask Danse about bringing him. But any words died as she saw his look. He was staring at Dogmeat with great concentration as if deciding what to do about him.

“I’m not sure what Elder Maxson will think of your dog. He isn’t a Brotherhood trained canine.”

Determination gave her strength and she spoke up, “If Dogmeat stays, I stay.”

She watched Danse as he continued to stare at Dogmeat. The canine stared back at him. He appeared to be thinking things through. “I just don’t know if bringing a pet—” He never got to finish.

Standing up so fast she almost knocked the chair over, Alice looked up at him eye to eye, not exactly easy being so short but this was nonnegotiable, she wouldn’t back down. “First of all, Dogmeat isn’t just a pet. You’ve seen him on the field, seen what he’s capable of. Second of all, if this Elder Maxson doesn’t want a dog on his ship unless it’s trained to Brotherhood standards, I don’t think I want to meet him -- or be a part of the Brotherhood. I’ll say it again. If Dogmeat stays behind then so do I.”

They stood like that for several tense minutes, neither willing to back down. Haylen quietly spoke up from behind them, suppressed laughter in her voice. “You know, Quinlan has a cat on board the Prydwen. I don’t see why Alice can’t have a dog.”

Dogmeat woofed in response.

Admitting defeat to the two females as well as the dog that continued to watch him, Danse finally agreed. “Fine then. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He glared at Dogmeat. “He better not pee on anything up there!”

Somehow, the canine had the grace to look affronted at the mere suggestion.

“Gather your things and get a good night’s sleep. We leave at dawn.” With those parting words, he
stomped off, the barely smothered laughter of Alice and Haylen echoing behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all of you who continue to follow and wait for updates, who comment and leave kudos. I'm grateful to each and everyone of you!!!
Alice is staring a new chapter of her life. She's not sure she likes the mode of transportation! Taking that first step is often the hardest one.

This is basically just a filler chapter to show Alice's view of the events leading up to and joining the Brotherhood of Steel.

Also, I'm going to be taking a break after this chapter -- not permanently but as I don't exactly follow canon, I need to figure out where Alice goes from here. She is changing and becoming stronger and as such, it's getting a little harder to write for her!

A big thank you to everyone who has been so patient as I've struggled with the writing muse and has continued to follow and comment. I hope you'll still be here when Alice tells me what she wants to do. lol Thank you also to everyone from beginning to now for the kudos, comments, advice and just wonderful support, which I never expected this story to have :)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

The sounds of power armor stomping around in the main room woke Alice up. To her, it felt like she’d just barely fallen asleep. Just how early was it? The building for all its internal damage suffered no holes in the walls or cracked windows. It was impossible to know if it was still dark outside or full daylight. Holding her breath, she strained for any sounds beyond the sounds of Danse's power armor. There was nothing at all. Releasing her breath, she continued to lie still on the sleeping bag, as if by refusing to move, the day couldn't begin in earnest.

Today was the day. The day she was officially joining the Brotherhood of Steel, the day she would ride in a vertibird, the day she would see the Prydwen up close and board it, the day she would meet this Elder Maxson Danse spoke so highly of. Her nerves threatened to choke her with all that was going on. Seemed like she just barely managed to beat her anxiety down when something overwhelming came along and it reared its head and took over her life again.

Her ruminations were interrupted by a slobbery lick to the face from Dogmeat. It was like he sensed something was going to happen, some new and exciting adventure, and was eager to get on with it.

Wiping the sleep from her eyes, as well as the wet spot on her cheek, Alice couldn't stifle a yawn as she stretched her arms up over her head. She might as well get up now as it would be wise to get her things together before Danse could take her to task for dawdling. He didn’t seem the type to wait around and she didn’t want to be left behind, despite her fears. Of course, being left with Rhys was also cause to get moving. How Haylen put up with that grumpy face every day along with his
surly attitude.

Walking hesitantly into the main room, she saw that Danse was packed and ready to go. Not exactly a surprise. A certain excitement emanated from him, knowing he was about to board the Prydwen again. It was apparent the ship was the pride and joy of the Brotherhood. It appeared to her that Danse had already eaten and was now just awaiting word the vertibird was on en route to Cambridge.

Alice felt a little nauseous even thinking about eating anything before flying. Foregoing breakfast would likely be in her best interests, as well as the rest of those aboard. She almost jumped out of her skin when Haylen spoke up beside her, completely lost in thought as she’d been.

“I’m a little jealous you get to go to the Prydwen. Only wish I was going.” Haylen’s face took on a dreamy look as she described riding up high in a vertibird, floating among the clouds, the thrill of docking at the Prydwen and the whole of the Commonwealth spread out before you. “I miss that ship and the camaraderie of my brothers and sisters.”

Hands clasped so tightly together, the knuckles were turning white, Alice felt nausea roil in her stomach and valiantly fought the urge to throw up. Hearing Haylen describe the flight brought her panic forward with a vengeance. It was posing a very real threat as it attempted to overwhelm her like it always had. She thought she’d changed, become stronger. Maybe it was just a fool’s wish that though had even crossed her mind because here she was, still just a weak and timid little female that had no control over her life.

Haylen stood beside her, eyes bright, face flushed, beyond excited; Alice was white-knuckled, terrified out of her mind and wished she could find some hole to crawl into. How could they see things so differently?

When Danse had offered her a chance to join the Brotherhood, she thought her chest would burst with the pride she felt. As her mind turned to all that meant, pride had given way to outright panic when he’d announced their ride on a vertibird up to the Prydwen. When she found out Haylen wouldn’t be going, panic had turned into absolute terror.

She replayed the memories back at Fort Hagen of the vertibirds soaring lazily to and fro around the blimp, doors left wide open. Rhys had then informed her, with a smirk, that she and Dogmeat would be strapped in so they wouldn’t fall. All that came to Alice’s mind was images of their bodies falling out the open door, cartwheeling through the air, landing miles down to their death. Her thoughts came to an abrupt stop, just as her life would be if she hit the hard ground. If she didn’t stop thinking about it, she truly would be sick and then Rhys would laugh and give her a smart ass comment.

At this moment, he stood off to the side of the room, all dark and broody. His attempt to appear nonchalant was ruined by the attitude. Alice wasn’t fooled. She’d caught him sneaking glances at her from time to time, the look in his eyes at war with the outward appearance of indifference. He looked resentful. Maybe Danse and Haylen didn’t see it or they preferred to ignore it. Rhys made Alice uncomfortable but for the first time in her life, she didn’t want to cower. He made her want to smack him.

Dogmeat caught on to Rhys’ feelings right away. He stuck to her side like glue and every time Rhys looked her way or even changed position, she could feel a rumble move through Dogmeat’s body vibrating up her leg, felt the hairs of his ruff stiffen. Once Rhys walked away to another room, Dogmeat relaxed but refused to leave her side.

It seemed almost as soon as her anxiety and fear started to fade, the sounds of the vertibird
approaching stirred them up again. There was a muted thud as it landed above their heads, dust raining down on them.

Danse looked at her, brown eyes bright with joy, “Follow me.”

For a moment as she watched him leave, Alice was frozen in place. The time had finally come and she had yet to get her fears under control. Haylen startled her when she put a warm, comforting hand on her arm. “It’s okay, Alice. You’ve got this. Think of all you’ve accomplished since you left the vault. Look at you know, ready to become a soldier. Flying in a vertibird is nothing at all.”

Looking up into her compassionate eyes, Alice felt a little of the anxiety fade. Although, she knew once she made it to the vertibird, she’d flounder and more than likely, Danse would turn her away.

“Would...would you come up there with me?”

Haylen smiled down at her, “Of course. Come on!” She turned and raced towards the top of the building, Alice following much more slowly behind her.

Flying was exhilarating!

Getting on board the vertibird hadn’t been easy task. Danse climbed on first and extended a metal hand down to help her up. Reaching out for it and willing her body to obey her commands had been an exercise in a willpower she hadn’t known she’d possessed. The urge to dig her heels into the roof beneath her almost won out.

Dogmeat jumped up inside and plopped down, tongue lolling as he panted. His head tilted when he looked at her as if to say, “Come on? What’re you waiting for? There are adventures to be had!”

Oh to live the life of a dog. Well, at least this dog.

Once Danse was sure everything was in order, he took up a position at the minigun. Her stomach dropped as the vertibird rose and banked hard but once they were airborne, Alice felt like a kid at Christmas, wide-eyed in wonder with the sights around her.

“The Commonwealth looks different from up here, doesn’t it?” Danse had to shout to be heard over the deafening noise inside the ‘bird, blades chopping over their heads and wind rushing through both open doors.

His sudden words startled Alice from her rapture. Turning her head towards him, she was struck by how boyish he looked at the moment, how...approachable and friendly his demeanor was. It appeared he liked to fly as well.

Gazing past him at the Commonwealth outside the open door, she had to agree. Even the damage and the years of neglect and deterioration couldn’t take away from the thrill she felt in being up here. A split second of sadness passed through her. Would that this flight could go on forever, up here away from the ravaged world below, away from her very real fears and anxiety. Closing her eyes, she let the cool rush of air glide over her skin, enjoying this moment for as long as it lasted.

All too soon, it seemed their ride was coming to a close. She marveled at the difference between air travel versus foot travel. Maybe as a soldier of the Brotherhood, this would be a more common occurrence. It was certainly something she could get used to.
“There she is. It has been far too long since I’ve been on the Prydwen.”

Hearing the reverence in Danse’s words, Alice opened her eyes and sucked in a breath at the sight before her. It was like looking back in time. She remembered a picture book she’d found in the library so many years ago, telling a story about a blimp named the Hindenburg and it’s tragic fate. Dear God, she hoped that wouldn’t befall her while she was ever on board. What a horrible way to die. And that thought had her anxiety kicking back into overdrive.

She felt powerless against the onslaught but again, dug deep inside her for the strength to bank it’s fires. Through the open door her eyes roamed the length of the giant balloon hovering in the sky against a backdrop of cerulean blue. It loomed larger and larger as they neared it and Alice was overwhelmed by its sheer size; larger than she could have ever imagined. The pictures in the books could never hint at the reality before her. The silver skin wrapping it’s metal frame sparkled in the sunlight, almost blinding in its intensity.

As they flew ever closer, Danse’s demeanor changed as the mantle of Paladin settled over him again; rigid, composed...every inch the soldier. Alice missed the small glimpse she’d been given into the very real, very approachable civilian he could be, may have been once before the Brotherhood.

His next words were shouted into the air rushing by her ears, “Get ready, soldier, we’ll be docking soon. Brace yourself. And remember, everything you’ve known before will have no bearing on your life in the Brotherhood from here on out. I suggest you utilize the experience, supplies and training to your advantage. All that you’re taught from this point forward will make the Commonwealth less fearful and help you traverse your way through it, ready to take on any challenge. Adhere to our code and you’ll find your place.”

His words caused a frisson of fear to run down or spine...or was this anticipation? In any case, this was real, it was happening right now. Alice knew she was going to have to steel herself against any onslaughts of anxiety or fear. Tiny as she was as well as a female, she just knew she would have to work harder than anyone. What had she been thinking? Closing her eyes, she sent out a plea for Nate to talk to her, give her words of encouragement from beyond the grave. However, those pleas went unanswered; they had for awhile now. Sadness colored her emotions in a blue haze.

A hard jolt rocked her body even strapped snugly into the harness and Alice’s eyes snapped open. Relief overrode her usual reaction of fear. They were docking, the jolt was just as Danse had warned. He left his post at the minigun and got to work unbuckling the harness for her and then the one for Dogmeat, talking to her as he worked quickly.

“First, we’ll check in with Lancer-Captain Kells on the main deck.” Brown eyes met hers in a fierce stare, “Don’t leave my side and answer any questions he asks. Be quick, brief and truthful. And always show him and any other soldier here the utmost respect.”

He was all business. Climbing out of the ‘bird, he turned to help her down. Thank goodness, too. Her legs felt like cooked noodles all limp and wobbly. Dogmeat jumped out after her and trotted off like he flew on vertibirds every day.

Dance turned, striding away purposefully. Alice took a few steps, slowing as she gazed around her, trying to look everywhere at once. It was a wonder she didn’t fall over the edge and plunge headlong to her death as distracted as she was. Her eyes barely processed one thing before lighting on the next. Never, in her wildest dreams, would she ever have imagined being on a ship like this, floating in the clouds. She felt like an actor in a sci-fi movie, as if this couldn’t possibly real and instead, just a prop..
“Initiate!”

The words thundered down the walkway, sound snapping over her like lightning. Her body stiffened in response, a wayward child caught dawdling. Turning away from the intricate details of the ship, she strode purposefully towards Danse and the man standing next to him. Two pairs of eyes regarded her, sharp and expecting complete obedience. The soft padding of Dogmeat followed behind her.

“Sir.” The word tasted foreign on her lips.

“Is this the new recruit, Paladin?” The man standing next to Danse gave off an air of impatience, as if he clearly had better things to do than waste his valuable time on a raw recruit from the Commonwealth. Alice had no doubt she didn’t measure up in his eyes as to be worthy of joining the Brotherhood.

“Yes, sir. I promoted her in the field to Initiate and would like to be her sponsor and initiate her into the Brotherhood personally.”

“Is that so. I value your judgement, Paladin, but I feel the need to ask. Are you sure about this?”

Danse bristled at the doubt in the older man’s...wait, Alice searched her brain, Lancer-Captain Kell’s words. Ranks and titles had never interested her when Nate spoke about them and had always had trouble remembering them and the order in which they went, whether higher or lower. It was all so confusing. She would do well to remember them now.

“Sir, I think she will be an asset to the Brotherhood.”

“We have read your reports, Paladin. In any case, Elder Maxson granted your request. The recruit is now your charge and you will be responsible for getting her outfitted and for her training.”

“Thank you, Sir. Are their orders for me?”

“Only to remain on the Prydwen until you’re given further instructions.”

“Ad Victoriam, Sir.” Danse saluted the Lancer-Captain with that chest thumping action. Alice resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Gorillas in action.

“Ad Victoriam, Paladin.”

Well, that was out of the way. Maybe Alice could breathe again. Danse turned to head inside the ship. A stray thought twined its way through her head, unbidden. All the men and their self-important chest thumping, such self-important airs causing the balloon to swell and stay afloat. She had to fight not to laugh out loud. That was so unlike her. Must be Hancock’s influence.

Turning to follow Danse, she was effectively frozen in place as sharp words rang out behind her, “Initiate! We’re not done here yet.”

Alice couldn’t help it. His words made her stand straight and stiff in his presence, trying to be taller than she was.

Dark eyes fixed on her, no expression on the Lancer-Captain’s face almost as if in challenge. She refused to show fear, not entirely sure how successful it was. Finally, those piercing eyes drifted away from own, trailed up and down her body dispassionately. Almost as if he was sizing up her worth in a single uninterested glance. Coming back to rest on her face, Alice felt little better than a speck of dirt.
“So,” that one syllable held a world of meaning, none of it good, “you’re the vault dweller Danse has taken under his wing.” An exclamation of doubt slipped between tight lips. “You don’t look much like a soldier to me.”

Alice had no idea where the little imp in her head came from but it urged her to speak. There was no way that was going to happen. Then she opened her mouth, “Looks can be deceiving.” Uh-oh. Belatedly, she added, “Sir.”

There was no way she’d just seen a tiny lift of the corner of his mouth. A trick of the light. It had to be.

“Which is why I personally scrutinize every single recruit that comes on board. Without exception. After reading Danse’s reports, it’s clear he thinks you’ll be an asset to our cause. If you think an endorsement from one of our highest ranking officers gives you preferential treatment, I suggest you wipe that thought out of your head now. I will not allow a common vault dweller to jeopardize our mission or our goals. In my experience, accepting outsiders like your self into our ranks has met with disastrous results. So, anything you achieve here will be earned with hard work and determination and the adherence to our code of honor. Do I make myself clear, Initiate?”

“Absolutely, Sir.”

“Good. That will be all. At this time, your orders are to proceed to the Command Deck for Elder Maxson’s address. He’ll want to have a word with you once he’s finished. Head out, soldier.”

“Yes, Sir.”

She did an about face and strongly quelled the urge to run. That urge was only held in check by the smallest of margins. It was time to meet the famous Elder Maxson everyone she'd met so far spoke so highly of. Alice wondered if he was just as bad as the politicians from before the war or if maybe, this man might actually be someone to look up to.
Alice made her way inside the main door of the Prydwen, startled when the Knight in power armor, standing guard at the door spoke up, “Welcome aboard.”

She smiled, or tried to, noting that her anxiety was taking hold again. Every new experience brought it forward again and she was tired of the constant fight, the roller coaster ride of highs and lows.

“Thank you,” she muttered quietly. As she opened the door, Dogmeat slipping by in front of her. Alice followed, standing still just inside the doorway. A man’s deep and authoritative voice echoed down the hall from a room just beyond where she stood. That must be the command deck.

Glancing around her, she saw no signs of Danse. It appeared he’d left her to navigate the ship on her own. Briefly, she wondered if this was her first test. A test she was already late for by the looks of it. Quietly, she slipped in as the man was turned away, adopting the same parade rest stance as the rest of the recruits.

"Brothers and Sisters, the road behind has been long and fraught with difficulty. Each and every one of you has surpassed my expectations by rapidly facilitating our arrival in the Commonwealth. You have accomplished this amazing feat without a hint of purpose or direction, and most impressively, without question. Now that the ship is in position, it is time to reveal our purpose and our mission. Beneath the Commonwealth there is a cancer... known as the Institute, a malignant growth that needs to be cut before it infects the surface."

Alice tuned out the sound of the commanding voice as it droned on. The Elder was charismatic. There was no doubt in her mind in regards to that but Alice had never been able to concentrate on long winded speeches. Looking towards the front of the room, she noticed Dogmeat completely won over, resting on his haunches, forepaws dangling in front of him like a good little soldier. Figures. Her eyes glazed over as she waited for it all to end.

A loud chorus of ‘Ad Victoriam!’ rang out into the quiet after the Elder’s speech, bringing her
attention back to the tall, imposing man at the front of the room. Everything about him was so precise: thick dark hair with not a strand out of place, his mannerisms, his perfectly controlled pacing back and forth and carefully cultivated words. The only thing that was out of place was his wild and untamed beard.

The man was also a solid wall of muscle. Comparing him to Nate or even Danse, she saw that he wasn’t quite as tall as either of them but had a much stockier build. The heavy coat he wore seemed to add to his bulk. How much of it was illusion?

As the rest of the recruits filed out of the room, piercing ice blue eyes met hers and all thoughts fled abruptly. Alice felt like she was being scrutinized for any potential flaws. The man turned away, his broad shoulders stretching the coat as his arms came to rest behind him. That coat was no illusion. He filled it out, almost bursting it at its seams. Thankfully, his intense eyes had turned to gaze at the Commonwealth spread out beyond the windows. She was grateful for the reprieve.

He spoke quietly now, still as impassioned and no less forceful, “I care about them, you know. The people of the Commonwealth.”

Silence followed his words. Was he waiting for her acknowledgement? What could she say that he would want to hear? Attempting to extend an olive branch so to speak, she forced words past her lips, “I--I can see that.”

“I just hope our timely arrival will be enough to save them from being burned by the fire that grows beneath them.”

Whoa. That was...deep. Not for the first time, Alice wondered what the Brotherhood’s objective truly was. Her thoughts flashed back to Cambridge when Danse had explained to her who they were and their mission. Never actively engaging in the world around her, content to let the more critical agendas pass her by back before the bombs, she was finding herself more involved in what went on around her now. The subtle nuances and hidden meanings in random words were like a battlefield all around her. She often felt like she was navigating through a field of landmines, something far beyond her expertise, which happened to be mostly nonexistent.

“The mistakes that gave us this,” his hand swung out to encompass all that extended beyond the windows, “cannot be repeated.” He turned on his heel, facing her again. Those eyes, such a startlingly clear shade of icy blue, pinned her in place. It was eerie, as if he could see deep into her soul.

“I...I’m convinced, sir.” She wasn’t but he certainly didn’t need to know her doubts or this odd feeling that slithered through her gut. Never having been in a situation like this, Alice had no idea what to make of that odd feeling, no idea how to react. She could only hope she was convincing enough to get away from him unscathed. His intensity was overwhelming, frightening actually.

“Good.” He appeared to relax, changing the subject. “Danse’s reports have been read and reviewed. It appears he thinks you’d be an asset to the Brotherhood of Steel. As he is my most trusted officer, that recommendation comes highly. In fact, you couldn’t get one better.”

The words were generous and the delivery of them nothing like the Lancer-Captain Kells’ had been. Still, Alice was wary. At the moment, it was probably best to be neutral in her actions and words as she learned her way around this ship and the ideals of the Brotherhood. Talk about a learning curve. It was hard not to glance over her shoulder, hoping to see Danse standing behind her. She had no idea where he’d gone or what she was supposed to do after this. Even Dogmeat lay near the doorway, for once not at her side. Traitor.
“In light of those reports, I’m granting you the rank of Knight. You will now receive a suit of power armor, as befitting your new rank.”

Alice nearly choked. She was going to have to wear that big armor plated suit like Danse? That was never going to happen. Prone to panic attacks and clumsy as well Alice couldn’t see herself walking around in power armor. Besides, she was tiny and...oh, no, she’d be closed up inside one. Her throat started to close, just the thought of that confined space making her claustrophobic. They couldn’t possibly fit her inside of one. Struggling to breath normally, Alice could only hope this conversation would soon be over.

“Now, I suggest you familiarize yourself with the Prydwen as well as the staff that keeps her running safely and securely. Once you’re done, report back to me here. I’ll have orders ready. Ad Victoriam, Knight.” His hand whipped out and across his body, fist thumping his chest.

The breath rushed back into her lungs on a barely held in laugh. Good grief, the Brotherhood salute was like a barbaric ritual for cavemen. She repeated the gesture, albeit not with quite the same enthusiasm as the man before her. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to notice. He turned and walked a few steps away, once more standing before the windows, arms held rigidly behind him. She wondered if he spent most of his time here, just staring out those windows. What a lonely existence...

Staring at the ladder that went below decks before finally taking a deep breath and reaching for it, Alice carefully climbed down to the lower decks. A long narrow hallway stretched on before and near the other end, she spied Danse in conversation with some Knights and Scribes. Making her way there, she was relieved when the group scattered, leaving her alone with the Paladin.

“So, what did you think of Elder Maxson?”

Alice thought about what to reveal of her reaction. On the one hand, he terrified her with his intensity and laser sharp focus as well as the conviction for ridding the Commonwealth of ‘abominations.’ On the other hand, she was astonished at how young he was once she’d seen him up close. It was like he was a contradiction of so many things, she had a hard time trying to understand her reaction. Likely, Danse wouldn’t approve of anything negative.

“He’s so young! Do you--” Alice choked on the words, took a breath, forced them out in an almost unintelligible torrent, “Do you ever question his youth, his vision for the Brotherhood?”

Surprisingly, Danse didn’t berate her for her doubts. It almost seemed as if he’d expected her answer. “Don’t let his age fool you. Elder Maxson is not only a brilliant tactician, he’s also a formidable and steadfast soldier in battle and his vision for the future of the Brotherhood is highly regarded. The Elder is the epitome of a trustworthy and genuine leader. I would follow him anywhere, without question.”

Well, when you put it that way. Still, Alice just stared at Danse. It was clear the Paladin had a bit of hero worship going on towards Elder Maxson. Wonderful. She was beginning to doubt this idea of joining the Brotherhood. But who else had the weapons, ammunition and soldiers at their disposal to help her in her quest. One she hadn’t been forthcoming about. Would Danse go to the Elder and spill all her secrets once she told him? Only time would tell.
“So, you’re really that confident in this vision he had and his plans for the Commonwealth?”

Danse went on to explain the changes Maxson had made from what the Brotherhood had been under leadership of the Elder before him to what it was now. Alice thought what they had been doing before sounded noble, though probably not the best path for a military organization. Being married to a soldier had taught her a few things. Yet, she could see a benefit in combining both ideals but as a woman, her opinions likely wouldn’t count for anything. In any case, it was nice to have Danse speaking to her as if they were equals. Maybe he was starting to trust her more as a potential soldier.

And then he went and burst her bubble. Again. “I hope you understand and appreciate the kind of chance I’m taking by accepting you into the ranks of the Brotherhood in such a short time. Not to put too fine a point on it but if you screw up, we go down together.”

Well then. So much for feeling like equals. Honestly, she should have known better. How could this man cause such conflicting emotions in her? Wasn’t it enough she had her own demons that made her feel like she was on a rollercoaster ride from hell? Apparently not. Now she had this soldier in front of her doing the same. It was enough to make Alice want to disappear forever and leave this world behind.

“Alright then. It’s important for you to familiarize yourself with the ship as well as its crew. As your sponsor, it would be wise to take me with you.”

“Okay. Let’s go then. Where should I start?”

“You’ve met Lancer-Captain Kells already. That leaves four more crew members who are paramount in keeping the Prydwen in top shape. They would be Procter Teagan in charge of supplies and requisitions, Proctor Ingram in charge of power armor and any repairs on the ship, Proctor Quinlan who is in charge of records and information and Knight-Captain Cade in charge of medical.”

Having spotted the power armor bay just beyond Danse, Alice decided it might be best to get that meeting over with. She wasn’t sure how well she’d do, hoped there would be no panic attacks. First or last, it was a meeting she’d have to endure. Heading in that direction, she heard the heavy footfalls of Danse in his power armor follow behind her. Despite his ability to be an ass at times, she was oddly reassured that he would be with her. Maybe she could get through this relatively unscathed.

Alice hesitated once she crossed the threshold into the bay. Who was Proctor Ingram? Before she could figure it out, a woman with wild red hair, face streaked with grease, approached her in a power armor frame. Rooted to the spot in panic, Alice could only stare at her.

“So, you’re the new recruit, huh?” The woman’s brown eyes traveled up and down, sizing Alice up. “Not exactly what I was expecting.”

That snapped Alice out of her trance. It was almost the exact same thing Kells had said. What was with these Brotherhood people...er, soldiers?

Setting a hand on her hip, Alice looked up at her through narrowed eyes, “What were you expecting then?”

A smirk tipped up one corner of the Procter’s mouth in response, “The last batch of recruits were less than exemplary. In fact, they hadn’t bathed in...well possibly ever, they were covered in bruises and scrapes and damn near starving to death. Not sure what’s become of them but I think
they were just really here for free food and clothing.” Those brown eyes narrowed as she continued, “You aren’t like that at all. I’d say you have goals, maybe a mission to accomplish, and you mean business. Somebody like you? Well, that’s what the Brotherhood needs.”

Sighing in relief, genuinely surprised at Ingram’s spot on insight as well as her praise, Alice relaxed. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all. She could do this, actually found herself liking Ingram.

“In any case, I’m Ingram and this grease pit is usually where you’ll find me. I’m usually working on someone’s power armor, keeping the Prydwen from falling from the sky or a robot that’s gone wonky. Not enough time in the day for everything thrown on my plate, especially since I’m not as agile as I used to be. This rig isn’t the best but at least I get around.”

Alice looked it over, surprised to notice that Ingram had lost her legs, using the power armor to move around. Her eyes snapped up to Ingram’s in shock, only to see honest humor in them. Apparently, she didn’t consider the loss that big of an issue or had just become accustomed to it. Stumped for words, there was a pause but it was quickly filled by Ingram.

“I bet you’re here to grab some power armor. There’s a suit over in bay 3. The left leg actuator may be a bit sticky but it’ll keep you safe. Danse here can show you all you need to know about how to fix it and keep it in tip-top shape. I better get back to it now. Good luck, Knight. Glad to have you aboard.”

And with that, Ingram was gone. There hadn’t even been time to freeze up about the power armor. Hopefully, she could stall Danse when the time came.

Next came Proctor Teagan, quartermaster of the Prydwen. He was nice enough, yet Alice felt uncomfortable around him. She couldn’t even offer herself a reason as to why. Teagan was followed by Proctor Quinlan who made Alice feel more like a bug under a microscope, as if she was a waste of his time. But he did have a cat and the marginally helped redeem him. She could only wait and see how she felt as time went by. Through all the meetings, Dogmeat trailed behind her, never getting in the way. At this point, no one had mentioned his presence and she’d heard no negative remarks.

The last person she had to meet was Knight-Captain Cade in the med bay. “Excuse me. Knight-Captain Cade, do you have a moment?”

“Hello there. Glad you finally stopped by, soldier.”

Finally? Was he upset because Alice came to him last? Studying his face, she could detect no animosity. Unless he hid it well.

“Ready for your medical exam?”

Wait. What? No one told her she was going to need an exam. She hated doctors. Even giving birth to Shaun, she’d been a basket case, had needed to have an epidural. Of course, it was mostly for the pain but she could have sworn as the medicine took hold, there was a collective sigh of relief in the room for the doctors and nurses alike. She has become calm and coherent instead of freaked out and neurotic. Nate, as usual, had been her rock.

Coming back to the present, she could feel herself start to freeze up, the thought of donning some apocalyptic type of hospital gown in front of this man or even Danse terrifying. Her face flamed a bright tomato red as that thought crossed her mind.
Seeing her distress, the Knight-Captain chuckled, the warm sound easing the squeezing pressure of her heart. “Relax, soldier. It’s only a series of questions.” He reached for a clipboard, eyes glancing over it before turning back to her, kindness in their depths.

“I just need you to answer these questions as best as you can. So, first question: As a child, were you ever exposed to radiation for an extended period of time?”

That was an odd question. Danse didn’t know her whole story but she knew Haylen did. Wouldn’t she have had to turn in any information she had on Alice as well? This wasn’t exactly how she wanted Danse to find out but it couldn’t be helped at this point.

“There’s nothing in my records already? I’m from a vault.” She gave a vague explanation just in case.

“Hmmm, let me check my notes.” He looked back at his clipboard, flipped a few pages, looked back up in astonishment. “You were a vault-dweller? Well then. You’re likely healthier than anyone else on board! Sorry I missed that in your records. Still, let’s keep going with the questions. I still have to ask them.”

Alice just nodded at him in response. Might as well just get this over with. Thankfully, she still hadn’t had to give away any information about where she came from...or anything else. When she and Danse headed back into the Commonwealth, she’d make a point to tell him the truth. He deserved it after all, bringing her here, sponsoring her.

“Alright, second question. Have you ever had or come in contact with a person confirmed to be carrying a communicable disease?”

Alice felt her eyebrows climb upwards. “You...you’ve had problems with diseases on board?” So much for thinking she’d be safer with the Brotherhood than in most other areas of the Commonwealth.

“Well, it’s not entirely impossible for our recon teams to come across environments that are contaminated or encounter creatures that carry disease. We’d rather not have a single soldier of our crew infecting the whole ship. You do understand, I’m sure. In any case, this is about you and the question still stands. Have you?”

“Well, I’ve never really been sick. Ever.”

“Very good. Third question.” He glanced down at his clipboard, having been jotting down her information and answers for each one. “I would appreciate your absolute honesty regarding this question.”

The look on his face, like that of a father asking his daughter if she slept with someone, had Alice cringing. Would they really ask something like that of their recruits?

“Have you ever had sexual relations with any species considered non-human?”

Wow. They would. Only this question was ten times worse. Alice could feel her face flame in embarrassment and she hadn’t even done anything! With anyone! Not since before the bombs! Non-human? What did they...wait, would they consider a ghoul non-human or even Nick? Oh boy. This organization, military regime, whatever the hell name they gave it...they were seriously nuts.

Alice opened her mouth to shout no but it wasn’t what came out. Curiosity getting the better of her, “That happens so often you have to ask that question?”
He didn’t look happy when he answered, “You’d be surprised how many wastelanders answer yes to that question.”

Alice couldn’t repress a shudder of revulsion at the thought. She liked Hancock well enough but to...oh, no. She absolutely refused to go there. “No, I absolutely have not.”

“Good, good.”

“Okay, last question.” He didn’t even look down before asking it, instead staring directly into her eyes, “Would you have any problems pulling the trigger on an enemy of the Brotherhood whether they are human, formerly human or machine?”

What? “That’s not exactly a medical type of question. Isn’t it more about a person’s morals?”

“Oh, absolutely it is. The mental state of the Brotherhood is just as important as the physical, in some cases even moreso. At least in my professional opinion. Anyone that hesitates to fire in combat due to misguided moral standards is definitely not Brotherhood material. Now, what’s your answer?”

“I...I don’t think so.” As long as it didn’t apply to Nick or Hancock.

“Then we’re done here. I’ve got all the information from you I need and I think you’ll fit in well with the Brotherhood. I believe you’re now ready to begin your duties immediately. Remember, come see me right away if you ever need medical attention.”

Suitably dismissed as the Knight-Captain logged into his terminal, Alice turned to go. Danse was standing just outside the door, Dogmeat at his feet. Likely, he’d heard everything. How embarrassing! She was just glad it was all over and done with. Of course, now she had to go face Elder Maxson for her next set of orders.

“All done then? Elder Maxson wanted you to report for your orders but I requested permission to get you outfitted with Brotherhood gear and your personal set of power armor as well as instruction in its proper care. I will also train you on how to use it. He’s granted his permission. Follow me, Knight. Let’s get you into a suit of power armor.”

Suddenly, Alice wished she was headed to speak to Elder Maxson instead.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always for sticking with me, for kudos and comments. I thrive on those and none of you disappoint!!! I'm beyond grateful, as well as a little astonished, at the love for Alice but I will happily soak it all in :)

Chapter Summary

Just when Alice thinks she's getting a handle on this new life, it throws her more curve balls.

Chapter Notes

Okay, not going to complain about it being a filler chapter lol It's not, really, but just some background filler from Alice's POV and I think important to the ongoing story ;)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

Once again, Alice managed to slip out of training with the power armor or more like a short reprieve. Danse ordered her to follow him as he went down flights of stairs deep into the belly of the ship. There was a whole world underneath the areas above she’d become somewhat familiar with.

Below decks housed the sleeping areas for the Knights, Scribes and Squires. Alice was surprised to
find that Squires were merely young children. When she questioned Danse why children were
allowed on board if they were at war, he responded, “I never liked having squires aboard a
warship, but Maxson thinks they need to train under fire.”

More and more, Alice was finding she didn’t like Maxson at all. She also got to meet Scribe Neriah
who was busy in her science lab studying animals, plants and various other specimens from the
Commonwealth. There were mole rats, the usual plants Alice knew of as well as some odd looking
ones, the bodies of what they called a Gen 1 synth and a super mutant. The smell alone down here
would have driven Alice topside.

Upon being introduced to Alice, she launched into a scientific spiel. She was on the verge of
discovering how all these specimens adapted to the radiation and how she could use that to make
Rad-X stronger to combat radiation poisoning. Alice felt herself drifting away from the
conversation, eyes glazing over as it all went right over her head. This type of science had always
been lost on her.

Noticing her disinterest, Neriah turned back to her studies with a brisk dismissal and then, almost
as an afterthought, turned back around. “These specimens I’ve captured here can only produce so
much blood and genetic material. If I try and harvest too much, I’ll lose them completely. I need
more samples of blood from the creatures roaming the Commonwealth. Would you be willing to
help?”

Alice wasn’t exactly sure what she could do to help, and the thought of collecting a blood sample
makes her whole body shudder, but it might be a good idea. Helping the Brotherhood with their
research could make her look good. “I guess so.”

“Excellent!” Neriah clapped her hands, eyes excited, almost feverish in their intensity. The image
of a deranged Dr. Frankenstein pops into Alice’s head. “I’ve modified your Pip-Boy to scan the
corpse of any freshly-killed creature that has the proper type of blood in its body. Just pick up any
viable sample and return it to me whenever you come back aboard. Once you hand them over, I’ll
pay you for any research materials you recover.”

Neriah turned back and immediately started her studies once again. Dismissed for good this time,
she noticed Danse standing off to the side, a look of approval on his face. Apparently, he was
happy she’d agreed to help. A warm feeling centered in her chest at that look and all thoughts of
getting samples of blood fled her mind.

They continued deeper into the ship until eventually Danse stopped beside a random bunk, “This is
yours. Whenever we’re on the Prydwen overnight, you’ll sleep here. Keep your provisions in this
locked box at the end of your bunk.”

He handed her a key. “Inside you’ll find your uniform, a few pieces of armor, a weapon and some
rations. Don the uniform and head back up to the armor bay. Quickly, Knight, there’s no time to
waste.”

He turned swiftly in his power armor, leaving her to follow his orders. Glancing around her, she
wasn’t sure where she was supposed to change. Was she just supposed to strip down right here, in
the open? Looking at her cot, she thought maybe she could dive under the blanket and change.
There was simply no way she was changing out in the open here where anyone could walk up on
her, especially in her underwear.

Opening the lockbox, she found everything just as Danse described. Taking out the uniform, she
unfolded it and sighed in frustration. She’d been hoping what she found would be the same
uniform that Haylen wore. This scrap of material was the orange fitted jumpsuit most of the BoS
soldiers wore. Wonderful. It was fitted and left nothing to the imagination, which might be okay if she had a curvy, hourglass kind of figure. Looking down at herself, she knew she more aptly resembled a board, just plain flat.

Alice managed to wriggle off her civilian clothes while under the blanket with a fair amount of ease. However, with mounting frustration, she barely managed to contort herself into the BoS uniform, much like what she imagined it would feel like to put on a straight jacket by herself. Crawling out from under the blanket and falling to the floor, she warily stood up, hoping no one had seen her. Just her luck, a female soldier stood nearby, having looked up when Alice fell to the floor, tumbling out from under the blanket.

By the look on her face, she’d been studiously ignoring the struggles going on, probably trying very hard to keep from laughing out loud at the blanket contorting itself on the cot. Blushing a furious shade of crimson, Alice could only stare at her, terrified at what the soldier might be thinking.

A warm smile broke out over her youthful face, light grey eyes sparkling with humor. “You look like you could use some help.”

Alice knew she must look like a hot mess. Her hair was wrapped around her sweaty face, tendrils sticking to her flushed cheeks like a sucker fish, strands stuck in her mouth. The uniform was tight in some places, loose in others. Not exactly a surprising result considering how she’d struggled to get it on in the darkness beneath the covers. The buckles clacked against each other every time she moved. Nodding shyly, she waited for the woman to approach her.

It turned out she wasn’t a woman, just a girl. A girl who looked so very young, which was surprising. Almost everyone she’d encountered, children and adults alike, all looked like they’d aged twice as fast in this world. Her dark brown skin was healthy, shining from the glow of the lighted lanterns scattered around. Her dark hair, what looked like a rich deep brown, was twisted into a tight bun that sat low, nearer to her neck. It was impossible to tell whether it was smooth or curly, long or short. Her eyes were a light grey, a startling contrast to her dark skin. She was incredibly beautiful, making Alice feel like an ugly duckling.

“I’m Meliah and you must be Alice.” At the surprised look, her smile grew. “Word travels fast on this ship. Especially when it concerns Danse. Half the soldiers in the Brotherhood have a thing for him.”

Alice blushed, not entirely immune to the Paladin herself. She wasn’t dead after all.

Meliah laughed. “Add another one to the list.” Her look became serious as she concentrated, deftly righting the uniform and fixing the buckles quickly. “Guard your heart, little one.” Stepping back, she passed a critical eye over Alice. “There, you’re all set. Best step to it. You don’t want to keep the Paladin waiting. Not sure how he is out in the ‘wealth but here on the ship? That soldier means business.” A wink followed the seriousness of her words.

“Thank you for helping me.”

Meliah grasped Alice’s hands, her own warm and soft. “My pleasure. I’ll see you again, I’m sure.” Winking at her, she turned back to her task, leaving Alice to make her way back to the power armor bay. As she topped the stairs, seeing Danse busy at a bench, Meliah’s words came back to her: Guard your heart, little one. What had she meant?

Pushing the strange encounter out of her head, she stepped forward. Might as well face the music. It was time to learn about power armor, hoping she wasn’t going to be trapped inside it too soon.
“Knight. I was beginning to wonder if you were avoiding me.”

Danse kneeled behind his armor, screwdriver in hand, tightening...something. There was a look of serious concentration on his face. He paused to look up when she didn’t respond, wiping a forearm across his brow to clear away the sweat before it could drip down.

“Alice? Are you alright?”

Was she? No. Just looking at that huge hulking body of metal, knowing at some point he was going to make her climb inside had her fighting back a wave of nausea. How was she supposed to admit such a weakness to him? Danse was a strong soldier who could do anything at all. He feared nothing.

Suddenly, Danse was standing right in front of her, concern replacing the earlier concentration on his features.

“I...I…” She couldn’t even push the words out, could feel herself starting to struggle for air.

A strong, warm hand landed on her shoulder. Alice started at in surprise and the hand was quickly pulled away. Danse had never touched her before, never acted like he cared. Glancing up at him, she was amazed at the obvious concern, even as it seemed to war with embarrassment. It was like she was seeing another layer of this man. How many were there under that gruff exterior?

“Follow me, Knight. I think we need to talk.”

Alice watched him walk away, unsure if she wanted to have this talk. Surely, this didn’t bode well. Biting back a sigh, she figured they might as well get it over with. She almost had to run to catch up to him. Once again, they headed down into the lower area of the ship. He seemed to be going somewhere that they could talk in private.

Following him down several flights of steps, he stopped near some crates, pulling one out for her to sit on. “This isn’t a formal meeting, Knight. I wanted somewhere we could have a private conversation. I just...need to clear the air.”

Alice was really confused now. So, she waited, almost afraid to move, to breathe, wondering what on earth was making the Paladin so nervous. She’d never seen him like this.

“I realize we may have gotten off on the wrong foot the first time we met, and I believe I owe you an apology.”

Alice barely kept her mouth from falling to the floor. Danse was apologizing? And to her? She must be delirious.

“I feel my expectations of you were unfair, basing them on the standards that the Brotherhood upholds and my belief that you would follow them without question. Without even having a history with us, that was...well, it was incredibly unfair to you. You’ve been adjusting quite well here today and I shouldn’t be pushing you so hard in light of all that.”

“I...uh, thank you.” Alice wasn’t quite sure how to respond, so kept it simple.
“You deserve it.”

He paused, gathering his thoughts before continuing. “I feel I owe you in an explanation as well. You see, back when I was an Initiate, my sponsor was Paladin Krieg. He was a tough squad leader, the toughest I’d ever served with. That man was a model soldier. He perfectly embodied the values of the Brotherhood, the values all of us trainees were striving to achieve. Krieg was fiercely loyal and secure in his beliefs. Brave to a fault. From the very beginning, he singled me out. It felt like he was pushing me harder than any of the other squad members. For years we fought side by side, had many close calls. I never knew why he treated me that way.”

Lost in thoughts of a time long gone, he paused. Alice wasn’t sure if she should say something or not but as the silence continued, she gathered her courage and spoke up, “Did you ever ask him why?”

As if waking up from the past, he looked at her, deep brown eyes serious as well as sad, “I’d considered doing exactly that. However, I never got that chance. I had been promoted to Paladin and given command of my own squad. I learned soon after that Krieg was killed at Adam’s Air Force Base. The news hit me hard, like someone had kicked me in the stomach.”

He looked past her, off into the distance. Again reliving memories but this time, his words didn’t stop. “I’d lost brothers and sisters before. It’s something you understand when you join.” His eyes returned to hers, “There’s always the chance you’ll give your life in defense of the cause you fight for. But Krieg’s death, it hit me harder than any other at the time.”

Turning to look at her again, Alice knew he was seeing her right now, not the past. “It’s taken a long time, but I realized the reason Krieg was so tough on me. It’s the same reason I’m so tough on you.”

Alice waited with her breath stuck in her lungs, not sure if she wanted to know why he was tough on her. She always seemed to be so clumsy around him, unsure of herself. Unless Dogmeat was threatened. Then all bets were off, though he still took her to task for throwing herself in danger. She looked down at floor, not able to handle the intensity in his gaze as he looked at her.

“Alice, I’m tough on you because I believe in you. I don’t want to see you waste that potential.”

Her head jerked up in surprise, mouth opening and closing as she struggled for words, feeling more like a fish gasping for air. Closing her mouth, she gulped, tried again. “I...I don’t know what to say.”

He smiled at her. He. Smiled. It transformed the soldier before her. In that moment, he actually looked like someone she could call a friend. But then her traitorous thoughts stomped that idea. *He’s your sponsor, Alice. Get a grip!*

“You don’t have to say anything. I promise I'll do my part keeping our relationship strong. I hope you'll continue to do the same.”

Their relationship? Oh, yes. *Professional relationship, Alice. Stop that!* “I will, Danse.”

He stood up straight, once more the Paladin. “Well, I said what I had to say. I hope that it meant something to you.”

Wow. Just like that, it was like a wall went up around him. The man behind the soldier was gone, just *poof*. And then, he did another about face, throwing Alice completely off again.

“I...trust that you’ll keep everything we said in confidence. Some of that information was of a
personal nature. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Oh, absolutely. I would never say anything.”

“I appreciate that. Now, would you like to tell me what was bothering you up in the power armor bay? I could tell something was wrong. I hope you realize that you can confide in me as your sponsor.”

Despite his obvious concern, Alice was still reluctant. He looked sincere, as if it really mattered to him that she was struggling with something. As she struggled to find the words to tell him in the best possible light, he spoke up again.

“If there is a problem, I need to know about it. I can’t have you jeopardizing the mission or getting one or both of us killed because of it.”

Just like that, all decisions of confiding in him fled. Of course he was a soldier first. His only concern was for the mission and that they came out of it alive. Granted, it wasn’t wrong for him to think that; she’d like to stay alive as well. Only, a part of her had hoped he truly meant it more as a mentor, as a...friend, maybe.

Swallowing down her fear, she steeled herself and looked him straight in the eye. And lied. “No, sir. There’s no problem. I’m ready to go.” Hopefully, he didn’t notice the waver in her voice.

Thankfully, she was sitting on her hands so he couldn’t see them. If they’d been in her lap, they would have been shaking.

He searched her face, looking for any signs that she was lying. How she managed not to shrink in the face of that, she wasn't sure, but somehow she did. He nodded once and strode past her, “Let’s get on with your training then.”

Oh boy. This was going to be the hardest thing she’d ever done.

She couldn’t believe she’d done it. Well, Ingram had helped. It was like she knew what Alice was struggling with. Danse had left to go to his quarters for something and left Alice to crawl into the power armor on her own, after showing her over and over how to jump inside. It was a good thing he hadn’t closed her inside it.

After he left, she’d managed to jump inside several more times, until she felt comfortable with the process. Her fear was subsiding gradually but she knew it would overwhelm her once that back of the power armor came down and closed her inside. Like a coffin.

That thought brought her back to Nate, whose body was still encased inside the frozen pod underneath the ground. His coffin, his grave. It had almost been hers as well. She pushed the thought away. There wasn’t time for that right now.

Sitting on a toolbox, she waited for Danse to come back. Fear determined to grip her heart in its vice, squeezing it out into her bloodstream like ice in her veins.

“You’re not the first to have trouble being closed up inside one of these.”

Her whole body jerked at the unexpected voice, she’d been so lost in her thoughts. Looking at the
source out of wide blue eyes, she saw Ingram standing near her. The first time she’d met her, only a few hours ago, the woman was all sarcasm and briskness. Now, her eyes showed kindness and understanding.

“We’ve had several Knights who couldn’t stand being enclosed in these steel suits. It’s not for everyone and it’s okay if you’d rather not wear it.” She paused, assessing Alice, “But I get the feeling you’re determined to overcome that and get inside. Maybe it’s because you don’t want to disappoint your sponsor.”

Alice felt heat move up her neck and across her face. She hadn’t realized it was so obvious. Why didn’t Danse say anything? What was she supposed to do? She wanted him to be proud of her but just jumping in this stupid steel suit made her heart beat so hard, it was painful. Somehow, she’d managed but...what happened when it closed her inside? What if she couldn’t breathe? What if...what if she died inside there?

“Alice…” Ingram’s voice broke through her frantic thoughts. “Alice!” How long had she been calling her name?

“Take a deep breath, kid. We’ll get you in there and Danse will never know. He hasn’t figured it out yet because he’s been too busy telling you what to do and how to do it, he hasn’t looked at the signs. I see them. Hell, I know them because I’ve watched countless Knights from across the room. I’m an observer, I guess you could say. So, you trust me?”

Slowly, hesitantly, Alice nodded. What else could she do? If Ingram’s ideas didn’t work, there truly was no hope for her. Danse would most likely refuse to sponsor her any longer, despite the black mark to his name. She had to do this, for him. No, not for him, for herself. And yet, why did it mattered so much to win his approval? She refused to go down that road.

“Okay, jump inside again.” At Alice’s sideways glance, Ingram chuckled, “No, I’m not going to shut it on you. Get up there.”

Alice stood up and jumped inside the power armor. Ingram appeared in front of her, voice muffled despite the back still being open. “I want you to walk forward. As I back up, follow me.”

Her voice was low, soothing, similar to the voice Alice used for Shaun when he was upset as a baby. It worked the same for her. Slowly, concentrating on the thick iron feet of the armor, she lifted her leg and moved her right foot forward. It was awkward. She felt clumsy. Just as clumsy in a steel suit as she did in real life. For some reason, she thought she’d move as smoothly as Danse in one of these. Ha!

“Easy. You have the right idea. It’s awkward at first, moving all that steel around your body. Feels unnatural. Like anything else, the more you do it, the easier it gets. Keep going.”

Alice kept at it, slowly inching her feet forward, one slow step at a time. Occasionally, she rocked from side to side, her heart ending up in her throat, terrified she would topple over and the back would slam shut, locking her inside. Her clumsiness marginally subsided but her fear was waning faster as she was more focused on trying to keep moving than whether or not she was stuck inside the suit.

Ingram continued to coax her and before she knew it, she was halfway around the bay. As Ingram congratulated her, she heard a hiss, a sharp snap and didn’t realize at first what happened. As she went to jump out of the suit, she realized what the sound had been. Someone had shut her inside.
Where She Stood

Chapter Summary

"And where she stood, she stood tall."

Chapter Notes

Found the quote on Google. Hopefully, I can find the source. Edit: Might be from a song by the Lumineers but they use the word when instead of where.

Let's just say, every time I go over this chapter it blows me away.

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alice fought for breath, choking, air stuck in her lungs. The black void, the edges of her vision becoming hazy and dark, was coming to claim her. An old, familiar friend. Sounds filtered towards her as if coming through a long tunnel. She could only just make out two voices; one higher-pitched, one deeper.

Her mind reached for the deeper tones, like a hand grasping for a life preserver. She didn't want to sink to the depths this time. “Save me,” she screamed, not realizing the words only echoed in her head. “Please! Save me!”

“Alice, open your eyes. Alice...look at me. ALICE!”

Her eyes snapped open, wide and startled. They zeroed on the person in front of her, the one the deep voice belonged to -- Danse. He was standing right in front of her, talking to her. Those deep brown eyes, as rich as the earth in the spring, fresh and full of new life, calmed her, centered her. His deep voice was a melody flowing through her, heart beat slowing to its tempo.

She kept her eyes trained on him.

“Can you hear me?”

Her head felt full of cotton distorting his words. She hoped her head actually moved as she nodded yes.

“Okay, I want you to do what I do. Watch me, Alice. Follow along with me.”

He inhaled, deep breath in. She did the same. He exhaled, let it out slowly. Again, she did the same. He kept talking in a slow steady rhythm and Alice felt herself drift away, content just to watch him and listen, following his actions without thought.

The rich baritone of his voice was soothing and as he continued to speak to her, it changed in her mind, becoming Nate’s voice. The words he used were so similar to Nate's, only subtle differences.
Her mind substituted the minute details in her precarious state.


Her eyes closed, drifting on the tide, letting her fear and anxiety wash away until she could breathe normally again. Opening her eyes once more, she called out a name.

“Nate.”

Danse’s brow furrowed in confusion, not sure who this Nate was. Right now, it didn't matter. It was of prime importance he get Alice out of that power armor immediately.

“Alice, I need you to press the lever I showed you. The one to release the back. Can you do that?”

The helmet tilted sideways as if in question or could it be she simply didn't understand? Damnit! Why hadn't she said something earlier when he asked her what was wrong? This could have been avoided.

“Alice. I need you to listen carefully.”

“Nate? What's going on?”

“Alice, I'm not Nate, I’m Dan--” oof.

“Go along with her, you idiot. It might be the only thing that gets her out of there.”

Danse’s eyes opened wide. Did Ingram just call him an idiot? And why would he pretend to be someone he was not? “I can’t--”

She cut him off again. “You can and you will,” she hissed against his ear.

Very well. Sometimes there was simply no arguing with that woman.

Looking into the glass eyeholes of the helmet, he spoke again, stumbling over his words. He hated being dishonest and lying to someone under his charge definitely qualified as that. “It…it’s me, Nate. You're in power armor, Alice. I'm trying to help you get out.”

“Power armor? Why would you let me wear your steel suit?”

“Because…” Wait, Nate had power armor? He hadn't known of any vault procuring a set of power armor. “Why does your vault have power armor?” He heard Ingram groan behind him.

“Vault? I didn't know you brought it to the vault. When did you do that?”

“Focus, Danse. Worry about the details later!” Ingram’s whisper was almost as loud as her normal voice.

Making a note to get those details when this was over, he kept trying to get through to Alice. “Remember the lever I showed you? To open the back? Can you press it?”
Much to the surprise of them both, Alice pushed it immediately and they heard the hiss as the hydraulics disengaged and the back of the power armor rose up.

Danse quickly moved around to the back. He froze when he heard her small, scared voice. “I can't get out Nate.” Danse could hear the sound of fear in her voice approaching the edge of panic. What was he supposed to do now? She thought he was Nate, something he’d gone along with against his better judgement, all because Ingram said it was the only thing that would work. It had but now, Alice would know he wasn’t Nate.

“Nate? Can you help me? Get me out, Please!”

The plaintive sound of her voice, her plea, was painful to hear. He felt just as awkward as when Haylen had wrapped her arms around him and cried her heart out on his shoulder. He had no idea what to do in a situation like this.

Ingram had no such problems, peppering him with instructions, appearing so suddenly at his side, he almost jumped in reflex. However, he was a much better soldier than that. “Put your hands around her waist, gently. Don't startle her. Let her know you’ll get her out.”

Reaching inside the suit of power armor, Danse settled his hands tentatively on each side of Alice’s waist. She was so incredibly tiny. How could he not crush her with his strength? “It’s okay, Alice. I’m here to help you. Just relax and I’ll get you out.”

Before he could figure out what to do, she’d backed out of the power armor, turned around and jumped into his arms, wrapping herself around him. Once again, he froze, unsure of how to react, arms held awkwardly at his sides. This was like Haylen all over again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ingram standing nearby, arms crossed, a huge grin threatening to split her face. Damn woman! How could she laugh at a time like this? How could she think this was acceptable? Everything about this was completely wrong! All he needed was for Elder Maxson to walk in and see this, or any of his brothers or sisters for that matter. That decided him, prying her arms from around his neck, he set the tiny woman down and away from him.

“Alice, I need you to focus.”

She looked up at him, the joy and relief on her face giving way to confusion. “Danse? What’s going on?”

Well, at least she knew who he was and where she was now. That would make this much easier. “I shut the back of the power armor on entering the bay, seeing that you and Ingram were training. Walking around with open power armor is hazardous in an area like this.” At that, he looked towards Ingram, disgruntled with the look she gave him. A look that said ‘so?’

Alice stared at him with wide, blue eyes. “You...you closed it on me?” As if she couldn’t believe he’d do something so heinous.

He confirmed, “I did. Now, care to tell me what this was all about?” From the look on her face, he knew she understood what he referred to.

Blushing furiously, her gaze angled downward away from his. “I...I get claustrophobic.”

Danse struggled to be understanding...and failed. “Knight, don’t you think that's important information? Don’t you think that’s something I should know? When I asked you before if something was bothering you, did you think I did that just to hear myself talk? You’re a Knight of the Brotherhood of Steel. I expect you to act as such. When I ask a question like that, it’s not to
belittle you or call attention to your failures. It’s important for me to know what we need to work on so that you don’t endanger yourself or others. When I ask you something, I expect an honest answer. Remember? The only things I require from you are honesty and respect. First, you lied to me. Second, you didn’t give me the respect to be able to help you through this. It’s only by chance that this tragedy unfolded here on the Prydwen in the armor bay. Do you have any idea what might have happened had this been in the field? You could have gotten yourself killed. You could have gotten both of us killed.”

Alice stood silently before him, her eyes once more on him. All color had leached from her face. Her blue eyes, if possible, were even larger, appearing to take up her whole face. He couldn’t stand there and face them. She was making him feel like a tyrant and he wasn’t. At least, he didn’t think he was. He’d always just been a good soldier, making sure anyone who served under him was the best and that they followed the ethics and codex of the Brotherhood.

He had to walk away before those eyes had him regretting everything he said or giving in and letting this whole catastrophe slide. Turning on his heel, he headed for his quarters, not caring what she did while he was gone. Maybe he’d made a grave mistake in judgement about her and the potential he thought he’d seen. It was on his lips to say exactly that but somehow, he refrained.

Hours later, he left his quarters in search of Alice. He still stood behind everything he’d said to her. But he’d also had time to think and had remembered his time under Krieg’s command. There’d been things he’d done he wasn’t proud of and been taken to task for them. In each instance, Krieg had come to him later to explain why he’d been so upset, what he expected going forward. Danse had always wanted to be the same type of leader. With Alice, he could do no less than what had been done for him.

Searching the Prydwen, he couldn’t find her in any of the locations he thought she might be. The first place he’d looked had been her assigned cot. She wasn’t there. Hadn’t been anywhere else he’d looked either. Upon entering the power armor bay for the third time, he encountered Ingram. The look on her face was one of understanding. For what, he wasn’t sure. “She’s on the forecastle. Why, I don’t know, as heights are something else she’s afraid of. Listen. Danse, I know what you said was all true and she needed to hear it, just go easy on her okay?”

Not sure exactly what he was going to do or say, he strode off without giving an answer. His heart beat at a steadily increasing pace. Why was she out on the forecastle if she was afraid? Had he pushed her to do something dramatic? Had he been too hard on her? Refusing to give rein to those thoughts, his strides still lengthened as he walked faster, rushing to get to her as soon as he could. If she did do something drastic, he’d never forgive himself.

Opening the door to the forecastle, he just barely kept it from slamming shut. Not wanting to startle her, he held on so it would close quietly. Alice stood at the far end. Even from here, he could see that her hands were gripped tight around the railing, hands white with a death grip. His heartbeat slowed marginally as he realized she’d likely be unable to jump.

Walking slowly and carefully, he silently made his way towards her. Halfway there, he was startled as her voice carried back over her shoulder.

“The demons I carry inside, they never let go. They’re persistent and resilient. I couldn’t -” a sharp intake of breath made him realize she was struggling to push the words from her throat, likely tight
with fear. “I couldn’t let you know. You’re so strong, an exemplary soldier. Now, just like Krieg, you’re the one the rest of strive to be like.”

Her words caught him off guard. His brothers and sisters wanted to be like him? A small surge of pride tried to take place in his chest but he willed it away. Now wasn’t the time.

High up in the air, only a small railing protecting them from an endless drop below, the strong wind buffeted them. He watched as her hair blew around her in a white-blonde flurry. Nothing else up here moved. Her legs were spread wide in a bid to keep herself steady. Her arms were locked straight.

“Alice, I-”

“NO! Let me finish. You wanted to know, didn’t you? Well, fine. Now you’ll damn well listen to me.”

Danse was stunned into silence.

“I’ve never fit in, never belonged. Anywhere. Not in my other life. At least, not until Nate. I don’t fit in here either. If anything, it’s even worse. This world is so different from the one I knew before. So desolate, so angry and terrifying. Back there, Nate gave me something I never had before. A home, a life...love. Complete and total love. He never asked me for anything I couldn’t give, never pushed me beyond my boundaries, only tried to help me survive. I’ve come to realize something about that though. He never pushed me, never expected more from me than he thought I could give. It helped me, in a way. I understand now that I was being the person he saw, even as he did his best to try and help. Back then, it worked for me, for us. I lost it all when the bombs fell. Once again, I became this terrified, anxiety-ridden little girl from my childhood. A character flaw that stayed with me as I became an adult.”

The words fled from her lips rapidly, running over each other. Danse wasn’t sure if she was trying to get them out before they were swallowed up inside again or if she was determined to show him who she truly was. He didn’t need to know. Well, he did but not like this. Never like this.

Having moved closer, he reached a hand towards her. What he intended to do, even he didn’t know but he had to do something.

“Don’t.”

He halted his movements, unsure of what exactly she meant. Only a few feet separated them now. Slowly, haltingly, her movements jerky, Alice turned to face him. His heart stuck in his chest, frozen, unable to beat.

She was chalk white, her eyes so large, so blue, they pierced him with their intensity. Still, that wasn’t what got to him. Her eyes were made all the more blue by the fact that she’d obviously been crying, eyes red-rimmed and puffy. He’d done this to her. Pushed her beyond her limits. The only one to blame right now was himself. He wasn’t the leader Krieg had been after all.

“Everything you said was true. Every. Single. Word. At first, I was bewildered. Then I was terrified you’d kick me out, refuse to sponsor me. Where am I supposed to go?”

Her breath caught on those words and Danse wondered if she would cry again. He didn’t think he could endure it if that happened. But she surprised him, this tiny slip of a woman. Her jaw jutted forward in defiance and he saw the strength underneath the fear. That was what he’d seen in her. Something she didn’t even see in herself.
He watched as she took a deep breath, seemed to grow right before his eyes, become stronger. “The more I thought about it, the more I realized you were right. We don’t always like what we’re told, especially when it’s the truth.” Those blue eyes zeroed in on him, their power piercing him. “I won’t ever give up. I’ll keep going no matter what. The thing is, I didn’t want to...no, I don’t ever want to disappoint you. You took a chance on me. You’re risking your reputation in the Brotherhood to sponsor me. I don’t ever want you to regret that. It’s why I didn’t say anything. From here on out, I promise to be truthful. I can’t say it’s going to be easy for me.”

She looked away from him and he saw her hands tighten even more on the railing, as if she’d forgotten where she was and only just remembered. He opened his mouth to say something, anything but she turned back, spearing him with a look that made any words impossible.

“Will you...will you give me another chance?”

“Alice, I would never dismiss you so easily.” He saw her shoulders sag in relief, much the same relief as he felt himself. That answer had been easy. “I meant everything I said. However, I’m sorry if my delivery was harsh. Maybe we could begin again?”

A tentative, although strained, smile crossed her face. A face still white with fear. “That would be nice.”

He was astounded at her confession and what it must have cost her to be truthful to him. He’d asked for honesty but this was far beyond anything he expected. This was raw and real. He had no concept of not belonging, at least as much as he could remember. The earliest memories of being a child muddied long since forgotten over time, he’d always had someone ever since he’d met Cutler. A friend he made when he needed one most, one who became more like a brother to him as time went on. Then, he’d joined the Brotherhood and everyone in it had become his family. He had a place he belonged. This was his home, the Prydwen.

He nodded at her. “Ready to go back in?”

“I’d like that. Only...”

He raised an eyebrow in question, wondering what other revelations might be forthcoming.

“I...um, can’t move.”

Oh. Reaching out, he carefully pried the grip of one hand from the railing and grasped her tiny hand in his. “Don’t worry, we’ll do this together.”

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, comments, criticism always welcome!

Thank you to those still here and welcome to those just finding this fic!
Chapter Summary

Figuring out how to have a loaded conversation was something akin to walking through a minefield.

Chapter Notes

Whew...managed one more chapter for this year! Found some inspo so I think I'm back again. Thank you all for your patience!

A big shout out to Purple_Martin for helping me square up this monstrosity I was calling a chapter. You're awesome ;)

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

The crew of two, and Dogmeat, was quiet as they flew over the Commonwealth in the vertibird. The absence of conversation was mostly due to the noise of the rotors and the wind rushing by outside. The sounds were muted by the power armor’s helmet, yet still loud enough to prevent any attempt at talking. She glanced down at Dogmeat, strapped in near her feet. The canine had lain down, staring out the open door, looking for all the world like this was just a normal day in the life of a dog. There were days she wished she could trade places.

When Danse said they were heading out to do some reconnaissance, Alice mustered up her courage and requested they stop in Sanctuary. Brows furrowed down in confusion, he’d wanted to know why. She’d known he would expect a reason. Not quite sure what she was going to say, she had opened her mouth and out came some lame excuse for checking on the Sanctuary settlement. Surprisingly, he hadn’t argued.

Later on, she’d found out just why Danse had been so accommodating. Proctor Teagen had called her over to him and explained his earlier comment on how to earn extra caps. At the time, she’d been interested. She never seemed to have enough of them.

The way the Proctor explained how to get them had shocked her. Assuring the cooperation of the settlers in getting their crops “by any means necessary.” If they couldn’t be convinced, then “take over the settlement.” Amazed at the entitlement the Brotherhood felt in regards to getting supplies, Alice found herself too shocked to form words. When she did find her voice, Danse had come to stand nearby.

It didn’t feel right to question the Proctor about the Brotherhood’s exploitive practices with Danse standing right there. She continued to keep her mouth shut. Not committing to the Proctor’s comments in any way, Alice turned away when his speech was done. The man’s indifference to what he was asking, the choice of words he’d used so matter of factly, sat like a lead weight inside her stomach. Maybe she could put her thoughts aside while checking her power armor and getting ready to leave. After she and Danse left the Prydwen behind, she could mention how she felt. It
was possible she’d just misunderstood.

Alice locked her knees inside the power armor as the vertibird landed behind the settlement, right on top of the vault. There’d been no chance to speak to Danse about either subject on her mind: the wind rushing past, the Lancer in the cockpit, the noise from the blades...none of it conducive to a serious conversation.

Once they were on the ground, Alice just about toppled out of the vertibird, embarrassing herself in front of Danse. Her legs felt like limp noodles, so it was only by his outstretched hand that she hadn’t fallen. With his hands grasping her shoulders, she could see by the look on his face he had questions. He wasn’t voicing them out loud. Yet.

Unsure of what Preston and the others would think with a vertibird touching down, she wasn’t going to worry about it. More important things were on her mind. First and foremost was telling Danse about her past. This wasn’t quite how she’d planned to have that conversation. She’d imagined just the two of them heading out on a mission, plenty of time for her to explain where she’d come from...and when. He’d be too focused on the mission to be upset or worse, leave her behind somewhere. That was what she hoped, anyway. If there was one consistent lesson she’d learned since leaving the vault, it was to always keep moving forward.

Standing atop the enormous gear lift of the vault, Alice watched as the vertibird took off, growing smaller in the sky. So many thoughts swirled inside her head -- the world before and the one now, the life she’d been torn from and the one she lived now. If she continued to dwell on them, she’d simply crumble under their weight. Digging deep for the inner strength existing somewhere inside, she pushed the thoughts away. What she wouldn’t give sometimes, to be the woman she’d been before. A woman who would run from pain and the struggle of survival and pretend it couldn’t harm her. Those days were no more.

Dogmeat had jumped out of the vertibird the minute Alice’s hands had released him of his harness. Nose to the ground, his weaved back and forth, finding scents he was familiar with. He let out a joyful bark, wagging his tail. Clearly, he was happy to be home. She watched as his paws hit the path headed down to Sanctuary. Time to say hello to old friends. As she watched him trot away, Alice was envious of the feeling of being free Dogmeat must have felt.

Looking around, Alice felt time warp around her. The day the bombs fell became real once again, disorienting her to her surroundings. She could hear the vertibirds hovering over Sanctuary, the soldiers and Vault-Tec employees yelling, people screaming or begging frantically to be allowed inside the vault.

She could see Nate right there in front of her, Shaun held safely in his arms. Could touch them if she just reached out her hand…

Their neighbors stood around them -- the ones that had made it through the gate. Some twisted their hands over and over, others clasped them tightly together. Quiet moans filled the air, whispers of prayers sent up to God or murmurs of despair and hope.

It was all over so suddenly. A blinding flash of orange-red light, a whoosh of hot, dry air and then a cloud of dust and debris a mile high came barreling towards them--

“Alice!”

Blinking rapidly, she saw the world again as it was now: dry, barren, stripped of life. Danse stared at her curiously but also with concern written across his handsome features and she turned away, eyes falling to her feet. They stood on the doorway that led to her old life but also heralded the
beginning of this one. The doorway to the vault she’d been frozen in.

A place Nate still rested, encased in a frozen sarcophagus.

Her mind having drifted again, she tuned in to something Danse was saying, “...Vault-Tec abomination. I’d bet a month's pay that inside this vault is another illicit experiment gone wrong.”

A sound alerted them to another presence. Footsteps were coming up the path behind them. The tip of a modified musket became visible first, then a worn, dusty brown hat pinned up on one side, followed by a beige duster. Alice felt a real smile curl her lip upwards. In some ways, it was good to be back.

“What does the Brotherhood want with us?”

Preston’s voice carried ahead of him. His laser gun was pointed downwards, voice filled with curiosity alone. Looking behind her, she saw that Danse was tense, safety off and finger around the trigger guard. Ready for anything as always but at least he wasn’t being openly suspicious.

“Preston...it’s me.” She hoped her voice wasn’t too distorted inside the helmet.

Hat tilting to one side, Preston’s eyebrows disappeared beneath the brim, “Alice?”

She smiled to see how shocked he was, only he couldn’t see it. Thinking of the woman he’d sent off months ago, a meek little girl really, his response wasn’t entirely a surprise. “Yes. I’m sure you never expected this.”

This was not going to work. Releasing the lever, she waited for the back to open, jumping out on unsteady legs as soon as she was able. Once again, Danse was there to help, steadying her with a steel hand.

Walking out from behind the power armor over to Preston, she saw his eyes narrow at her uniform before he carefully schooled his face into a neutral expression. She would need to talk with him later, find out how he felt about the Brotherhood and the Institute. Living his whole life in the Commonwealth, Preston would surely have good insight and no doubt be a wealth of information from his time as a Minuteman. She could count on Preston to give her an honest review, regardless of what he truly thought of them.

“Well, you're right about that. I’ve been checking with every trader, hoping for word from you or any information really. I was worried I sent you off to your death.”

His tone wasn't exactly accusatory but Alice felt her face heat up with shame. She hadn't once thought of Preston: of how he'd cared for her, listened to her, taught her all he could before sending her off. It never occurred to her he'd even care. But it should have. Preston was just that kind of person. Alice walked over and wrapped her arms around him in a hug. He responded in kind.

Sensing her distress, he tilted her face up with his finger, “Hey, Alice. It's alright. You're here now, in one piece.” His eyes moved past her. “I guess you could have done worse.”

Wiping the moisture from her eyes, Alice smiled up at him. She'd do better next time.

“So, um, who’s that you have with you?”

Danse stepped forward. “Paladin Danse of the Brotherhood of Steel. And you are?”

“Uh, Preston Garvey of the Minutemen.”
Leaving them together, Alice jumped back into her power armor. Might be interesting to see how the Minutemen and Brotherhood interacted.

As they made their way down the path from the vault and along the road within the settlement, Alice saw familiar and unfamiliar faces alike stop to watch their progression. Sturges smiled and waved, Marcy glanced at them and then away again, Jun looked but ran back inside. Maybe he was frightened by the power armor?

Mama Murphy sat on the carport of the “gathering” house, quietly nodding her head in Alice’s direction. Dogmeat sat at her feet. The unfamiliar faces ranged from curious to hostile. Alice couldn’t really blame them for that.

Her eyes opened wide in amazement. The advancements around Sanctuary were a lot to take in. Slowing to a standstill, her eyes took all the changes in, one by one. The house from the path to the curve at the end of cul-de-sac were all repaired. New walls, new roofs, even new windows? That had to be the work of Sturges. The man could repair anything! Guard posts were set up on each side of the road right before the community house and her house on the other side of the road. Well, what had been her house.

Tower were located on the corners of a few of the houses, a bar had been built and looked like it served food as well. A jukebox played softly in the corner. Streetlights lined the road, generators humming quietly supplying the settlement with a good supply of power. All the workbenches had been put in the same area for ease of use.

Alice stared at Preston in amazement, “Wow! Everyone’s been very busy!”

He smiled wide, clearly happy with the changes and her response to them. “We have. A few more settlers have arrived and they helped out in a lot of areas we didn’t have covered.”

“It’s nothing short of amazing, Preston.”

"Thanks, Alice. By the way, Mama Murphy has been cleaning your house while you’ve been gone and Sturges made sure to get it all patched up. Just in case, you know…” Preston’s words trailed off, the rest of the unspoken words hanging in the air.

Alice simply nodded. Words seemed empty considering she’d all but forgotten everyone here.

Dogmeat jumped up, prancing around the trio barking happily before running back to the house. He lay on his back and she watched as Sturges bent down and rubbed his belly, whispering nonsense words into the dog’s ears no doubt. If dogs could smile, Dogmeat would surely have a big one plastered on right now. At least someone was happy.

Preston spoke into the sudden silence, “Codsworth will be happy to see you again. I think that robot’s been lonely without you, though he has been keeping busy helping all of us as well as the few new settlers that have arrived.” He paused as Alice stepped out of her power armor under the carport. “It’s good to have you back, Alice, for however long you'll stay.”

“Thanks, Preston. That means a lot.”

Walking back out from under the carport, she went to stand in the street, facing the house she had lived in before she left. The house that had belonged to her and Nate before the bombs. So many memories. Alice wasn’t sure she was ready to go inside but it couldn’t be avoided forever.

With a sigh she trudged forward, pushing open the door, she walked inside. Memories from
another time echoed around her and Alice paused at the threshold. The group of people that had shown up from Concord so many months past had done their best to fix up her former home. Well, her current home as well she supposed.

There was only one problem with that. Ghostly images of Shaun and Nate hovered all around her and she heard whispers of Nate’s laughter and Shaun’s cooing echoing in every corner. Tears sprang to her eyes and Alice struggled to keep them in check.

From behind her, a deep voice spoke up, “That Minuteman said this was your house. You told me you came from a vault.”

The question implied by his words was telling. She didn’t hear the tone of betrayal or distrust...yet. There was a bit of curiosity. More like he was waiting her out, ready to deliver the sentence once he’d gone over all the evidence with a fine tooth comb.

In for a penny, in for a pound, right? Turning, she studied him, blue eyes watery with dark lashes just barely wet. He seemed unsure of what to make of her sadness. “Why don’t you have a seat, Danse. I have a story to tell you and it might take awhile.”

Before he could sit or even answer, another voice from the past piped up. This one was thankfully real and not just the whispers of ghosts in her head. “Mum! I say, it’s an absolute delight to see you again! I was so worried you might never make it back. Can I get you anything? Some refreshments for you and the young gentleman?”

Alice choked on the laughter bubbling up from inside - the young gentleman. Codsworth made it sound like she was bringing home a date! Looking askance at her mentor, she noticed confusion written in the deep V of his brows. Date indeed. Not in this lifetime!

“Hello, Codsworth! It’s good to see you too.” What Alice wouldn’t give to get a real hug from someone she’d known for so long, someone who had no hidden agenda and just truly wanted to care of her and help where needed. “This is Paladin Danse of the Brotherhood of Steel.”

What words would suffice for who he was and what he was doing here? “He’s...ummm...going to teach me how to...uh...take care of myself.” Her tongue tripped over words as she struggled to explain to Codsworth, a robot no less, one who knew her well, that she was going to be a soldier. There were enough worms to deal with around here without her opening a new can.

Facing Danse full on, she noticed a raised brow had taken place of the earlier confusion. Why couldn’t anything ever be easy? Stuff it all. “Would you like something to drink, Danse? Maybe--”

“We have some lovely Mutfruit tea, chilled even, as well as some Fancy Lad Snack Cakes. I could prepare a serving tray?”

Again, Alice had to choke back a laugh. Danse’s eyes nearly glazed over at the mention of his favorite snacks. Codsworth was chomping at the bit to perform duties he’d been deprived of for so long. And not just for over two hundred years after the bombs but also in the time she’d been gone.

“That would be wonderful, Codsworth. I’d like to speak to Danse when you’re finished, if you don’t mind?”

“Oh, absolutely, mum. I do believe Sturges needed a bit of help with something.”

They both watched as the robot quickly and efficiently put everything together, Alice marveling at the working refrigerator. Codsworth set the tray on the coffee table and then he was gone. Quiet
descended around them and Alice felt the familiar pangs of anxiety reaching for her. Cold, bony fingers intent on stealing away her newfound boldness. Of course, it was always when she needed that boldness the most.

Looking up at Danse with anxiety, she saw him visibly relax. A strategic move, no doubt, meant to put her at ease. She hadn’t forgotten how unforgiving and exacting the man could be. Time would tell what he thought of her story and where that left them.

“Go ahead and have a seat, Danse. Help yourself to whatever you'd like.” Alice could have sworn she saw his cheeks pinken as he stared at the Fancy Lads. However, he moved to sit down, so she figured she'd just imagined it.

Walking around the couch, she made to sit down only to realize she was too nervous to sit still. Besides, she couldn't possibly face the man who might very well think she’d outright lied to him. She hadn't, of course. Haylen new the truth, as did the original small group that had made Sanctuary their home. And Piper. And Nick. Well….

A sigh slipped from her lips. In the beginning she hadn't cared to tell him and didn't really think he'd care. Since then, the timing just hadn’t been right. The perfect moment she was waiting for always seemed to be interrupted by something else and it simply never happened. Running a hand through her hair in consternation, she jumped when Danse’s voice interrupted her jumbled thoughts.

“Out with it, Knight. Whatever it is, I've heard worse, I'm sure.”

She looked at him, turning away abruptly to hide her laugh with an attempted cough. He had pink frosting on his lip and didn't even realize it. Such a serious soldier and yet, so much like a child when it came to sweets. These particular ones in any case.

Well, the hint of laughter certainly put her in a better frame of mind. Taking a deep breath, she began, “Remember when I said I was from a vault?”

“That was at Cambridge. I was surprised and pleased by your honesty.” The words flowed from his lips but his eyes told a different story.

Alice flinched, remembering his earlier words. There went her better frame of mind. Closing her eyes, she wished for the courage to continue in the face of his words. There really was nothing for it but to plunge into the deep in and hope she made it up for air. She’d never been a strong swimmer.

“Yes...well, I am from a vault. There’s just a lot more to the story.” Glancing at him from under her eyelashes, she tried to gauge his reaction. His brows furrowed down at the inside corners giving him a look of confusion.

“Wait...you’re reaction when we arrived. Are you referring to the vault we landed on? The one above Sanctuary? I thought it was one of the Vault-Tec experiments where they--” his words stopped in mid sentence, eyes narrowing at her before opening wide. “You were...it was...that was the vault you came from?”

Alice nodded. The man was smart and had quickly put two and two together. “I gather you know that each vault was a different experiment?” At his nod, she continued, “The vault above Sanctuary? Vault-Tec used cryogenics on those who made it inside. We were frozen. It was supposed to last for 6 months, only it lasted much longer than that.” Much quieter she added, “At least for me.”
Not waiting for a response, refusing to look at him and see...well, anything she wasn’t ready to deal with, she continued, “You’ve heard me refer to Nate.”

She couldn’t sit still any longer. Getting up, she walked over to the bookshelves by the front door, trembling fingers reached out towards the flag in the wooden case. Somehow, it had survived the bombs. Running fingertips across it, she felt a little closer to her old life. To Nate.

“He was my husband. We had a baby boy, Shaun. All of us made it into the shelter,” her voice quieted to barely above a whisper, “but not all of us made it out.”

“You were frozen inside one of Vault-Tec’s experimental vaults? Your whole family? What happened to your husband and son?”

The incredulity in his voice was honestly reassuring. It meant he wasn’t mad at her. At least for now.

“I’m not sure how much you heard of the conversation I had with Kellogg.” Alice turned and looked at him, eyes burning with hatred. A rare look on her face. “The Institute sent him to steal Shaun. Right out of his father’s arms. When he wouldn’t cooperate, they...they...they shot him and ripped our baby from his arms.”

Her arms wrapped themselves around her, the only comfort she had at this moment. There was no one else left, no one who understood...no one who cared. It took her several minutes to push her way out of those memories but she did it. She was becoming stronger despite the stumbling blocks she encountered on a regular basis.

She proceeded to let her feet wander over to the window looking out on street in front of the house. Blue eyes watched the activity of those who called Sanctuary their home now. "Only...he's not a baby anymore but a ten year old little boy. A boy who might be better off without me now."

Her words were quiet, yet filled with emotion all the same. “But I won't give up. Somewhere out there is my baby. Our baby - mine and Nate’s. Our little boy. Wherever the Institute is, I have to find him. I...” Her head fell forward. She’d been honest with Danse before, brutally honest out there on the catwalk. It was only yesterday but felt like a lifetime ago. Could she do this again? What choice did she have?

Refusing to back down, she let her eyes meet his, “I owe it to Nate and to myself. I owe it to Shaun to find him and bring him home. I’m not sure how good of a mother I’ll be, not sure he might not be better off where he is. But, I have to try. I have to know.”

Danse stared back at her. Learning him as she had over the last few weeks, she knew an outburst could be forthcoming after what he would most likely consider a betrayal. If nothing else, just in holding back valuable information from him. Being dishonest, not by outright lying per se but definitely lying by omission. No, he wouldn’t take kindly to that at all.

It was going to hurt no matter what he said but she could hardly fault him when he’d been nothing but honest about what he expected from her. She’d known going into the Brotherhood, having him as her sponsor, what was at stake. And now, her story was out. The choice was his what he decided to do.

Despite the trembling of her body, Alice once again surprised herself. Instead of turning away, or better yet running away, she stood her ground, eye to eye. Whatever he had to say, she’d stand here and take it. Maybe, just maybe, they could use this to come together and form a stronger bond. After all, wasn’t that what anyone did in any type of relationship? Navigate the minefields of each
other’s lives? Feelings, experiences, views...and learn where the other stood?

Hopefully, this mine didn’t blow up in her face.
Heart to Heart

Chapter Summary

Danse comes to grips with Alice's revelation and Preston shares his views of the Brotherhood.

Chapter Notes

I had to rework Alice's convo in the last chapter because in my eagerness to get it posted, I overlooked a couple key elements. It was only in the beginning of her speech to Danse about Kellogg/Shaun -- a couple of sentences at best. Feel free to go reread in case you catch anything odd in this chapter!

You can find me on tumblr here: MaxRev

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alice's words turned themselves over in his mind. As a veteran soldier, he was used to sifting through information to pick out key points above all others. He did no less here. First, she had been truthful about being from a vault. Specifically, the vault located above this settlement. She and her family had been unknowingly locked inside, victims of a Vault-Tec experiment gone awry.

A second key point was that she was married, to a man named Nate. He’d heard that name before, had pretended to be him at the insistence of Proctor Ingram. Alice still felt something for him, having struggled over imparting the fact he was dead. He had been shot and killed by an intruder in the vault while trying to protect their child.

The third point, and this one staggered him -- she had a son. A baby ripped from his father’s arms as the man fought to protect him. A surge of anger coursed through him at the ruthlessness of the Institute. That they would stoop so low to shoot an unarmed man and steal the baby from his arms, while his wife watched, powerless to stop it from happening...it was beyond all reason.

Even more astounding was that her baby was no longer a baby; he was now a ten year old boy. There was simply no end to the depravity of the Institute. He’d hated them and all they stood for with a burning passion for as long as he could remember. His hate was now summarily transformed to new heights in light of Alice’s revelations. This tiny woman before him. It was tragic but overall, it meant she was the key to that organization in some way.

After sifting through the information she’d imparted, separating the most pertinent facts, other details came to light. The most difficult to comprehend was that Alice hadn’t been completely truthful with him. He could accept her reluctance in the beginning. But now, after all they’d been through? After mentioning not once but twice how he valued honesty above all else? There was another feeling there as well. Once he didn't want to consider to deeply. He also had to wonder...

If she hadn't been honest with him, it was likely she hadn't shared this information with Elder Maxson, either. The man could be intimidating no doubt. Danse himself had felt like that a time or
two. Would Alice have reacted to him any differently than she had to Danse himself? Regardless of her fears, it was in the Brotherhood’s best interests for her to impart such valuable intelligence.

Unable to think clearly given his muddied thoughts, Danse stood up and walked out the door. Maybe some time alone would clear his head.

He didn’t see Alice’s stricken face as he walked out the door.

Striding through Sanctuary, hands clasped behind his back, Danse admitted to himself the settlers had been industrious in this settlement. Several of the improvements made were impressive. He didn’t know what this place looked like before but he could easily imagine; he’d been in the Wasteland for a long time now.

Most of the debris had been cleared from the streets and surrounding areas, a smart move as it kept raiders and the like from finding hiding spots to attack from. His soldier’s eye didn’t miss the strategic layouts of the turrets and hastily built but sturdy guard posts. The existing houses seemed to be cleared of debris as well. Holes in the roof, the walls and windows protected against the elements, providing much needed shelter.

Those who had chosen to remain here kept themselves busy gathering scrap, turning it into usable items or weapons. One person sat at the cooking station, the smells coming from it tantalizing.

A large patch of ground had been cleared and was used for a garden. Various plants flourished under the many hands tending it from mutfruit bushes to tatos and carrots. He even saw gourds and melons. Must be an excellent watering system here. Sanctuary could easily supply the Brotherhood with much needed supplies in this area. He’d have to speak with Alice.

As he observed the prosperous community, a few of the settlers showed curiosity, though most stared at him with outright hostility. At least they didn’t have any weapons aimed at him. He’d left the house without even thinking to bring his laser rifle with him -- a mistake only a raw recruit would make.

He couldn’t understand their attitude. The Brotherhood was here to help them, here to win the hearts and minds of the people. The way he saw it, the Brotherhood was carrying out their mission spectacularly. Cleaning out the super mutants and the ferals, taking out synth and keeping an eye on the ghouls. Never knew when one would go feral on you.

Frustration warred with patience; they would understand once the Institute was destroyed. Then, these Wastelanders would be grateful. As they should be.

His thoughts kept cycling back to everything Alice told him, and he struggled to come to terms with what it all meant. He was definitely disappointed and, if he was truly honest with himself, even hurt she’d been afraid to confide in him. Granted, he had been a little harsh with her in the beginning but he felt they were on mostly equal footing now.

Then, there were the implications she was somehow connected to the Institute. A fact which could simply not be ignored. Valuable information such as that needed to be brought to the attention of Elder Maxson. That she hadn’t told him right away or been up front from the beginning was serious grounds for reprimand. And as her sponsor, it certainly didn’t look good on him.
This was going to need to be addressed, immediately.

At the end of the street, Danse turned and strode back towards her house. Her house. The reality of her situation struck him anew. She was from a time which existed before the bombs, a time when everything was alive and wondrous...yet still wicked.

In many ways, maybe even worse. The deception of ease and comfort was a shiny coating hiding the darkness and corruption underneath.

Behind him, he heard the sound of tiny thrusters heralding the arrival of the Mr. Handy Alice had called ‘Codsworth.’ It was that kind of thinking -- programming a robot with a personality, giving it a name -- that had brought this world where it was today. An abhorrent practice.

“Mr. Danse! Good to see you out and about. How are you this fine day?”

Danse cringed at the helpful tone of the robot. “I’m good.”

“I would be delighted to be of service to you! Please let me know if you need anything at all.”

“T’im fine.”

He wished the thing would leave but instead of hovering off to do...whatever the damn thing did, it followed him. Apparently, it was quite happy to have a one-sided conversation.

Lost in his own thoughts, he tuned in upon hearing a familiar name.

“...see that Alice is doing much better. It’s a joy to see her taking part in life again. Mr. Nate did so much to help her come out of her shell, so incredibly patient with her. Then the bombs fell and...well, the nasty business in the vault.” The Mr. Handy’s programming actually gave it the ability to get choked up. “And then young Shaun being kidnapped. I do so love that little boy. It’s just terrible to think of him somewhere out there all alone.”

The robot became quiet and Danse hoped it was done and would leave him alone. No such luck.

“It surely was a bit of chaos when Mum arrived here, I can tell you. I’d tried so hard to keep things up but...” the appendages flailed in the air, “nuclear fallout is just dreadful and so hard to clean!”

The distress in the robotic voice was alarming.

“It was touch and go for a few months. So dreadfully terrible to witness Mum so frightened, jumping at every sound. The panic attacks were the worst. I believe she is much stronger than she thinks, if I must say. And now a soldier? Why, I’m positively beside myself at the changes!”

“Hey, Codsworth! Give me a hand over here?”

Danse turned to see a younger man in grease-smeared overalls calling to Codsworth. His black hair stood up tall on his head, sideburns edging along a strong jaw. The man smiled and waved at Danse before turning away.

“Ah, Sturges has need of my services. Mr. Danse, please me know if I can get anything for you while you’re here.”

“Sure. Thank you.”

It didn’t register until the Mr. Handy bobbed across the street he’d just thanked a robot. He really needed to get away from this place. Thankful no one in the Brotherhood could see him right now.
Still, despite his opinion of the robot in general, the conversation stayed with him. Resolute in confronting Alice, Danse turned back to the house where he’d left her.

Ducking through the doorway, he stopped in surprise at the sight that greeted him. Alice was huddled into the farthest corner of the couch. Legs crossed and drawn up to her chest, arms wrapped tightly around them, it appeared as if she was trying to make herself as small as possible. The sun filtered through the newly built but dirty window. A pattern of shadows and light made by the smudges of the glass highlighted her face in intricate patterns. Despite this, the paleness of her skin was clearly mottled with pink splotches, eyes red and swollen. Clearly, she’d been crying all this time.

Danse felt like he’d been punched solidly in the gut. He’d done this to her.

Crossing over to the couch, he called out, “Alice?” She didn’t move, didn’t acknowledge him in any way.

He stood next to her, unsure of what to say, what to do. He’d had a speech all prepared, knew the exact words he was going to use and here he stood in awkward silence, the speech having fled his mind at seeing her sitting so along and lost, folded in on herself.

Gingerly, he lowered himself to the couch. A gloved hand reached out to rest on her shoulder, pausing halfway before being snatched back.

“Alice, I’m sorry for walking out on you. I...I needed some time to think. I…” Danse’s words trailed off. What could he say? He was still upset about her not being upfront with him. Even more so, she should have been truthful with Maxson from the start. Yet...what was any of it in the face of her current distress?

His brows drew down at the sound of deep, shaky indrawn breath. “I...thought you’d…” a hiccup, likely from crying to hard, made her pause. Danse waited patiently. “I thought you’d left me behind.”

Her voice was soft but broken and full of pain. Instantly, Danse new why. She’d lost her husband, her infant son...her whole world. She thought he’d left her as well. Scrubbing his hands over his face, images of Cutler and how he’d felt once he’d lost his best friend surfaced. What an idiot he’d been.

“No, Alice. I didn’t think...I know I can be...harsh...in how I deal with things but--”

“You’re always honest Danse. I appreciate that.”

He turned to look at her, struck by the vividness of those large, clear blue eyes staring back at him. They were made even brighter by the redness surrounding them.

“I would never leave without telling you. You have my word.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.” The words were quiet, a mere whisper. Danse almost didn’t hear them.

Settling back against the cushions, Danse started at his hands, folded in his lap. “I left because I needed to think about what you’d told me. I wanted to...well, to...I had to leave in case I said something I might regret. Instead my actions are something I now regret.”

A small hand reached out, settled on his arm. Danse stared at it as if was deathclaw. “It’s alright Danse. I understand. I threw a lot of information at you at once. Can we...can we still be a team?”
His head whipped around, eyebrows rising to his hairline, “What? Of course we can.” His earlier thoughts of dismissal he kept to himself. Angling his body, he faced her more fully, refusing to acknowledge the strange feeling when her hand slid from his arm. “I am disappointed you felt you couldn’t come to me sooner. However, I admit much of that is my own fault. I apologize. Alice, you can come to me with anything. I can’t always promise to not sound...rash and overbearing but I will try.’’

A tiny smile lit up her face, brighter than the sun. Danse was struck at how it transformed her. Something moved inside of him but he pushed the strange feeling aside. He needed to focus.

“What I am disappointed in is that you didn’t tell Elder Maxson the truth. He put his faith and trust in me as a Paladin, in you as a Knight in my charge. This will look bad on both of us.”

That bright smile dimmed at his words, clouds hovering on the horizon. She looked down at the floor, hair falling forward like a curtain. A screen to shut him out of her world. Muffled words reached his ears, “I...didn’t think about it then. Being up there was all new, terrifying and exciting. Like reading about a castle in the sky and suddenly, there you are.”

He couldn’t stop the smile at her words. Exactly how he felt so many years ago. “Believe me, Alice, I do remember that feeling. But information like that is valuable to our cause. You’re a link to the Institute and as such, Maxson needs to know this. We need to tell him as soon as possible.”

She turned back towards him, brow furrowed in confusion. “I’m a what?”

Danse could only stare at her, his own puzzlement no doubt written on his face. “A key to the Institute. You did say you learned from Kellogg the Institute had your son?”

“What does that have to do with me?”

A look of incredulity settled on his face. “If Kellogg knew your son was in the Institute, that means he worked for them. You mentioned he was the one who kidnapped your son, correct?” At her nod, he went on, “Then they were the ones with access to the vault. Alice, they have your son so by association, you’re involved with them somehow. We need to get back to the Prydwen, to apprise Elder Maxson of this immediately!”

Alice jumped at his exclamation. His voice had risen in volume as he kept going. Oddly enough, she didn’t feel threatened. “But, Danse~~”

“I’m going to look over my power armor before we head out. I’d advise you to do the same.”

Before Alice could utter another word, he was gone.

After Danse left to fine tune his power armor, Alice took off for her own walk through Sanctuary. She saw the same things as Danse with the exception that it wasn’t through a soldier’s eyes.

Catching sight of Garvey in the distance, she ran over to him, slowing to a walk at his side.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself. So, you have to tell me...how’d you end up with the Brotherhood?”
Alice thought she heard a tinge of bitterness in his voice, which was surprising. Preston gave everyone the benefit of the doubt and always looked for the good in others. This should be an interesting conversation.

“It’s kind of a long story.”

Glancing at her, deep brown eyes hidden in the shadows of his hat, he told her, “I have time. More security here now so they won’t miss me for awhile. Come on.”

He veered off towards the wall by the river. Preston extended a gloved hand, helping her settle on the wall, legs dangling over the side. He joined her. “Alright, tell me everything from beginning to now.”

Alice worked out the details in her head, deciding exactly how much she’d tell him. It wouldn’t do to worry him about her injuries and some of the near misses. Preston was the kind of person who would take it personally, as if he’d not done enough before sending her out. The last thing he needed was more guilt heaped on his shoulders.

“That caravan you sent me with? We ran into the Brotherhood at Cambridge. We heard gunfire. My Pipboy picked up a signal. They argued over helping but in the end they went. I stayed behind with the brahmin and Dogmeat. I won’t bore you with details but the caravan left me behind. Danse found me and with his scribe, Haylen, they offered me shelter in the police station. Danse escorted me to Diamond City and then I didn’t see him again for awhile.”

Preston’s gloved fingers played with a button on his duster, “Danse, huh?”

Alice could feel the flush climb up her face. “It’s not like that, Preston. Paladin Danse is just a mouthful and well...I expect his chest to stick out and next thing I know, he’ll be strutting around with big airs. He’s already looked up to in the Brotherhood.”

She smiled in response when Preston laughed at that.

“So, how long is a while because he’s certainly here now.”

Her face scrunched up in thought, looking off into the distance as if it held the answer she thought. “I don’t know….maybe a few months? Maybe not a really long time but I honestly had forgotten about him. I’d met Piper at Diamond City. She took me to meet Hancock in Goodneighbor and then we went to rescue a detective, Nick Valentine, from a vault. He helped me find Kellogg.” Her voiced died to whisper and came to a halt.

Preston reached out, squeezed her hand lightly in an attempt at comfort.

“You don’t have to continue, Alice. Really, it’s okay. I may not wholeheartedly approve of the Brotherhood, their mission or their tactics. But you know I’ll stand behind you always.”

And didn’t that make the tears want to flood. No one in her life, other than Nate, had ever had her back like that, never judged her for anything and just stood beside her. Would that the world could see this man and follow his example.

She placed her hand on his, looked at him from under her lashes, “Thank you, Preston. That truly means a lot.”

Swallowing down her pain, she started out over the river, focusing on the giant red rocket in the distance. “Nick helped me find a lead for Sean. I was terrified but he and Hancock, and Dogmeat, went with me. Tracked him to Fort Hagen. Along the way we ran into Danse and he just kind
of...followed us, I guess.” She paused, lost in thought for a time. “Anyway, he was the one who
told me about the Institute, about them having Sean, that he was now—”

Preston interrupted her, words blurted out in shock, “The Institute has him? Your baby boy? Alice,
that’s...it’s crazy!”

Big blue eyes regarded him with pain and wonder both. “I know. Believe me, I know. And Preston,
he’s not a baby anymore. He’s ten years old! Can you believe that? I was down there for ten more
years while he grew up without me.” A few tears slipped down her cheeks, voice cracking, “What
if he doesn’t need me anymore?”

Preston reached around her, solid and warm, offering her a hug. “He will Alice. You bring him
back here and we’ll show him what a real family is.”

What she wouldn’t give for that to be true. Sitting back up, she went on, “Danse said he’d seen the
changes in me, that I’d make a good soldier. I...need what they have to offer, Preston.” A plea to
understand.

“Listen, Alice, I know the Brotherhood has all the fancy toys, but don't forget the Minutemen are
here for you. We need you more than the Brotherhood ever will. To them, you’re just another
body. Our numbers are growing every day and we need someone to lead us. We’d...well, we’d be
happy to have you as our General. If you wanted to be that is.”

That wasn’t something she’d ever imagined doing. Then again, she would never have dreamed of
being a soldier. What would Nate think if he could see her now? His voice had been silent for a
long time and Alice knew he was gone forever. A small part of her hoped he was still up there
somewhere looking down on here with love...and a little bit of pride.

“I’ll have to think about that one, Preston.”

“You have plenty of time, Alice. Just know the offer is always there.” That warm smile always
made her feel safe and protected. “So, you sure about the Brotherhood? I know I seem pretty easy
going but honestly, I wish the damn Brotherhood would just go back where they came from.”

Alice laughed, “Preston! I am now one of them. You want me to leave to?”

He backtracked quickly, “No, Alice, not you. Never you! It’s just, they make everything so much
worse by being here. We have enough problems of our own and they just fly in here with their big
ship, fancy toys and think they can just take over.” He sighed, “Sorry, I just want what’s best for
the Commonwealth. In my view, it isn’t them.”

“I understand, Preston. Maybe I can find a way to get everyone on the same page.”

“That would be nice but I hope you don’t mind if I don’t hold my breath on that one. Anyway,
better get some shuteye. I need to pick up some supplies from Diamond City.”

“You do? Would you be okay if Danse and I come along?” She hated to ask in light of what he said
but there was something else she needed to do and Diamond City was the place to ask.

“I guess? Should make for an interesting trip. Sure Danse wants to go?”

“Nope.” She stood up after him, dusting the back of her suit off. “But he won’t have a choice. I’m
going and that’s that.”

Preston whistled, “Well, then. That’s a side of you I haven’t seen before.” Alice blushed and
ducked her head but Preston continued, “I think I like the new you. See you in the morning.”

“Alright. And..thanks, Preston, for everything.”

He tipped his hat and headed for the barracks. Alice took one last look around. They were going to Diamond City in the morning. Danse could just stay behind if he didn’t like it.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for any mistakes, typos...I looked it over several times but you never know!

As always, thank you so much for following along, for the kudos and comments!!!
Mystery Vault

Chapter Summary

While securing supplies in Diamond City with Preston and Danse, Alice learns of another vault. What mysteries could this one hold? Only one way to find out!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Danse didn’t like Alice changing their itinerary but he did accompany her and Preston to Diamond City.

By the time they’d reached the old baseball stadium, Alice wanted to put both Danse and Preston in a timeout. They’d been trading barbs - Danse against the Minutemen and Preston against the Brotherhood of Steel - the whole way. Many times along the way, she’d had to insert herself between them to shut them up...as well as pulling one or the other up ahead to give them time to cool off, purposely moving the conversation to a safe topic.

And conversation was not one of her strong points. Then again, babysitting two grown children intent on frustrating her at every turn was not something she thought she’d be good at either. Turns out, she was better at being a peacekeeper than she thought. Although, she did have experience in keeping Hancock and Danse from each other’s throats.

If the bombs hadn’t destroyed the world, who knew what she could have done? A quiet huff followed that thought. She would only have been a stay at home mother, content to raise Shaun and be a good wife to Nate.

Pulled out of her thoughts, it was with a great amount of relief she saw the guards patrolling outside the old stadium. They were close. Maybe now she’d get some peace.

Passing through the now defunct turnstyles, Alice said hello to the guards, especially Danny, who smiled at her. As they entered the marketplace inside, she went with Preston to Myrna’s. Danse trailed behind them, always on alert. Dogmeat took off the minute they hit the marketplace. She figured he’d gone to visit Nick as Ellie always seemed to have some kind of treat ready just in case he came by. The dog was spoiled by everyone he met but Alice figured all the attention was well deserved.

Approaching the store, Myrna shouted out her usual sales pitch, “Diamond City Surplus has everything you need! Synth-free shopping right here! Shop in safety! No synths allowed at the Surplus! We buy and sell everything to everyone! Except synths! No synths allowed here.” As they walked up, Myrna gave them all a piercing glare. It seemed to bounce right off Danse’s power armor.

Preston spoke up, “Hey, Myrna. Good to see you.”

Her brows settled into a scowl, “That's exactly what a synth would say. But... I don't know. Are you really... human? Don’t they...steal people and replace them with synths? How do I know you’re really who you say you are?” She squinted, looking him up and down. “You might be a
Alice couldn’t believe this woman. She was crazy. “Look, we just want to buy a few things and then we’ll leave.”

Myrna glowered, “I am not crazy!” Oops, Alice must have said that out loud. “I read the paper! I know the synths are here, walking among us.”

Over his shoulder, Preston gave her a look of reproach. Danse paid no attention to any of them. He stood facing the marketplace, gun at the ready. Squinting, Alice breathed a sigh of relief that the safety was on.

Tilting her chin at Danse, Myrna asked, “Is he always on alert?”

Thinking quickly, Alice said, “Yes and he’s very good at figuring out who is a synth.” She turned to him, “Danse? Do you see any synths around here right now?” Please, let him play along.

A dark brow rose up in surprise. He turned to survey the people walking around them, “Well, I can’t–”

“Do you...see...any synths?” Along with the emphasis on words, Alice tried gesturing with her eyes to Myrna and the people in the square, hoping he’d get the hint. No doubt she looked crazier than the store owner at the moment.

His eyes widened comically as he appeared to catch on, “Oh..um...no, I don’t see any synths around here at the moment.”

Alice turned an overly bright smile on Myrna, “See? No synths.”

Taking her time assessing the situation, clearly not convinced, she finally relented, “Alright, we can do business. But no funny stuff.”

Preston and Alice went inside to gather the items on the list Myrna’s store carried while Danse remained on alert outside. Alice was all too happy to leave when they were done and move on.

Their next stop was Arturo’s to stock up on ammunition. Sturges was hoping to be able to make their own ammo in the near future. It would certainly be easier and more cost effective.

The friendly shopkeeper greeted them with a smile, “Hey Preston. And Alice! Look at you now, a little bit of Wasteland living under your belt. What brings you to Diamond City? Need some supplies? You know I have whatever you need.”

Alice chatted with him for a few minutes and then let Preston talk about the ammunition needed and their prices. Only half-listening to their conversation when they began to discuss news around the, she turned her attention to a most interesting exchange taking place between two visiting traders.

“Ever been to that vault out near the river outside of town? Them dwellers inside’ll trade with you. They don’t never leave. Least...that’s what I hear. Gets ya some caps if ya have what they’re needin’.”

“Yeah? Heard about it but never been over there. Can’t imagine living in a vault like that, never getting outside. Maybe I’ll give it a go one of these days.”

Alice could hardly contain her excitement! Another vault, here, close to Diamond City! Her thoughts ran over each other: what would it have been like to have never left the vault she’d woken
up in? To be self sufficient, well mostly? To have never lost Nate or Shaun, for them to have been a family? Shaun would have grown up, become an adult, married another vault dweller maybe, had grandchildren for her and Nate to spoil. A completely different life from the one they’d lost but better than what she had now. Doubts shadowed those thoughts but she couldn’t place why.

On the heels of that, she began to wonder what kind of experiment Vault-Tec had conducted there. Every single person inside could be a lunatic. Then again...what if the people who made it in before the bombs had died? It could be someone had found the vault and created their own society to get away from the chaos of the Commonwealth. She could only speculate and wouldn’t know the answers to her questions unless she actually went there and talked to those inside. Yes! That was exactly what she needed to do!

Turning to Danse, she grabbed the arm of his power armor all but vibrating with excitement, “We need to go!”

“Go where?” He hadn’t been listening.

“Those traders over there...they were talking about a vault outside the city, down near the river. Besides the one I came from, the only other vault I know about and have been inside was the one where Nick was being held. That one wasn’t even finished. We need to find this vault, Danse! I want to see it, talk to the people...the overseer. Do we have time?” At his hesitation, she played the only other card she had, “They might have some interesting technology.”

She could see the gleam of interest in his eyes at those words. Hah! Got him! “We are on a reconnaissance mission. It would be beneficial to the Brotherhood to see what technology they have accumulated.”

A moment of indecision clouded her mind...Preston would have to travel back to Sanctuary alone. She turned to see he was finishing up with Arturo. He smiled when he saw her watching him, the smile fading as he searched her face.

“Alice? Everything okay?” His eyes settled on Danse and Alice saw him tense up as if her change of mood had been the direct fault of the soldier.

“Everything’s fine. I...um...would you be okay going back to Sanctuary alone?” She asked, biting her lip in uncertainty.

The smile faded completely, his shoulders sagging a bit even as the warmth in his voice remained, “Sure. You probably have a lot of...important missions to complete.”

Despite him trying to hide it, Alice could hear the disappointment in his voice. She hated that by wanting to do something for herself, it tugged her away from him. He was such an incredibly good friend and for the first time since meeting him, Alice wondered if she deserved that kind of loyalty. She wasn’t doing much to warrant it.

Even though she hadn’t given much thought to those left behind in Sanctuary, she had been busy just trying to survive. The reason didn’t feel like much of a justification. But finding this vault felt like the first thing she’d ever truly wanted for herself. Going after Kellogg didn’t count. That was something she needed to do to find out more information about Shaun and while yes, it was important, visiting this vault was all for her. If it made her selfish, well...maybe this once it would be okay? She pushed away the lingering doubts.

“I…” her voice trailing off, she walked over and wrapped Preston in a bear hug before pulling back to explain,“those traders over there were talking about a vault near here. Preston-”
“Alice,” he interrupted her, “you don’t have to explain yourself to me. Although, knowing it’s a vault, I understand now. It’s something you have to see for yourself. I’ve heard of it but never looked for it myself. I hope you find some answers...and I’ll be fine. May see if any of these traders around here are headed in that direction, so I can travel with them.”

A wave of relief poured over her to hear that - both for his safety and his reassurance. Still...when she would have continued with feeling guilty for leaving him, offering more excuses, Preston reached out gave her a hug, “I’ll head back to Sanctuary. Don’t go getting yourself killed, okay?” Deep brown eyes looked over her head at Danse, “Keep her safe. If anything happens to her...” He didn’t finish his sentence. Giving her one last hug, he walked over to talk with the traders.

Time to go then. She turned around, “Ready, Danse?”

“Let’s move out.”

Despite the feeling of sadness at leaving Preston behind once again, Alice felt almost feverish to get going. They were going to another vault! She had so many questions to ask those who lived inside. This was going to be amazing.

They left Diamond City, Dogmeat trotting happily at their side, and walked carefully through the streets, headed back towards the river. Following behind Danse this time, memories tumbled over and over in her mind of what happened the last time she’d been this way: the super mutants, the mutant hound biting her...almost dying at the hands of a Raider as they crossed the bridge. The bridge up ahead of them.

A sound of distress slipped through her lips. Dogmeat’s ears pricked up upon hearing it and he returned to her side, sliding his head under her hand for a pet.

Absentmindedly rubbing her hands through his fur, her thoughts took a different turn as she glanced around her. So much history was gone now, completely wiped out. No one around her remembered any of it. Except maybe Nick and his memories weren’t truly his own. They belonged to someone who had lived in that time, not that she held it against the detective. Of course, there was Danse, who knew a lot about her world from reading books he’d come across during his missions. Not many others bothered or cared to go to that length.

Suddenly, Alice felt homesick. Even if her world hadn’t been a perfect paradise, it had been...home.

Up ahead, Danse stopped, waiting for her to catch up. The action pulled her from her melancholy thoughts. Once she approached, she noticed he was turning left, heading down the stairs to follow the river.

“Is this the way to the vault?”

“The traders mentioned it was along the river and this is the most strategic route for now.”

Nodding at his logic, something she would never have thought of, Alice turned and followed him down the steps. He paused, letting her go ahead. They traveled along the road, Alice paying little attention to the buildings on either side of the road. Her mind was centered on getting to the vault.

“Alice,” Danse called out, pausing at a side road, “this way.”

She stopped, turned, but there were no street signs around here. Turning on her heel, she followed where he led. Dogmeat waited up ahead, turning back to see what was taking them so long. Danse seemed to know where he was going. Maybe he’d been in this area before. It led through the
outskirts of Diamond City, past a Raider camp. Thankfully, they weren’t spotted but even so, Dogmeat growled quietly as they passed by. At the intersection, Danse turned right and kept going. The road went past a now empty diner and a few other buildings. All was quiet. Alice kept expecting something to jump out at them - ferals, mutant dogs, or even Raiders or super mutants. Anything was possible.

She could almost imagine the smell of food from the diner, the music piped into the air through speakers. A harried waitress running from table to table, patrons talking, laughing, eating. Another world indeed.

In the distance, she could just make out what looked like a fence and wondered if that was where the vault was located. Dogmeat loped up ahead, slipping in and out amongst tall rocks at the edges of the road.

In no time at all, they approached the area and entered through one of many gaps in the fence. A sound - snorting and snuffling - drew Alice up short. Her blood began to pound in her ears, palms becoming sweaty. She knew that sound.

It was a Yaoi Gai.

Her eyes traveled up over the solid rock into which the vault had been built. The hulking shape of bear was outlined against the bright blue sky and she could feel it’s menacing stare, a frisson of fear racing up her spine. The head turned, body following as it began to pace back and forth. It paused again, roared down at them, but made no move to charge. She heard the click of the safety being turned off on Danse’s laser rifle behind her. Glancing at the gaps in the fence around them, she knew it wouldn’t keep the bear out if it chose to attack. For now, it seemed content to just watch them.

With Danse and Dogmeat both as a barrier between her and the threat, Alice took the chance to check her surroundings. Inside the fence were a few ramshackle buildings, one was an outhouse, two others set up as places to sleep. There was also a Vault-Tec building, like the ones at vault 111, for someone to sleep in. She hadn’t even noticed the caravan present - one lone trader, their brahmin, and two guards sitting around the fire of a cook pit. A couple of burned out vehicles had hidden them from view.

Upon closer inspection, the trader was painfully thin, a dirty scarf covering an equally dirty beanie pulled over their head. There were no wisps of hair and Alice wondered if the hair was short or if they’d lost it. Radiation poisoning was the most likely cause. As she moved in closer, the male guard spoke up in a gravelly voice, “Try anything, Wastelander, and I’ll make you hurt.” Dogmeat growled threateningly, though the man didn’t appear to be bothered by it.

Alice stopped, blinked a few times. Her? Hurt them? Had he even looked at her? The man had to be referring to Danse, who stood guard behind her, or maybe even Dogmeat. They were more of a threat than she could ever be. She heard the heavy footfalls of Danse in his power armor move up behind her.

Before he could say anything, the trader spoke, words tumbling out one after another, almost staccato like in a definite feminine voice, “Guns, guns, and more guns. Just for you!”

“I...uh...what kind of stuff do you have?” Alice blurted out in response.

She stepped even closer, inside Alice’s personal bubble, excitement lacing her words with the thought of a purchase, “If it can chamber, cock, and spit out lead -- then I sell it. I sell slashers and clobberers, too, for those maniacs that like it up close. But hot death flying faster than the speed of
Alice resisted the urge to cough, the woman’s breath a cloud of noxious gas threatening to choke her. Not quite sure what to make of the woman, or maybe even a young girl, before her, Alice surmised she could have been any age, really. A cigarette was gripped tightly between two fingers, smoke drifting lazily into the air. Her cloudy eyes, color indeterminate, were red-rimmed and sunken, the red a stark contrast against the deep purple bruising around them. Both arms were wrapped with bandages from wrist to elbow, Alice unable to note any reason for this. Again, maybe it was from radiation. The woman’s slender frame shivered even in the warm air.

Danse’s deep voice spoke up behind her, “Alice, she’ll only buy more chems to satisfy her fix. She also supplies ammunition and weapons to the Raiders and Gunners we fight regularly, which they use against us.”

The trader turned her eyes on Danse and sneered, “Who are you? The Brotherhood’s poster boy?” Taking a drag from her cigarette and blowing out the smoke, her words once again tripped over themselves as she became impatient, “Listen, Wastelander, I ain’t got all day. You gonna buy anything or not? Make up your mind already! Unless your bodyguard makes your decision.”

Dismissing Danse’s concerns for the moment, Alice figured it wouldn’t hurt to look. “Let’s see what you have.”

The cloudy eyes cleared for a moment, nearly glowing with maniacal glee, “Oh goody, let’s make mischief!”

Alice realized Danse was correct in his assessment or he’d dealt with her before. This trader was probably a few caps away from her next fix. Despite her misgivings, she had said she’d look and soon found a shotgun in the large array of weapons and ammo for sale. It hadn’t been shortened like hers but wouldn’t hurt to have a backup in a sense. Hopefully, she’d be able to hold it and use it. Maybe she could get some practice in after they left the vault.

“I’ll take this shotgun. You have the ammo for it?

“You need ammo? I got ammo. I got it all - weapons of mass destruction!”

“Okay.” This woman was clearly weapon happy.

“Every big purchase buys little bitty trees. I’ll blow them up in your honor.”

Well then.

Business concluded, the group left the vault behind them. No sooner were they out of sight then a large, fat raindrop fell on Alice’s nose. No better time than now to head into the vault.

Before them, scaffolding and spotlights highlighted a passage carved in the rock. A sign on the scaffolding read Restricted Area. Glancing behind her, Alice figured Danse’s power armor would just about fit through and wondered if this was the original entrance. They’d know soon enough. Alice stepped into the passage, Dogmeat and Danse right behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Ummm....hi? lol
Wow, been awhile. While I definitely slid over to the Mass Effect fandom to write, I didn't intentionally choose to abandon this fic. I just...struggled with what to do and say, with where Alice was going.

I'm back, hopefully, and thank you to all of you who are still here with me, waiting to continue Alice's journey. All of your comments and kudos are dear to me and I'm endlessly grateful for them all :(
A tour of vault 81, given by a ten-year-old boy, has Alice making comparisons - and not just between this vault and her own.

Turning on the light of her Pip-Boy, Alice breathed a sigh of relief as the glow chased away the darkness directly before her eyes. Tentatively, she began to follow the long passage, the dank and earthy smell of dirt strong in the air, until it ended at a lighted metal walkway. She followed it to the same type of mechanism used to open the door in vault 111. A desk sat off to the side with an odd assortment of items: a broken monitor on the floor beneath it, a lunchbox, a Blast Radius game and a ham radio sitting on top.

Behind her, Danse clearly voiced his opinions of what lay before them, “Vault-Tec built places like this to conduct unethical experiments on human beings. Just thinking about it makes me sick.”

The disgust in his voice was so palpable, Alice felt she could reach out and touch it. Her own loathing for Vault-Tec was on par with his...maybe even more so. She had lived through one of their experiments after all. A shiver of fear snaked down her spine to think of what they might find inside this one.

Plugging her Pip-Boy into the console, Alice waited for it to register and then mashed the button to open the door. Nothing happened.

A voice echoed out over the speakers, “Hold it right there! This is Vault 81 security. I don’t know where you got your hands on a working Pip-Boy but you’d better start talking.”

“I got it from vault 111.” Alice spoke up with surprise, as if the answer was obvious. She had no reason to lie about it. Regardless, it was best to be honest with security in case there was an opportunity to talk to the overseer. No use starting on the wrong foot.

A few seconds passed while the person on the other side of the speaker digested the information. “Vault 111? Haven’t heard of that one yet.” More silence and then, “What sort of business do you have with this vault?”

“I just wanted to do some trading.” That wasn’t quite the truth, using the conversation she’d heard in Diamond City. She looked down at her orange Brotherhood jumpsuit. It might have been a good idea to change into some normal clothes. Then again, Danse stood behind her in his power armor. She couldn’t exactly hide him or what he represented. Maybe they weren’t familiar with the Brotherhood here.

“Is that so?” The voice became sarcastic. “You expect me to believe that-” stopping in mid-sentence, the tone changed to one of respect. “Oh, hello overseer.”

“Who is it, Edwards?” A woman’s commanding voice came over the speaker.
“Ma’am, it’s some new Commonwealth traveler. Not one of our usual traders.”

“Well, if this one wants in, they can earn that privilege just like anyone else who comes here. I’ll speak to them now.” There was a pause as if she was turning towards Alice to engage in conversation. “Sorry about that. Officer Edwards was just doing his job. I hope you understand we need to be extremely cautious about who we let inside our vault. When newcomers arrive, we operate with them on exchange. You help us; we’ll help you.”

“Sounds fair. What is it you need from me?”

“Fusion cores. Three of them to be exact. If you can get them, we’ll allow you access to the vault.”

Was this a test to discourage newcomers? Unsure of herself but willing to take a risk, Alice tried a different tact, “But...I’m a fellow vault dweller? Can’t you just...let me in?”

Edwards spoke up, “Excuse me, ma’am, it’s true. Before you arrived, she mentioned she was from vault 111...and she has a working Pip-Boy. Almost opened the door before I could stop it.”

Alice was surprised. A few minutes ago, Edwards had been rude and suspicious. Now, he was tripping over himself to give the information to the overseer, albeit late.

The woman wasn’t as quick to change her tune, “Is that so?” There was a long pause and then, “Fine. I’ll allow it. Edwards, open the door and make the announcement.” She spoke to Alice next, “Officer Edwards and I will meet you at the entrance.”

The noise of the door mechanism signaled it’s opening to allow them inside. The trio waited on the platform as the vault door rolled slowly to the side. An interior walkway moved forward. Walking inside, Alice searched everyone standing on the other side for the overseer. There was one woman in a blue vault suit and one in a white lab coat. Just like the doctor who’d taken them back to the pods in vault 111. She struggled not to be drawn back in time to when she’d entered her vault.

Alice stepped forward, the woman in the vault suit having an ongoing conversation with an older gentleman. Observing those around her, she saw they were all in excellent health. The woman had stylishly cut, short auburn hair set off by a rosy complexion. Alice was surprised none of them were pale, having lived their whole lives in here.

The woman turned to her when the man walked away. “Gwen McNamara,” she announced by way of an introduction. “I’m the current overseer for vault 81.” Giving Alice a once over before doing the same to her companions, she said, “We’ve never encountered someone from another vault before, though certainly heard rumors of them existing around the Commonwealth from our regular traders. Is this vault 111 you mentioned still operational?”

“It’s...” she thought of Nate and all their neighbors who’d actually made it inside before the bombs fell, all of them now dead,”...more like a graveyard now. I’m the...only survivor.” She didn’t feel like sharing information about Shaun yet.

Eyes widening in surprise, Gwen blurted, “Damn...I’m really sorry to hear that. What happened down there?”

Alice looked away, memories crowding her mind. “They...froze us. Cryogenically. In our pods. But then the vault...it malfunctioned. I was the only one to make it out...alive.”

Placing a hand on her chest, voice full of horror, “Oh my God! All those lives lost...because of a malfunction? I can’t...I’m so sorry. That is simply...unacceptable. I suppose we’ve been lucky here.” Her voice trailed off. “Thank you for sharing that. I’m sorry to hear no one else made it
Throwing off her melancholy with what was becoming a practiced ease, Alice told her, “I’m really impressed you’ve managed to succeed with maintaining this vault for so long.” She was desperate to steer the conversation away from her own experiences.

“A lot of the honor goes to the hard work of the overseers before me, although some of the people living here would argue the point. There are those who believe opening our doors to the Commonwealth was a mistake.” She didn’t sound very upset.

“Interaction with the Commonwealth isn’t a bad thing. It really is improving out there.” Alice knew the truth of both of the statements she made first hand.

Gwen nodded in response, “So I’ve heard. But that being said, it still has a long way to go. It’s the reason we’ve allowed traders in here. Although, newcomers like yourself are on a case by case basis. But if those Commonwealth dwellers living outside are willing to help us, then we’ll be happy to help them in return.”

Seemed a reasonable way to do business and get what they needed in turn. “Understandable.”

Making a split second decision, Alice reached in her bag. Handing over three fusion cores, she watched Gwen’s face light up. “You’ve been generous in letting me inside and I happen to have a few extra. I’m happy to help out when you’ve done so much down here to keep going.”

Pocketing the cores, Gwen smiled warmly at Alice, “Thank you.” Just as quickly, she ended their conversation, “It was nice talking to you and again, I am sorry about your vault. I hope you don’t mind, but I have much work to do.” Nodding at Alice and Danse, she walked away.

Edwards spoke up in alarm, “Ma’am, what about her friend...and the dog?”

Gwen glanced at Danse and Dogmeat over her shoulder, tossing out words to the security guard as she continued on her way, “I’ll allow it. Security is already doing its job well enough. Her friends have been chosen wisely if she’s lived this long out there.”

Alice was going to have to have a talk with Gwen before she left the vault. There was a lot she could learn from the overseer but for now, she’d let her get back to her work. Apparently, they had the opportunity to explore. She was sure she had something to trade in her bag.

Gwen paused before a set of scanners, “If you need anything else, I’ll be in my office.”

With that, she and Edwards both walked away. Edwards, of course, had some parting words, “Don’t make me regret letting you in here.” His fierce glance extended to Dogmeat but when it reached Danse, he visibly paled and scurried away after the overseer. So much for his change in attitude.

The trio followed behind them through a pathway of scanners, which buzzed and vibrated as they walked through them. Another doctor in a white lab coat spoke to himself, “No radiation detected. Remarkable.” As they passed him, he looked up, “Sorry about the security measures. Can’t be too careful these days.” Ignoring them after that, he scribbled notes on his clipboard.

Officer Edwards appeared again, mumbling something about a cat and Alice strode past him, unwilling to endure more of the man’s attitude. She’d heard a meow but thought her mind had been playing tricks on her. There’d been no cats anywhere that she’d seen since leaving her own vault.

They walked by several dwellers doing maintenance work, hearing bits and pieces of conversation - mostly about the cat. Finding the elevator, something her own vault didn’t have, they all piled in
and Alice hit the button to take them down into the vault. She was eager to see how it differed from 111.

Almost as soon as they stepped out of the elevator, a young boy with a head of bright red hair came running up to them. His eyes jumped from her to Danse to Dogmeat, wide-eyed with wonder. “Are you guys really from outside...from the Commonwealth?”

As he spoke, words tumbling from his lips, Dogmeat wagged his tail from beside her. Alice’s heart skipped a beat but she smiled at the boy, even while her thoughts ran circles around in her mind. He’s the same age as Shaun...or could be. Did Shaun run with such abandon? Did his eyes sparkle like that? Did his words tumble over one another when he was excited?

She couldn’t help but wonder if Shaun would have been like this boy if the bombs had never fallen...or even if they’d lived in vault 111 like all these people. Tears came to her eyes and Alice blinked rapidly to keep them at bay. Couldn’t begin crying...she’d never stop.

“Yes, we are. Is that odd?” She tried to imagine how she’d want a visitor to speak to Shaun if he’d been this boy.

“Yeah, for sure! I’ve never met anyone who came from the Commonwealth before.”

Alice thought back over the conversation she’d heard between the traders. “Has no one ever come down inside the vault before?”

“Oh, sure, but I’m usually in school. And sometimes, I’m at Erin’s, so I miss them. Not this time. I was down at the cafeteria.” He paused for breath and started again, “Hey, do you guys want a tour? I can give you one, show you around the vault. It’s only five caps...”

Danse spoke up beside her, “That’s very resourceful for a young man. However, we have to-”

Alice placed a hand on the arm of Danse’s power armor to stop the flow of words, “-take you up on that offer, which is a very excellent idea!” She reached into a pocket and pulled out five bottle caps, placing them in Austin’s hand. “Here you go. Where do we start?”

The smile she received in return could have lit the whole vault on its own. Does Shaun smile like that when he’s happy? Shaking the thought from her head, she waited for Austin to begin.

“Thanks so much! We’ll start over here.” Flashing a grin, he introduced himself, “I’m Austin,” and then turned to make his way to a large room on the upper level nearby.

Turning to look back at Danse, Alice noticed his brows furrowed in a frown. Of course he wasn’t happy, she’d just added more time to their missions - whatever they were. He hadn’t told her anything yet. Then again, she hadn’t exactly given him time to explain. Oh well, he could follow or leave. She was determined to see the vault and find out more about its history as well as those who lived inside.

“Hang on, Sha-...uh, Austin.” Damn, I have to stop comparing this boy to Shaun.

Dogmeat trotted to catch Austin and Alice quickened her pace. This boy could provide valuable information about who lived here and what they did to make the vault work.

“Inside here is the depot. The Combes family runs it. Erin and I are best friends; these are her parents. They fight a lot, so I don’t like going inside when they’re both working. If you need something, they have it.”
Alice looked inside the depot through the glass window. The wife stood at the counter, rearranging the items. Her husband paced around and around, tense, before changing direction and heading towards the door. He came out into the vault, glanced at them, and kept on walking.

As soon as he turned the corner, Alice asked, “What do they fight about?” She imagined Shaun befriend another child his age and watching their parents fight. It wasn’t a good thought. Maybe there was something she could do to help.

Lowering his voice, Austin repeated what he’d heard, “I shouldn’t be telling you this but...I’ve heard the grownups whispering about them. They said he’s sleeping with Tina.”

Alice couldn’t believe it. No ten-year-old should be hearing things like that! The adults really needed to keep their gossiping to themselves.

He had even more information. “Mrs. Combes doesn’t know, but Mr. Combes always leaves the store and her with all the work needing to be done and goes and spends time with Tina.”

If Alice found this Tina, she’d have a few choice words to share.

True to a ten-year-old’s mindset, Austin was already thinking about something else, “Next stop is the overseer’s office. Come on!”

Stopping outside the hallway to the overseer’s office, Austin talked in excited tones, his topic not even on the tour. “I bet you’ve seen a lot of strange things out there! Probably killed a bunch of raiders too.”

Alice thought of all she’d seen: ghouls, feral ghouls, super mutants, mutated animals...his words were the understatement of the year. Likely he’d heard tall tales from some of the traders.

He continued, “Up through there is the overseer’s office. They’re really busy up there and they do not like to be bothered.” A heartfelt sigh slipped past his lips, “She makes rules...but she’s fair and I like her.”

Smothering a laugh at his tone of voice about rules, Alice wondered out loud, “Does she...take care of anyone who breaks the rules?”

He shrugged, “Security mostly takes care of people who break them but she’s in charge of all the security officers. No one around here really causes trouble.” He quickly changed subjects again, “Next we’ll go to the diner. It’s downstairs.” The overseer, and her rules, forgotten, Alice once again found herself hurrying to catch up. “Everyone in the vault eats at the diner, so sometimes it gets really crowded. The Summersets are nice. I think you’ll like them.”

They entered an area with picnic type tables similar to the ones Alice had found in her vault. Serving tables like those found in most cafeterias held food, some of it familiar, and she wondered whether it was one of the resources they needed from traders to survive.

An elderly woman from the kitchen called out, “Hello, Austin. I see you’re giving our Commonwealth guests a tour of the vault.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He spoke politely to the lady. Austin was a very respectful and energetic boy and she worried about him someday venturing out into the Commonwealth. Speaking to her and Danse, he explained, “This is the Sunshine Diner. My gran says the diner takes all of her hard work and they turn it into...swill.” Pausing at the word, Alice wondered if he understood exactly what his gran meant. “Mr. and Mrs. Summerset over there run this diner. I think they’re really nice and Mrs. Summerset makes the best pies!”
Thinking about his gran’s comment, Alice had to ask, “How is the rest of the food? I mean, other than the pies?” After all, they might have to eat while they were here.

“I think it’s real good. Mrs. Summerset always tries to sneak me seconds.”

The woman spoke up as if she’d been listening to their conversation, “I’ll save you a slice of pie, Austin.”

Alice caught her eyes across the room, the older lady smiling and winking back at her. It was nice to know Austin had someone looking out for him. Alice smiled back at her and nodded, turning back to Austin when he spoke up again.

He smiled at her, “See? Told you they were nice! Now, it’s time to go to Horatio’s.” Talking rapidly again, he asked, “Do you like your hair? I like mine. I hate combing it, though. Gran makes me comb it.”

Not watching Shaun grow up, Alice wondered if all boys were like this, jumping from one thought to the next, frustrated with being told what to do and following rules, unconcerned with combing hair. It brought a wistful smile to her face to think of Shaun being like this. It sounded like Horatio was the hairdresser.

Inside the next room they came to were a couple of sinks, tables, a dresser, a mirror and some towels hanging on the wall. A man stood behind a customer, cutting a customer’s hair while engaged in conversation.

Having caught a glimpse of them in the mirror, he spoke up, “Austin, that hair of yours is a mole rat’s nest! When’s the last time you ran a comb through it?”

Austin didn’t answer, probably having heard those same words a time or two. “This is where Horatio fixes people’s hair. Erin’s mom comes here to get her hair done; gran hardly comes here at all but she makes me get my hair cut. It’s just not fair!”

Alice told him, “If I ever need my hair done properly, I’ll come here.”

He wasn’t impressed. “I hate getting my hair cut. Next stop is gran’s!” Alice struggled to keep pace with his rapid changes of subject. She’d finally get to meet Austin’s gran. After all he said, she wasn’t sure what to make of her. He may have just been being a typical boy and frustrated by her rules as well. She was about to find out.

They left Horatio’s and Austin told her about his gran, “I live with her but she’s not my real grandmother. My parents died when I was real little. She took me in.”

Stumbling a little, thinking of Shaun saying that to someone else about her, Alice bit back a sob. It was tragic just listening to Austin, thinking he’d never gotten a chance to know his own parents. Yet, there was no sadness in his voice when he mentioned them. He must have been just a baby or a young toddler when they died.

They walked into a hydroponics lab filled with the same food grown at the settlements. Having lived here their whole lives, she thought maybe they’d have food she’d eaten before the war. Maybe they’d exhausted those resources. Alice wondered if these foods also carried radiation.

“Hey gran!”

Gran was an older woman with grey hair cut in a shoulder-length bob, wearing a white lab coat and making notes on a clipboard. She turned in surprise, “Austin! What are you doing here? Are you
bothering these strangers?”

Attitude crept into his voice, “I’m not bothering them, I’m helping them, showing them around.”

She gave him a ‘look’ and hummed under her breath.

He kept talking, “That’s gran. She takes care of me. Her name’s Dr. Penske. She acts grumpy but she’s not really.”

A smile tipped the corners of her lips, “Says you.” Maybe Austin was right then.

“She runs this lab and we get all our food here.”

That was surprising. “Nothing from the Commonwealth at all?”

He spoke with pride, “Nope! Gran grows everything here. She’s really smart. Next stop, Ms. Katy.”

They made their way to the school where the teacher, Ms. Katy, asked Alice to come talk to the students if she stayed until tomorrow. When she questioned Austin if there were a lot of kids, he said no and that the Overseer was using population control ‘whatever that is.’ Maybe they had access to birth control methods in this vault. After that, they went to the medical clinic, which was downstairs. They observed through the window, Austin mentioning he wasn’t allowed to bother Dr. Forsythe or Rachel while they worked. When asked, Austin said hardly anyone down here got sick, mostly just colds, making Alice wonder if they had vaccinations down here when traders came by. Their last stop was Erin, Austin’s best friend.

“She’s going to be so surprised when she sees you.”

The last thought Alice had was she hoped Shaun had a best friend.

Chapter End Notes

More of a filler chapter (I know, I know...stop calling them that lol) but it's necessary for Alice's character development and...Curie! Well, no Curie yet, but we'll get there :)

As always, thank you for any comments and kudos!!
**To the Rescue**

Chapter Summary

Austin has been bitten by a mole rat in an abandoned part of vault 81 that no one new existed. Alice makes it her personal mission to save him, willing to put herself in danger to see if there's a cure somewhere inside. What other dangers...or secrets...might the abandoned vault hold?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Erin, look who I found! They’re from the Commonwealth!” Austin’s voice was loud and excited just as soon as the door opened to the Combes’ apartment.

Alice stepped inside, amazed; this vault actually had apartments where people lived. They were just big enough for beds, a dresser or two, a table and a few belongings. She seen communal bathrooms and showers down the hall. Why couldn’t she and Nate, and Shaun, have lived in a vault like this? They’d all still be alive...

Going back over all she’d seen, vault 81 was clearly built to support life. There was a diner, hairstylist, hydroponics lab, apartments with community bathrooms and showers, a school and a medical clinic all on at least three levels. Vault-Tec had intended for those who sheltered here to be self-sufficient.

Thinking back to the people who’d died in 111...the bodies still frozen, Alice realized the sleeping quarters, the dining rooms had all been for the staff hired to run the vault as well as the doctors and scientists monitoring the cryo pods. And the empty pods? She could only speculate on what happened to those inside - and really didn’t care to.

A dark-skinned young girl with shoulder length, straight ebony hair looked up at the trio. Hazel eyes opened wide, “Wow! You’re really from out there? From the Commonwealth?”

“Are you Austin’s best friend?” The girl, Erin, was about the same age, cute, and full of life.

Nodding in response, Erin said, “We’ve been friends forever. There aren’t a lot of kids our age in the vault.”

Austin smiled up at Alice, “Thanks for doing the tour! It was soooo cool to show you off to everyone.”

And didn’t that make her feel like the oddity at show-and-tell. Saying goodbye to them both, Alice turned to leave just as Erin’s mother came in. She gave Alice a wan smile, “Hello. It was really nice of you, letting Austin show you around. The kids here don’t get much of a chance to meet anyone from the outside or make a few caps they can spend.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Erin was talking to Austin behind them, her voice beginning to rise in a panic, “Ashes...I can’t find him, Austin.”
“Ashes is gone?” His voice held a note of disbelief.

Turning, Alice caught Erin’s frantic gaze, “Have you seen my cat? His name is Ashes.”

Alice remembered seeing a grey blur when they entered the vault and then overhearing several workers talking about a cat. “Maybe he left the vault? It’s possible he ran by when we came in.”

“He...he left? Please...you have to go get him and bring him back! No one else will go out there!”

“Erin…” her mother began but was cut off.

“Momma! Ashes will be out there all alone!”

“Alice…” Danse sounded frustrated.

She knew he was going to dissuade her, say they didn’t have time to be saving felines from the dangers of the Commonwealth. If she didn’t interrupt, he’d likely say something to distress the poor girl.

So, she spoke up before he could. “Sure, we’ll go look for Ashes. Where do you think he might have gone?” She could hear the creak of power armor behind her. He was probably mad at her. Again. But she couldn’t just leave the defenseless cat out there all alone and poor Erin was really upset. All these kids Shaun’s age...she kept seeing him going through whatever they were. If roles were reversed, she’d want someone to help him.

“He wouldn’t go far. I just know he’s really scared. He has to be close by.”

“We’ll bring him back.” She gave the girl a quick hug and looked down at Dogmeat. “Come on, boy, let’s go find Ashes.”

He wagged his tail, sniffed around the room, and took off with a soft woof. Dogmeat would find him right away. He’d found Kellogg after all. A cat would be a piece of cake.

As they left, Erin called after her, “Thank you! He’s the sweetest grey cat and I love him a lot. I just...want him to come home.”

Alice nodded and followed Dogmeat, not even waiting for Danse. Their partnership would go much smoother if he learned a little compassion for others.

Stomping along behind her, he spoke up, “Alice, we simply don’t have time to be chas-”

“Don’t say it.” She interrupted him before he could finish. “We’re going to find her cat and bring him back where he’s safe. Now let’s go before we lose Dogmeat, too.”

A very heavy sigh of resignation could be heard behind her.

They found the grey striped tabby sunning himself on a dock down by the river. He looked pretty full of himself, barely opening an eye to peek at them when Dogmeat trotted over and sat down near him. Looking back up at her, she could swear Dogmeat smiled at her, proud of himself for finding the cat. Alice walked over and rubbed his ears, praising him, “Who’s a good boy? You are, aren’t you, buddy?”
She looked down at the cat, “Ashes, go home. Erin really misses you.”

The cat stared at her for a few minutes, got up, stretched lazily, and then ran off back towards the vault. Well, that was easier than she’d expected. Turning, she caught Danse staring at her. “What?”

“You insist on talking to these animals as if they truly understand you.”

Crossing her arms, she gave him her best glare, “Did you see the cat leave to go back to the vault? Did you see Dogmeat nose around the room for the cat’s scent before taking off? I’d say they understand pretty good.”

He huffed and turned back towards the vault. Alice couldn’t resist a comment, even though it was under her breath, “Better than most humans do.”

They’d gone several feet before Danse spoke up, “I did hear that.”

Thankfully, he didn’t turn around so couldn’t see her face heat up with embarrassment. Next time, she’d think her opinions instead of voicing them...even quietly. Even if they were true.

---

Upon entering the vault, they overheard people speaking in hushed voices. Ignoring whatever was going on for the moment, Alice found Ashes with Erin in the depot.

She looked up as they came in, a smile lighting up her face. “Thank you sooo much! I was so worried about him.”

“You’re welcome.” Alice was distracted, hearing her dad say something about Austin getting bit by a mole rat. Was that what was going on? She turned to go to the clinic and check on him.

Inside, Austin’s gran, Dr. Penske, was clearly worried, demanding action. “You have to do something for him, Jacob!”

“I’m running the tests just as fast as I can, Priscilla.” His voice was calm and soothing, meant to put her at ease. “I can’t treat Austin until I know what he’s infected with.”

A painfully skinny young man was there, trying to get their attention but they shushed him and kept on talking. Their conversation was concerning the mole rat and what diseases it might carry in addition to how it affected Austin more severely. He was only a child. Alice was about to talk to the young man herself when Dr. Penske and Dr. Forsythe finally gave him a chance. His persistence that he might know something got their attention. The turn of events was certainly interesting and information they might be able to use.

“Go ahead, Bobby, what is it?” The voice of reason from the doctor.

Bobby seemed anxious, fidgety but finally had a chance to speak, “The door Austin found? Well...that was because of me. I keep my...um, private things in there. He saw me get them.”

Dr. Penske raised her voice and scoffed, “You mean your chems.”

That observation even had the doctor losing patience. “Get to the point, Bobby. What did you find down there?”
Chems would certainly explain his behavior. Alice only had Hancock as her basis for comparison and she’d never seen him anything but relaxed no matter what he took. Not so for Bobby. The young man was clearly agitated as he continued to explain, though it could also be knowing he was in trouble. “It’s like there’s a whole ‘nother vault down there behind that door. Parts of it are caved in, dirt everywhere, walls buckled. I found a terminal and started messing around on it. I came across some notes and other stuff about using mole rats to grow viruses.” He paused to catch his breath, “But there was also stuff about them making vaccines and treatments for those viruses.”

He certainly had their attention now. It was a surprise to the doctor, for sure. “A secret vault? I’ve never heard of that.”

Priscilla had a different view, “Bobby, you’re a genius! A junkie genius!”

Alice choked back a laugh at her description. Now probably wasn’t the appropriate time for humor. Still…’junkie genius.’ That would be a first.

Turning back to the doctor in elation, Austin’s gran exclaimed, “There just might be a cure for Austin down there!” Her gaze narrowed in on Alice, “You...stranger. How’d you like to do a favor for vault 81 and save my boy Austin?”

And there it was, the question she heard the most - ‘can you help us?’ Oh well, why not? “What is it you need me to do?”

“Save Austin. Please. I can’t lose him.” Her voice wavered on the last words. Austin had been right, she only appeared to be gruff. Priscilla really cared for him, no matter how it looked to everyone else.

Alice spoke to all three vault dwellers standing around her, “What exactly do you think is in this...secret vault?”

Priscilla answered, “I honestly have no idea. From what Bobby described it’s possible it was a research facility at one time. I hope it is anyway. That might be the only way to save him.” She glanced at the skinny young man and back to Alice, “Bobby will take you down there, show you where he keeps this secret stash of his. There has to be a cure inside this place for Austin! If you find it, bring it back and give it to Dr. Forsythe. Please...hurry! We don’t know how much time he has.”

Bobby called, “Follow me,” and ran out the door. Alice quickly took off after him as he ran upstairs, down a side hall and through another door into a room with a large generator. At the bottom of the stairs, he went around past them and stopped at a wall. Kicking at it, a panel slid up to reveal a door like the regular ones vaults had.

Stepping past him, Alice pushed a button and the door whooshed open, Dogmeat ran inside. The smell of dirt floated towards them and she could see the floor was completely gone. Either they hadn’t finished this part of the vault or over the last two hundred years or it had completely deteriorated from lack of use.

Closing the door, she looked around. Behind her was the same kind of metal shed that existed near her own vault. Walking over, she noted the terminal Bobby had mentioned.

Stepping past him, Alice pushed a button and the door whooshed open, Dogmeat ran inside. The smell of dirt floated towards them and she could see the floor was completely gone. Either they hadn’t finished this part of the vault or over the last two hundred years or it had completely deteriorated from lack of use.

Closing the door, she looked around. Behind her was the same kind of metal shed that existed near her own vault. Walking over, she noted the terminal Bobby had mentioned.

Stepping up to it, Bobby called after her, “Hey, you aren’t allowed to read that. It’s classified!”

Ignoring his outburst, Alice proceeded to hack it anyway. “Really? And you are?” That shut him up. “There might be important information I can relay to the overseer. Something you might have
overlooked. Go back to whatever you were doing, Bobby. We can handle this.”

Shocked more and more by each entry, Alice made notes on her Pip-Boy. The overseer would surely want this intel, might not even be aware of what vault 81’s true purpose was. If they came across any other terminals, she’d check them and bring her findings to Gwen. If - when - they got back, she’d give her all the notes on what she found. Gwen was certainly going to be in for a shock. That is, if she didn’t already know this from previous overseers.

Leaving the terminal, determination in every step, Alice opened the door once again and moved forward into the secret vault.

Danse’s deep voice echoed around her, “Stay sharp. Those mole rats could be anywhere and we have no idea what kind of diseases they were injected with over the years. Dogmeat especially could be vulnerable.” For a few seconds he was quiet but Alice knew it was likely preceding a reprimand. “You really should be wearing your power armor.”

Yep, she’d been right. “Well, not like I can go back and get it.” It wasn’t like her to be snippy but right now, she was terrified. Mole rats scared her to death, the way they burrowed into the ground and came up right next to you. Pulling her travel bag around to the front, she checked her supply of stimpaks. There were still quite a few. No use putting this off, Austin needed her. I almost said Shaun again.

One step at a time, she began to weave her way through the rubble, alert for the signs and sounds of mole rats. Dogmeat would sense them as well. A part of her wanted Danse to go first but with mole rats it didn’t matter who was in the lead and who followed; they came from any angle. There were plenty mounds of dirt down here for them to live and hide in.

The door had opened onto a hallway and in the back corner was a set of stairs. Having checked this level, Alice crept up slowly, peeking through the rails once she could see the next floor. Nothing stirred. She spied a couple of first aid kits and made her way over to them. More stimpaks to add to her stash. They might need them.

Up until this point, nothing had jumped out at them. The knowledge made her even more wary, hair standing up on the back of her neck. It was like waiting for a trap to spring. Now she knew what a mouse felt like.

Danse stood a few feet in front of her; Dogmeat at her side. Giving the area one last look, she wondered if she’d missed anything in the containers lying around. Couldn’t hurt to look one last time. Just as she stepped up to one, a mole rat exploded from the dirt. Before Dogmeat could launch himself or Danse could even turn around, Alice took aim, shooting it in the head, blood spattering back against the wall. A shudder worked through her at how close it had been. She hated the damn things!

“Outstanding, soldier.” Danse told her.

Willing her hands to stop shaking, she tamped down the feeling of pride at his words. The sooner they found any vaccines down here, the sooner they could leave this hellhole.

Entering a room on the upper level, Alice found another terminal. While she made notes, Danse spoke up from behind her, “I'm going to guess that the residents of this vault didn't even know this section existed.”

Rolling her eyes because he couldn’t see her, she somehow resisted pointing out he was stating the obvious. Of course they didn’t. And yet...could the overseer from that time have passed down this
information? The trials hadn’t been carried out on the residents, and they’d gone on to live full lives. So, would it even matter? She wouldn’t know anything until she got back anyway and Gwen had plenty of time to think up a story if she had known.

They still needed an antidote, and it wasn’t going to be found by questioning motives or wondering if previous overseers had passed down the info. Or speculating if Gwen already knew. Austin was the only important variable at the moment.

Ever deeper into the vault they went, encountering surprisingly few mole rats. Alice expected the place to be completely overrun by them. She checked terminals as they came to them, making notes at each one and found a few stimpaks and other first aid essentials when they came across a kit. A voice coming from one of the terminals made her scream in fright, looking around frantically. Heart lodged in her throat, she had to take several deep breaths to calm herself down. Danse eyed her strangely. Figures. Nothing scared him.

The voices were from Rachel and Priscilla in the clinic, discussing Austin. Was that how the scientists left behind here knew what was going on in the main vault? Most likely.

As she continued making notes, she shared her findings with Danse, who commented, “This is exactly the reason science never belonged in the private sector.”

She couldn’t argue the logic behind that. Maybe if they’d had checks and balances--

The thought was quickly squashed. They’d had big government backers who knew what was going on. So, in essence, where did science belong? Someone was always going to want to unethical things and there would be others with money to back them.

They continued on - another terminal, another floor. This time she could hear an argument between Erin’s parents - about Erin. She was coming to understand more about Mr. Combes and it wasn’t something good. Erin certainly deserved more from her father than what she was getting as did her mother.

It appeared a lot of these terminals were connected to places in the vault above for the scientists to observe their human guinea pigs. The thought made Alice feel ill. What would’ve happened in here if the first overseer hadn’t intervened? Speaking of, the next terminal was in the overseer’s office. They had also been observed.

Turning away, Alice opened another door to a stairwell going back down. By now, she had no idea where she was, how far beneath the other vault they were or what level they were on. Trying to gather her wayward thoughts, she heard Dogmeat growl and Danse yell, “Alice, look out!”

Her head jerked up, eyes widening. Mole rat! A glowing one. She froze. Dogmeat lunged, pushed it away. She took a breath, aimed and fired. Blood and bits of skin flew in the air. The mole rat tumbled down.

As her surroundings came into focus, she could hear them...their grunting and snuffling. Sounded like a nest of them. Unable to move, afraid of what she’d find, still recovering, she heard Danse behind her. Moving, she let him go first.

He fired several shots. “Ugh. Diseased filth.”

The plentiful shots broke Alice’s spell. Moving behind him, she peeked around his power armor for more mole rats. There was no sound, the vault having become eerily quiet. He’d gotten them all. A sigh of relief slipped from her lips, heart still pounding in her ears.
Walking past him, the ground erupted in front of her. Jerking backwards, she tripped, fell. Weapon already up, she fired blindly...and hit it.

“Careful, Alice. We can’t afford for you to be injured or bitten.”

Helping her up with a metal hand, she wondered if his concern was for her or wasting precious stimpaks. Likely the latter. The trio continued on, down a hallway and into an area with cages, then another hallway, back up the stairs. There was another terminal directly in front of them. This one was different, opened the door next to them if Alice could hack it.

She could.

Another set of stairs, a right turn and...Alice stopped at what she saw before her. A memorial site? But who could have died-- Wait! This must be for the three scientists. Quietly, reverently, she went over to it. At the head of three lockers sat many containers stacked together with candles, a glass beaker, and a microscope placed on top of them. A white lab coat, folded neatly, was lain at the bottom of each locker. At the foot of each locker was a white vase with a bouquet of purple and blue plastic flowers.

Who had built this shrine?

Hearing a noise, she and Danse both drew their weapons, Dogmeat growling. Walking over to the only clean window she’d seen since entering this secret vault, the room beyond with actual working lights, Alice stumbled backwards and collided with Danse. He steadied her, hands on her shoulders. “Easy, soldier.”

She’d been reacting to seeing a working white Miss Nanny robot, speaking from behind the glass, “Are you Vault-Tec security? I’ve waited so very patiently for you to arrive.” The robot had a...French accent.

Intrigued, Alice moved close once again, “Who...what...are you?”

The robot bobbed up and down, “I am a Contagions Vulnerability Robotic Infirmary Engineer, or CVRIE. The human scientists call me Curie. Or more properly, they called me this when they were alive. I repeat, are you Vault-Tec security?”

Alice wasn’t sure how to respond. If she said yes, would the robot know she was lying? If she said no, would the robot refuse to help? She asked another question instead, “These mole rats in this part of the vault carry a disease. Do you have any information about it?”

“Oh...these poor little darlings!”

Darlings? Was it really referring to the mole rats? Alice had much better words to call them than...darlings.

The robot went on to explain, “They were used to grow all manner of new and interesting pathogens. Then vault citizens would be exposed to these viruses in the hopes that they would develop new antibodies. But...the scientists never got a chance to execute their plan. Clyde got out of his cage. He was smarter than the others, my sweet boy Clyde. He let out the others and those poor scientists never stood a chance.” She stopped for a beat of silence before continuing, “Clyde's been dead for almost two centuries now, but his descendants have free run of the vault.” It paused again, “Oh dear, I am rambling. Where are my manners? Are you Vault-tec security?”

No getting away from that question. “Yes...yes I am.” She ignored Danse’s cough behind her.
“Superb! I placed an emergency call so long ago. I was beginning to think something dreadful must've happened. I am pleased to report I completed my primary duties 83 years ago.”

Eighty-three...and she - it - was still functioning. Amazing.

It was still talking, “...pathogens were grown in the mole rat hosts. Then a single broad spectrum cure was developed to treat them all. Very satisfying work for many decades. Now, please tell me you are authorized to release me from the lab.”

Alice didn’t catch - or care about - most of what was said, but she could answer that, “Um...yes, you are so authorized. By me.”

“Superb! I had almost given up all hope of leaving here. I shall open the door then. Since you are a Vault-Tec representative, I entrust you with the broad spectrum cure I developed. If you have an equivalent to my digital Hippocratic oath, please use it quickly to prevent any undue suffering. However, be advised, there is only one dose left, and I can no longer make any more.” One of the arms held out a stimpak containing the cure.

Alice placed it in a special compartment in her bag and looked up at the robot, “Thank you. But...you only have one dose? Why can’t you make more?”

“There used to be more, but they all expired. Sadly, the organic compounds necessary to make more have all deteriorated.”

Disappointing news to be sure but it couldn’t be helped. At least they had this one for Austin. “I’ll make sure it’s used for someone who needs it.”

“Since my job here is done, I think I will follow you out. Hopefully now I can properly further my scientific research on the outside.”

Time to get back and save Austin. Curie pointed out an elevator down the hall. Alice’s eyes widened in surprise when it opened out onto the vault’s entrance. All this time and no one had ever wondered what was behind it. With no time to lose, she began running towards the elevator. As soon as it opened downstairs, she ran to the clinic, handing the stimpak to Dr. Forsythe.

“The dose?” His eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. It didn’t look like he’d believed she could find it...or that it existed at all.

“How is he?”

“Austin’s been unconscious since shortly after you left.”

“Go on...give him the dose. We can’t waste anymore time.”

“This is the only one you have? Well, I hope it works. If it doesn’t…” He didn’t finish, walking over and injecting the stimpak into Austin’s arm.

Gwen walked in then. “I’d heard you made it back and with the antidote. I sincerely hope this works. Maybe Dr. Forsythe and Rachel can find a way to make more.”

They stood there, waiting for something to happen.

Chapter End Notes
I'm on a roll...again! Thank you to all who have been waiting (im)patiently for me to update and for the comments and kudos :)}
Trip Down Memory Lane

Chapter Summary

Reliving memories can sometimes be painful. It's even worse when you share them with someone else - but not with same point of view.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Austin began to moan once the vaccine began working, rolling over onto his back. He was still confused and disoriented. “Where am I? What happened?”

Dr. Forsythe calmed him down, “Easy Austin. You were bitten by a mole rat and our visitor here found a cure. You’re going to be okay but I’ll be keeping you in the clinic just a bit longer for observation.”

Austin’s eyes widened as his memories resurfaced, bolting upright in bed. Alice moved quickly to his side, wrapping his hand in hers. She brushed damp hair back from his forehead, “It’s okay, Austin. Danse, Dogmeat, and I took care of all the mole rats that were down there. You’re fine now and they’ll never bother you again.”

Her words, the gentle tone of her voice and touch, calmed him down until Priscilla entered the room and rushed over, wrapping him in a fierce hug. She rocked him back and forth, gratefulness shining in her eyes when they landed on Alice. Seeing how close they truly were, she backed away. Not even realizing it until now, she’d begun to have tender, motherly type feelings for the boy and right now, she felt like it was losing Shaun all over again, Priscilla comforting him in her stead.

But he was still a ten-year-old boy, a mix of the young child he’d been while wanting to appear older and less needy. He pushed her away with a protest, “Gran, stop. I’m okay. His eyes caught hers over Priscilla’s shoulder, “The visitor, Alice, saved me.” The look in his eyes turning sly, he turned back to his gran, “Can I get an extra piece of pie tonight at dinner?”

Choking back a laugh, Alice turned from them. Austin would be fine; he was in good hands. It was time to leave. Gwen walked in right then, coming in to check up on Austin.

As she watched the interaction of Priscilla, Austin and Dr. Forsythe, she spoke to Alice, “I heard what you did.” Looking directly at Alice, she went on, “You’ve done more to sway opinion towards the interaction of those inside the vault with people from the Commonwealth than anything else I’ve been able to do. I honestly can’t thank you enough - both for saving Austin and changing people’s minds.” She looked out the window at the vault, thinking about something, before adding, “We have an extra room here. It’s on the upper level, near the elevator. The room is yours any time you visit, if you’d like. We’d be happy to have you back.” She gave Alice an open smile full of warmth.

Unsure what to say, overwhelmed, “T-thank you. I...I was really only doing what needed to be done to save Austin.” He was still being smothered with affection and peppered with questions by his gran, Dr. Forsythe, and Rachel. It was just like a young child full of life to have already gotten past
the fear of death. He was now demanding to see the mole rat, which had bitten him. “He’s a really good kid. I’m glad I could help.”

Gwen was eyeing her strangely, like she felt there was more to the story. “I get the feeling...you know what, nevermind. In any case, none of us here would have been brave enough let alone had the skills to do what you did.” She took a deep breath, shuddered, “I honestly had no idea what was down there. To imagine a whole vault beneath all this time.”

Uncomfortable with the praise, Alice redirected the conversation. “I almost forgot.” she ejected a holotape and handed it over to Gwen. “I took notes on all the terminals down there for you to look at when you have time. There really isn’t anything else of value down there, so I’d make sure that door is locked up tight, maybe even sealed. If you choose not to, than I suggest everyone but you and any security people you choose have the only access. The mole rats seemed to have been cleared out but it’s never a guarantee. Curie also can’t make any more of the cure, so there’s no reason for her to be down there either. I’d advise anyone go down there in all honesty. Although, if you really feel the need to know more about it, go ahead and send her - but only her. She can record anything of interest and take care of herself.”

The overseer reached for the holotape, placing it in a pocket. “Thank you. I’ll definitely make sure it’s locked up tight - even from Bobby. You’re not taking Curie with you?”

“Not now. I’ll let her know we’ll visit again soon, and she can make the decision to come with us or not at that time. For now, you have her expertise and knowledge at your disposal.”

“Very well, then. I’d best go take a look at these notes. Thank you for doing this. I’m not sure I’ll like what I find but it’s better to know than be in the dark about it. I appreciate you leaving Curie here for awhile. I’m sure she, Dr. Forsythe and Rachel have a lot to talk about. Goodbye Alice...and take care.” She turned and left the clinic.

Alice turned to Danse. “Let’s go check out my new room. We can stay for the night since it’s so late. At least we have a warm, clean, sheltered place to sleep and we can eat at the diner. We’ll leave tomorrow, first thing.”

Not even realizing she was giving him orders, she left the clinic to go find her room, Dogmeat running ahead. Danse tried not to smile but it won out in the end. Austin caught his eye as he left and waved. Danse waved back. His Alice was becoming someone to reckon with.

Wait...his Alice?

Danse was still trying to examine his feelings regarding Alice when they passed the corner of a building, heading down a side street leading to Goodneighbor. How were they here already? He barely remembered them traveling past Diamond City and through the heart of downtown Boston. Had they encountered any hostiles? Glancing down at Alice walking beside him and Dogmeat trotting ahead, he was relieved to see they were both unharmed.

Lights strung on a line overhead were already on in the waning light of day. A fire crackled in a barrel, throwing orange light and moving shadows on the walls around them when they approached the blue metal door to Goodneighbor. The red and green glowing neon arrow on the fence, a beacon to point the way, buzzed and crackled.

Danse hated this place. “Watch your back in here. Ghouls have a high chance of becoming ferals. You never know when they’re about to turn.”
Alice rolled her eyes. Always so damn suspicious. Then again, he was alert and ready for anything. How could she fault that? Reassuring him, she said, “No one is going to attack us here. Hancock won’t allow it.” She turned to look at him, “Provided you behave yourself.”

Opening the gate, she walked on through. He didn’t have any choice but to follow her inside. Hancock. Hopefully, they wouldn’t cross paths with the ghoul. Looking up, he saw that his hope had been misplaced. The Mayor of Goodneighbor was leaning against the stone wall just inside, almost as if he’d been waiting for them. Frowning, Danse glared, willing him to keep his distance. It was all for naught.

“Alice! What brings you to the fine city of Goodneighbor.” The ghoul spoke to her but those black soulless eyes were on him. Danse swore they gleamed with humor.

He tensed as she walked over and gave the ghoul a tight hug that seemed to go on longer than normal. Something ugly twisted inside him. He watched her smile up at the ghoul; The ugly feeling twisted tighter.

She told the ghoul, “I’m supposed to meet Nick here, talk to Dr. Amari.”

“Well, sister, you got here just in time. Nick walked through that door no more’n a few minutes ago. Follow me, and I’ll lead you right to him.”

Bristling at the familiarity the ghoul took upon wrapping an arm around Alice’s shoulder, Danse spoke up, “Don’t you have better things to do, like run your town?”

Hancock looked over Alice’s head and gave him a toothless grin, “Town runs itself. Why? Jealous, Crew Cut?”

He bristled at the nickname but scoffed at the insinuation, “No.” But was it the truth? That introspection was not a place he wanted to go. What he did know without having to think twice was how he hated the ghoul touching Alice. In any capacity. However, he was resigned to the fact he couldn’t do anything about it because Alice wasn’t uncomfortable with it. Even Dogmeat wagged his tail and trotted by the ghoul’s side. Though, he didn’t pay the shepherd any attention. Danse just kept quiet and followed them to the doctor’s.

Entering the Memory Den, they walked through a short corridor into a room with memory loungers. At the far end was Nick talking to an elegant woman with a styled coif of short blonde hair and a beautiful feathered dress of deep burgundy. Dogmeat hurried ahead to get some attention from the detective.

They seemed to know each other well. A thought Alice had never entertained before made her blush furiously. Thankful for the shadowed room, she hoped her red face wouldn’t be noticed.

“I'd give all the caps in the Commonwealth to hear your thoughts right now, Sunshine. Gotta be something truly wicked to make you blush like that.” The raspy voice spoke quietly unto her ear.

Of course, Hancock would notice. She wasn’t about to tell him. “It's nothing.”

“Nice try. Ain't ''nothing’ causing such a strong reaction. Tell ya what, lemme play a guessing game. I think you're wondering if ol’ Nick there can do the dirty. You know...being a synth and all. Does he really got all the parts for it?” He paused for dramatic effect, then turned those black eyes on her to see what effect his words had wrought.

If only the floor would open up and swallow her whole. Alice wanted to die. His accuracy - and her
reaction - was beyond mortifying! Her face felt like it was on fire.

He cackled out loud, everyone in the room glancing at him.

Irma glared daggers at him, “Keep it down, Hancock. This may be your town but I run this business. So be quiet, you know the rules.”

Unashamed by his outburst or the admonishment, he gave the woman a devastatingly handsome smile. Well, the effect wasn't quite the same with a ghoul’s visage but Alice would give him an E for effort. “Sorry, Irma. Just couldn’t help myself when I correctly guessed Alice’s thoughts.”

All eyes now centered to her. Could this visit get anymore awkward? Probably but Alice wasn't waiting around to find out. Slipping from underneath Hancock’s arm, still wrapped around her shoulders, she walked up to Nick. “We ready? Let's get this over with.”

He stared at her a few seconds, trying to figure out what was going on. Deciding it didn’t matter, he turned, “Alright then. Follow me.”

Alice was quick to do as he said. A dry, raspy chuckle followed her as well as the metal stomp of power armor and click-clack of Dogmeat’s paws and the wood floor.

As they entered the room downstairs, Nick walked up to the slim, dark-skinned lady in a white lab coat. Her back was to them, intent on what she was doing “Dr. Amari?”

“Yes?” A beautiful, accented voice answered. Turning, dark brown eyes landed briefly on each of them, before coming back to Nick. “I take it this isn’t a social call?”

Nick turned to Alice but she felt completely out of her element. From the welcome he’d received upstairs, it was obvious both ladies here knew him. She shook her head, “This is all yours.”

Leave it to Nick, he certainly had a way with words. “We need a memory dig, Amari. This one’s just a bit different than usual. The perp’s on ice.”

“Are you completely mad?” Her eyebrows rose up the hairline of her short, jet black hair, eyes jumping from Nick to Alice and back again. Taking note of their serious expressions, a long sigh slipped from her lips. “Let me get this right, you’re asking me to defile a corpse. Do either of you realize that in order for the memory simulators to actually work, they need intact, LIVING brains to work properly?”

Stepping forward, Alice implored her, “Please. I really need your help with this. The man...brain...we need the memories from...he...” she had to look away, overcome by emotion. Taking a breath, she tried again, “The man we need the memories from, he...he kidnapped my son. He told us where he is but...I need to know how to get to him. This is the only chance I have.” The indignation on the doctor’s face gave way to sympathy. “Nick told me you’re the only one who can do this. So...please help us get Kellogg’s memories...so I can find my son.”

Nick seemed to sense the doctor was teetering on the edge and tried pushing her over, “The perp’s dead brain has to have inside knowledge of the Institute. This is the biggest scientific secret of the Commonwealth. You need this break, doc...and so do we.”

Alice held her breath. While she wasn’t sure how she felt about the scientific knowledge taking precedence in Amari’s decision over the kidnapping of her son, she wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Anything they could use to get her on their side was a win. Behind them, Danse shifted in his power armor. At this point, Alice didn’t care if he was with them or against
Dogmeat lay in front of the couch, head on his paws, happily snoozing away. He was content, relaxed, and taking advantage of the unexpected rest. Smart dog.

Clearly not happy, Nick’s words still managed to sway Dr. Amari’s decision towards helping them. “Fine. I’ll take a look but I will not make any guarantees that I can help you at all.” Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she asked, “Do you...have it with you?”

Reaching inside her bag, she handed the doctor what had been lodged inside Kellogg’s brain. It was wrapped in a clean rag, spots of dried blood on it. Alice almost gagged, thinking of the blood and where the piece had come from. “Here you go. This is what we found.”

As she studied what was in her hand, she became frustrated, “What is this? I thought you had a brain! This is not...wait. Okay, this is the hippocampus. There’s something...attached to it…” her voice trailed off as she studied it, seeming to talk to herself, “A neural interface possibly? Interesting.”

Nick stepped closer to get a better look, “Those circuits look really familiar.”

Looking up, Dr. Amari told him, “I’m not surprised. I’ve had a chance to study a few synths. From what I’ve seen, all the Institute’s technology is similar in its architecture.”

“How so?” Alice wanted to hear this, find out what Dr. Amari knew and if her knowledge could help in some way.

“Mr. Valentine is an older generation synth. However, since most of the Institute’s tech is basically the same...well, this brain could fit him.”

Alice’s jaw dropped open. Put Kellogg’s brain in Nick’s? Absolutely not! They’d simply have to find another way.

The doctor had the same idea, “It’s just an incredible risk to play with something like this. Wiring something to his brain...well, there’s no telling what harm it could do.”

Nick, always to the rescue. “Huh, don’t worry about me. This old body’s past its warranty date anyhow.”

Alice wanted to argue. Nick was a good guy, and he hadn’t gotten where he was today but taking unnecessary chances. The ones he did take, he was sure on. Insistent about it, he seemed sure on this chance.

Grateful, Alice gave him a hug, “Thanks, Nick. This truly means a lot to me.”

Shrugging off her gratefulness, he went on, “You can thank me when your son is found.” Turning to Dr. Amari, he said, “Alright. Let’s get this show on the road. None of us are getting any younger.”

Dr. Amari fixed him up with the piece from Kellogg’s brain, explained it would take both of their minds together to crack the encryption code and get information. Then she instructed them to get into the memory loungers. Nick made a wisecrack causing a frisson of worry snake down Alice’s spine, “If I start cackling like an old, grizzled mercenary, pull me out, will ya?”

The door closed once Alice sat inside. Her heart rate sped up. She hated enclosed spaces like this. Dr. Amari’s voice came from a speaker inside the loungers. “We can’t continue until you calm down. Breathe in and out, deep breaths.”
Alice tried in vain...until Danse came to stand in front of the clear glass door. “It’s okay, Alice. I’ll keep an eye on Dogmeat, make sure he stays safe.”

Looking after Dogmeat wasn’t what reassured her. It was his presence standing as sentinel, taking care of her. That was her last thought before she went under.

What she next saw in her mind was so strange. Little pathways of purple...things...leading to rooms where she saw different versions of Kellogg. They began with him as a boy, then a young man, married and with a child, and then older like when Alice confronted him. She felt a certain sadness towards him on seeing his memories. Sorrow for the way his life had begun, for the life he’d chosen to live because of that - for the loss of his wife and child, which had apparently pushed him over the edge. It wasn’t fair and while she understood him better now, his choices...it didn’t excuse what he’d done. He’d killed Nate in cold blood and kidnapped her son without a thought.

That memory was the worst - living it over again. She wanted out, wanted this to be over. But there was one more memory. It was his apartment in Diamond City. Alice recognized it. Maybe now they’d finally get some information they could use. Something to lead them to Shaun.

Her heart stuttered. *Shaun! My baby boy Shaun...only, he’s not a baby anymore.* Her son truly was the same age as the boy in the vault. She’d hoped...but no, it didn’t matter. He seemed so happy with Kellogg, happy where he was - reading magazines, unafraid of the synth who’d shown up...unafraid of Kellogg. It was a chilling look at what the Institute had done to her son, how they’d raised him. Anger, red hot and burning, surged through her. She needed access to those bastards. *Soon.*

And all she needed in order to get that access was go find a runaway scientist, Dr. Brian Virgil, in the Glowing Sea. Alice didn’t even know where the Glowing Sea was but maybe Danse did.

Another important bit of information from the memories was how to access the Institute - teleportation. It was why no one had ever found a way inside. There wasn’t one.

The memories cleared and Alice opened her eyes to see Danse had stayed with her the whole time. He was blurry - everything was - but it was him. Feeling groggy and disoriented, she tried to climb out of the lounger, only to fall back into it when she tried to stand. Danse extended a metal hand and she took it gratefully, standing up on wobbly legs.

Dr. Amari appeared at her side with a look of concern. “No sudden movements, okay? Just stand there for a few minutes while you become oriented to your surroundings again. No one’s ever...done this before, so I have no idea what side effects you might have.”

Alice did as she was told, still hanging on to Danse’s hand, unwilling to lose the only thing keeping her upright. Closing her eyes, she blinked a few times, took a deep breath and then opened them again. The first thing she saw was her hand held firmly in Danse’s. Something moved through her, an emotion she couldn’t name. Snatching her hand back, she refused to look at him, feeling her cheeks heat in embarrassment. How long had she left her hand in his?

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Amari watched her with a doctor’s penetrating eyes, taking in every nuance of movement.

“I...I feel fine. Maybe a little groggy. My eyesight isn’t blurry anymore.”

The doctor nodded, “Good. I believe you should monitor yourself,” her eyes cast a quick glance towards Danse and back again, “for the next few days. Just in case there are unexpected side effects. We want to make sure there is no long-term damage.”
“Are there any normal side effects your customers experience?” Danse, always asking the important questions Alice never thought of.

“Maybe a mild headache, some fatigue...a bit emotional. Nothing too out of the ordinary.”

Danse nodded, “I’ll keep a close eye on her, doctor.” His voice was quiet, serious...deep brown eyes studying her.

Alice shivered in response. Unable to look away from them, she tried to convince herself he was her sponsor and just looking out for the Brotherhood’s best interests. It only partially worked.

Turning to her, Dr. Amari asked, “Do you want to discuss what we saw?”

Alice nodded, thinking back over all they’d learned. She picked the most important question, “More than one person knows about the Institute.” Rubbing her head, brain still foggy, she looked up, “Virgil...the escaped scientist?”

Clearly dumbfounded by the news as well, Amari said, “I had no idea it was even possible for scientists to leave the Institute. That certainly changes things. If found...the questions he could answer!” Deep in thought for a few minutes, she then continued, “The memory, it said he was in...the Glowing Sea. Correct?” At Alice’s nod, she shook her head, “I find that truly hard to believe. Can’t imagine anyone, even a scientist running from the Institute, willingly going there.”

Entering the conversation, Danse gave his reasoning, “It’s exactly why he escaped to that precise location. No one would look for him there willingly - unless it was a synth sent by the Institute. It’s highly likely they were created to be impervious to radiation or at least have a stronger resistance than humans.”

Amari’s face lit up with enthusiasm, “That makes perfect sense! The radiation in the Glowing Sea would be a perfect shield to throw anyone off his trail and would give him an excellent advantage.” But then she turned serious, looking at both of them in turn, “If Dr. Virgil truly is there, it means he found a way to survive amidst the dangerous radiation. Neither of you can go there without serious precautions.” Studying Danse, she added, “The power armor is a very important first step. Of course, I would also advise you use Rad-X, RadAway - as much as the two of you can carry. If you go...be safe.”

The conversation over, Alice glanced around. Where was Nick? Had he been gone this whole time? Just as she got ready to ask Dr. Amari where he was, she answered, “I unhooked Mr. Valentine before you and also removed the implant. You were just beginning to wake up when I was finishing with him. He said he’d be waiting upstairs for you.”

“Thank you so much for your help, Dr. Amari. I really do appreciate you going to such lengths for us.”

She nodded, a slight smile on her lips, “You’re welcome. I have to say this was a first for me...and the last, I hope. However, I do wish you luck in finding your son.”

Shaking the doctor’s hand, Alice began to walk back upstairs, holding on to the wall to steady herself. Danse followed closely behind. In the main room, Alice saw Nick sitting on a bench by the door. Nodding to Irma as she passed, Alice noticed a man in the memory lounger. He looked familiar to her but couldn’t imagine anyone she could possibly know in Goodneighbor and shrugged the notion off.

Approaching the detective, Alice saw him watching her. He looked...normal. Almost laughing at
herself for that description, she greeted him, “Hey, Nick.”

He opened his mouth, “Hope you got what you were looking for inside my head,” gave an oily chuckle, then, “I was right. Should have killed you when you were on ice.”

The words were delivered in Kellogg’s voice and shocked her to the core, a tendril of icy fear slithering down her spine. Behind her, she heard the distinct click of Danse throwing off the safety on his laser rifle. He was ready to take out Nick…to defend her.

Making sure she stood between them, she gave the detective a worried look, asking tentatively, “Nick? Are you still here with us?”

“What?” He was confused. “What are you talking about? Of course I’m still in here!” It was most definitely Nick’s voice again.

“Y-you...sounded exactly like Kellogg just now.” Alice hated the way her voice wavered but he’d truly scared her to death and she wasn’t sure even now he was really Nick. Maybe Kellogg had found a way - no, the Institute - had found a way to take over Nick through the bit of technology from Kellogg’s brain.

“I did?” Not concerned in the slightest, “Dr. Amari did say it was possible the procedure could leave ‘mnemonic impressions’ or something.” Shrugging, he added, “I feel perfectly fine. You ready to move on? If you want to go it alone, though, I understand. Got some more cases I should be working on.”

“I’ll be fine, Nick. Go ahead and get back to your cases.” Truth be told, Alice was a little bit leary of him going along. If Kellogg still lingered in there, well…

He stood up, shook her hand, while looking at Danse, “You take could care of Alice, here. Brotherhood or not, you’ll answer to me if she even gets a splinter.”

That, more than anything, convinced Alice it was indeed Nick in front of her but she didn’t get a chance to change her mind before he was gone. Turning around, she faced Danse, “Well, I guess we head to the Glowing Sea.”

The stoic expression never wavered, though he did put the rifle’s safety back on. “No.”

Beginning to nod, Alice’s brain caught up with his response. “What do you mean...no? He has the answers I need!”

Staring down at her with an expression Alice couldn’t quite read, he repeated himself, “No.” Seeing her become fired up, he went on, “You absolutely will not be allowed to traverse the Glowing Sea. I’ll survey the map and assess the most likely strategic coordinates he could use for cover. You’ll stay behind to guard the campsite.”

Unable to find her voice for several minutes, Alice could only stare at this…this…pig-headed, stubborn, overbearing soldier who had the gall to dictate to her regarding her son! Guard the campsite…please. Taking a page from his playbook she answered, “No.”

He opened his mouth to argue but she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. “I’m going to the Glowing Sea to find this Virgil and get information about the Institute for my son. You can go or you can stay but you will not leave me behind like some...some...incompetent lackey. You chose me to join the Brotherhood because you believed in me, because you thought I had what it takes to be a soldier. Well, you either believe that...or you don’t. But hear this, I’m going and you can’t stop me. Come with me, stay behind, I don’t give a damn.” She turned on her heel and marched out of
As she walked across the street, she heard the door to the Memory Den close...the distinct sounds of power armor behind her. Even that couldn’t make her smile. She was just too mad at the stupid Brotherhood monkey man. Another thought occurring to her, she whirled around to face him, “And just for the record? I have plenty of friends who’d go with me, who’d risk their lives to help me find my son.” Waiting to make sure she had his complete attention, she asked, “What about you? What do you have to offer me in my search...other than to push me out of the way?” He didn’t answer, mouth opening and closing as he struggled for words. “That’s what I thought.”

Behind her, she heard Hancock tell Danse, “Damn...sure put that big metal foot in your mouth this time, didn’t you Crew Cut? Got some tools around here somewhere, in case you need help getting it out. Must hurt pretty damn bad.” There was no response. “Might have a few chems to take the edge off the pain...”

Alice might have laughed at that. As it was, she was still seeing red and there were more important things on her mind. First, back to Sanctuary to get her power armor. Then, the Glowing Sea and hopefully, some more information about Shaun.

Chapter End Notes

My summaries suck lol May change it at some point but...hope you enjoyed this chapter anyway and thanks for the wonderful comments. Always much appreciated ;)
Revelations

Chapter Summary

This time, it's Danse who opens up to Alice.

Chapter Notes

This chapter...ugh. It seriously kicked my butt. It was all over the place but I think I wrangled it into submission - finally!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Under the overhang of the carport, the air was stale and hot. No reprieve even in the shade. In fact, there’d been no breeze all day. A bead of sweat slid down the side of her face and Alice brushed it away with the back of her hand. Wrinkling her nose, it came as no real surprise she didn’t smell like roses and sunshine. Probably closer to the fertilizer used to make them grow.

The white tank top she usually wore under her BoS jumpsuit was soaked and stuck to her skin. Thankfully, the jumpsuit was washed and back in her bedroom. The shorts she was wearing helped a little but all of her skin was covered in fine sheen of sweat. Someone had found a mostly intact full length mirror and when Alice had stepped in front of it, she’d been shocked at the changes. She had muscles - in her arms, her legs...even her stomach. Still skinny but definitely more filled out than before. It was an startling realization.

Over the past few days, she'd been hard at work, banging out the dents on her power armor, tightening screws, and oiling every single crevasse. Since this morning, she’d begun with renewed vigor knowing the trip to the Glowing Sea was on the horizon. Right at this moment, she just wanted to be done with the task. Upgrades were necessary but a pain in the butt. Stepping back, she wiped her hands on a rag, grimacing when her fingertips and fingernails remained mostly black. Eyeing the steel suit, she figured it was ready to cross the Glowing Sea. At least, as ready as possible.

Glancing across the street when she heard the similar sounds of clunks and bangs along with an occasional muttered cuss word, Alice saw Danse working on his as well. A frown worked itself over her face. The obstinate soldier was still trying to persuade her not to go and for once, he and Preston were on the same side. Never would she have thought to see the two of them in such accord. It was frustrating to put it mildly.

Letting the screwdriver she’d been using hang loosely from her hand, Alice let go a long breath of frustration and shook her head. She understood, truly. It was just...when would they understand she wasn’t that scared little girl anymore? The one who hid from everything? It was true she still had a long ways to go but how did you ever grow into strength and courage if everyone was determined to keep you in a bubble? Would there ever come a time when these two would finally realize she was capable of taking care of herself? That she could stand on her own two feet?

Her shoulders slumped in resignation...probably never. Hard-headed males, the both of them.
Deep in her heart, she knew she should be grateful they cared enough to want to keep her safe. Not many in this new world could say that. She was grateful…and at the same time she wasn’t. Just thinking about it right now made her feel irrational and angry. Enough so, the thought briefly crossed her mind to sneak off in the dead of night and head out by herself. Just grab her supplies and slip off into the shadows, no one the wiser. Except they’d both know exactly where she’d gone and most likely send out a search party after her - the two of them in the lead. Besides, it was foolhardy; she knew it but logic didn't make it any easier to admit…or not to act upon it.

Staring at the steel suit which would be her defense against the radiation and god knew what else was lurking in the irradiated wasteland, Alice swallowed down her fear. Keeping working. If she kept busy, kept moving, maybe her thoughts would all be quieted by the pounding of the hammer. All those dents needed to be worked out somehow. What better way then with the strength of annoyance and a sense of helplessness behind it. On a personal mission now, she grabbed a hammer and began banging with renewed purpose.

Preoccupied and the loud clang of metal on metal in her ears, Alice didn't hear footsteps approach behind her. Neither did she hear the voice speaking to her until it yelled, “ALICE!” She stopped and turned, blowing a piece of hair from her eyes. Danse towered over her, thick brows angled downward in concern, “How are the upgrades going? Do you require any assistance?” Looking over her at her power armor, his expression became stern, “You’re going to hammer holes into steel or at least at more dents, worse than what was there before.”

Vexed as he went from concern to upbraiding her once again, she turned and ended up stumbling over the foot of her power armor, hands grasping at air. A strong, callused hand reached for one of her own, steadying her comical flailing.

Irritation made her snap, “Stop sneaking up on me like that!” She watched his cheeks flush with the admonition and felt like she’d kicked a puppy, big brown eyes full of hurt. Taking a deep breath, she apologized, “I’m sorry, Danse. I guess I need to be more aware of my surroundings - even here in Sanctuary. I didn’t mean to snap.” Giving them both a few minutes to recover from the awkwardness, she turned back to her power armor, eyes scrutinizing it once more. “I think everything’s ready…but…” glancing over a shoulder, she asked him, “would you mind taking a look? Just to make sure? You’re much more skillful than I am at fixing power armor.”

With a quickness that astounded her, he suddenly became the knowledgeable Paladin, sure of himself and ready to share his expertise and knowledge. Honestly, if his chest inflated anymore, Alice figured she’d be able to tie a string around him and float all the way to the Glowing Sea. Pushing down the urge to roll her eyes, she couldn’t quite manage to keep her lips from quirking upwards. Thankfully, Danse couldn’t see it as he was already kneeling down, checking her work.

Moving closer, Alice placed a hand on his shoulder. She didn’t even realize what she’d done until he tensed up after several minutes, finally taking notice. Snatching her hand away quickly, Alice moved back, her face rising alarming in temperature. Touching your sponsor. Bad form, Alice. Danse coughed. He was probably going to point it out with those exact words.

“I.”

“Do you-”

They both began to talk at the same time. Alice coughed a laugh into her hand at the absurdity of the situation. Neither of them was any good at personal interaction, awkward at best. There were times, Danse would remind her of Nate but in personal feelings, speaking their mind about them, they were nothing alike.
Then it was Alice’s turn to tense up as Danse began to speak again. “Do you have a moment to talk? I wanted to discuss something...off the record.”

Eyes widening in surprise, she regarded him curiously. What could it mean? Her thoughts flew off in a million different directions, none of them good. *Stop second guessing, let him talk.* Nodding, she said, “Off the record?” Did it mean this was personal? Oh boy. Regardless, she nodded, “Sure. Go ahead.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable. A few agonizing seconds passed as he gathered his thoughts. Then, “It will make this a bit awkward, so I just ask that you bear with me. I’m not well versed in personal...affairs.”

And didn’t that just make her heart take flight like a frightened bird. Taking a deep breath, he motioned for them to go inside and sit. Alice turned and led the way into what was still the living room of her house. No one came inside unless they were invited. The front window, glass long gone, was open to the street but likely no one would hear Danse’s low, murmured words. They’d have some privacy.

Sitting down on opposite ends of the couch, he continued, “Back when I asked you to join the Brotherhood and when Knight-Captain Kells gave me the responsibility of mentoring you...well, despite my words to the contrary, I had some strong reservations.”

Alice clenched her hands in her lap to still there trembling, refusing to let Danse see it. Her thoughts were not so easily controlled - *Here it comes. I knew he regretted his decision; he’s letting me go.* She looked up at him, chin tilted in defiance, refusing to act the coward. Deep brown eyes, so fierce at times, focused on her with laser proficiency, Alice powerless to look away. “Despite those reservations, I can honestly state I’m finding this partnership advantageous, a rewarding experience that has been of benefit to both of us. There are still some things I can teach you but overall, you make an excellent soldier for the Brotherhood and I’m happy to have you by my side.”

Struggling to breathe, as if the air had been sucked from the room, Alice gaped at him stupidly. Wait...what? It wasn’t what she’d expected at all. Did he mean it? Doubt was quickly followed by certainty. If he didn’t mean it, he wouldn’t say it. If nothing else, he’d keep the doubt to himself until she proved him wrong, earlier words testimony to that end. The death grip her hands had on each other loosened, clasped loosely now in her lap.

“For the most part, your attitude and actions reflect what the Brotherhood stands for and you are willing to uphold them.” He was gazing at her earnestly.

Alice felt like it was a backhanded compliment. ‘*For the most part?’* What was that supposed to mean? And in a bright flash of intuition, she suddenly knew - if she didn’t adhere to his every command, he wouldn’t allow her to travel with him to the Glowing Sea. She was just about to tell him what she thought of *that* idea when he sucked in a breath to begin again.

Holding her breath, she released it when he relaxed suddenly, running a hand through his hair. Some very heavy thoughts must be tumbling in his mind. A pang of sympathy rushed through her.

Brown eyes glanced at her, then down at the table in front of them. “Sorry, I’m not...really...good at these things. Let me start over...” His eyes skipped, looking everywhere but at her. He rested his elbows on his knees, hunching forward. His callused, oil smeared hands were clasped tightly between his knees, shoulders tense. Alice sank back into the cushions of the threadbare couch. It appeared this was going to be a long talk, might as well get comfortable.
He began talking, strong emotion deepening his voice. “I grew up alone in the Capital Wasteland. For most of my childhood, I picked through the ruins, salvaging scrap, selling it to survive.”

Unable to stop herself, she blurted a question, “Your parents? Where were they?”

He squinted outside, spoke quietly, “I don’t remember them. They must have died when I was young and yet I was old enough to learn to survive on my own.”

She scooted closer, placing her hand softly on his arm in sympathy. “I’m so sorry, Danse.”

Glancing at her hand, he didn’t seem to hear her at first. When he did, he just shrugged as if it was of no importance. “Thank you, I suppose. Although, I don’t miss them. I don’t even remember them. There were other children in more dire straits than me, I soon found out.”

Feeling awkward in the wake of his confession, Alice removed her hand from his arm. She scooted back again and waited for him to continue. A thought occurred to her - would that be Shaun? Never missing her because he didn’t know her? Well, that certainly hurt to think about.

“When I was older - I’d saved up some caps by then and everyone knew me as the kid who always had good scrap - I moved inside Rivet City and opened a junk stand. A place where people could find me more readily and to store what I’d find. It was there, in Rivet City, I met a boy about my age at that time. His name was Cutler. We got along fairly well, watched out for each other and kept each other out of trouble. Mostly.”

A fond smile appeared on his face and Alice felt the pang of sadness his words wrought be replaced by something warm and sweet. Danse suddenly looked young and carefree. She could easily imagine him then - a younger, happier version. Casing mischief...not so much. Having only ever known him as he was now, it was nearly impossible to think of him getting into trouble or doing anything else but being a soldier. What a sight that would have been though!

“One day the Brotherhood came through Rivet City. They were looking for recruits. Up until then, it had never occurred to either of us to be soldiers...to be anything other than scavengers and scrap sellers. When we sat down and talked about the possibilities, it made perfect sense. The lives we lived then would never go anywhere, never amount to anything. Eventually, we’d both get tired of the sameness of our day-to-day lives. By joining the Brotherhood, we could make a difference, have a purpose, never have to scrounge for meals or clothes. We sold our scrap business to a guy named Harkness, a security chief in Rivet City and signed up the next day.”

“What is Rivet City? I don’t remember hearing the name before the war.”

“It didn’t exist then. The city was established inside the remains of a beached aircraft carrier and one of the safest places to live. At least until the Brotherhood arrived in the area. That was the only reason I even tried to establish a store in the marketplace back then. After joining the Brotherhood, I finally felt like I was doing what I was born to do. Cutler...” he paused, lips twisting in a grin, “well, not so much but he still made a damn fine soldier. I found ways to mostly keep him out of trouble, maybe pushed him a little too hard to follow orders. He just countered that by dragging me into trouble with him.”

He blushed furiously. She’d give all her caps to know what caused it. Cutler must have been some friend to get this stalwart soldier to buck orders. Unable to help herself, she asked, “What did he make you do?”

His head snapped up, eyes widening in surprise. “I...what do you mean?”
Having been married to a military man who’d on occasion got into some shenanigans with the boys, Alice wasn’t fooled for a minute. “Trust me, I can see it written all over your face. You’re like an open book sometimes, Danse. But if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. No pressure.” She smiled, not wanting to push the issue. Eventually, she’d get it out of him.

“I...yeah, some other time.” Blowing out a breath, he continued, suddenly very somber. “About a year after we were posted to the Prydwen, Cutler went missing. He’d been on a scouting op. It was one of the few times we hadn’t gone out together. I’d been sent somewhere else as I was moving quickly through the ranks. Cutler was...content...where he was and had no desire to further himself. It took quite a bit of convincing to be allowed to lead a search party. Cutler was my only friend, had been my friend long before the Brotherhood. My persistence eventually paid off and I was allowed to lead a party out in search of him and his men.”

He stood up suddenly and went to stand at the window looking out onto the road through Sanctuary. Alice remained seated, looking past him at the settlers going back and forth, busy with their chores. She looked up at Danse, realizing he didn’t see any of it. Probably reliving the past. It hit her in that moment - she’d do anything to erase the pain for him, take it on herself. *Friends do that. Right? Yes. Friends.* The words rang false in her ears but she didn’t dwell on it, waiting for Danse to continue.

“Three long weeks it took us before we finally tracked Cutler’s team to a super mutant hive.” His voice turned dark and angry, words like thunderclaps into the quietness of the house, “Those wretched abominations...they had slaughtered them all, except one last member of the team - Cutler himself.” There was a long pause, then, “They should have killed him as well.”

Alice tried to hold back her gasp behind a hand, afraid it had slipped out anyway. Such a brutal statement, she couldn’t wrap her mind around it. The fierce anger which had rang in his words - it felt alive, as if she reached out a hand toward him, it would lash her, cutting to the bone. She wanted to go to him but dared not move, afraid to be caught up in the vortex of hatred swirling around him.

His words were cold, brittle, “They’d changed him. Those green bastards had used their FEV to change him into one of them. He was no longer the Cutler I knew. He tried to kill me, charged me with a weapon. I stumbled back, fell and he was on me in a second. In my head, I still saw him as Cutler. The rest of my team were holding their own, taking out the hive.” Deep silence followed for several long minutes and Alice wondered if that was all. It wasn’t. “Cut--” he paused, swallowed, “this super mutant and I, we fought and once my head finally cleared - once I knew it was no longer Cutler staring back at me...I had to...put him down. It was my...duty...as a Brotherhood soldier.”

Alice wasn’t sure what to do, could only sit there, silent tears falling down her cheeks. She hurt for him, for Cutler...for the evil that had taken a beautiful friendship and made it into a horror show. But nothing could have prepared for what came next, the pure anguish in his words.

“I...killed him…” His words trailed off into silence but he continued to stand there, seeing another time.

This time, Alice didn’t hesitate. She stood up, went over and put her hand in his. Danse startled, her touch bringing him back to the present. What she expected was for him to yank his hand from hers, what he did was grasp her hand back, as if thanking her for her comfort. Looking up, she was snared as surely as a hare in a trap when his beautiful brown eyes gazed down at hers, open and honest in that moment and so full of pain - at the loss of a friend, at being the one to end his life. She marveled at what she saw even as, the shutters came down and he was Paladin Danse once
more, Brotherhood Soldier...her mentor. He stepped away, the personal moment gone in the blink of an eye.

“Danse, you did what the Brotherhood taught you. There’s no shame in that.” Oh, the nights she spent telling Nate that after he came home. Empty, empty platitudes. But what else did she have? She’d never had to kill a friend before, never faced family on opposite sides, what did she know? Even Nate hadn’t had to do something so painful.

Nodding, he stood at parade rest, spoke towards the window, “Then you understand why it had to be done.”

Oh, he wasn’t fooling her but she’d play along anyway. She could see the turmoil in his eyes, the regret and doubt, wondering if he’d truly done the right thing. It must haunt him still after all this time. She gave him the words he wanted to hear, “I do,” but didn’t understand at all.

“How, you did what the Brotherhood taught you. There’s no shame in that.” Oh, the nights she spent telling Nate that after he came home. Empty, empty platitudes. But what else did she have? She’d never had to kill a friend before, never faced family on opposite sides, what did she know? Even Nate hadn’t had to do something so painful.

Nodding, he stood at parade rest, spoke towards the window, “Then you understand why it had to be done.”

Oh, he wasn’t fooling her but she’d play along anyway. She could see the turmoil in his eyes, the regret and doubt, wondering if he’d truly done the right thing. It must haunt him still after all this time. She gave him the words he wanted to hear, “I do,” but didn’t understand at all.

“Since Cutler di- has been gone, I’ve seen quite a few soldiers come and go. Some were brave, others honest to a fault. Some of them were...hell, they were downright heroic. But...,” he paused, looked down for a few seconds before capturing her eyes with simple honesty, “none of them would have been what I considered a good friend...a friend like Cutler was. At least, not until now, that is. It...it’s a good feeling, but I have to admit it frightens me. A bond like that changes you; it changed me in many ways. I’ve made it a point since then to put distance between myself and my fellow brothers and sisters. I can’t seem to do that with you. I also don’t think I could lose a friend like that again.”

Alice wasn’t sure what to say, blurted the first thing that came to mind, “It wouldn’t be that way with me, Danse. I care about you too much to allow that to happen.” Oh, shit, what had she just done? Talk about foot-in-mouth disease.

Those eyebrows, always so expressive, shot up to his hairline. She’d actually made him speechless. Well, maybe this was one for the record books because she was just as speechless as him.

“I...I didn’t know you felt that way, that strongly, about our...uh, about us.” His eyes looked everywhere but at her, “I...I’m sorry. I guess I’m a little confused. That’s quite a statement. I’ll need some...time to process that information.” Gathering his cloak of soldierdom around him, Danse turned to leave the house. Stopping at the doorway without turning to her, he added, “I thought you deserved to know how I felt. I...uh...about being friends.”

And then he was gone. How she wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. She was never going to be able to face him again. Collapsing onto the couch, she held her head in her hands, moaning about what an idiot she was. Where had those words even come from?

Danse wasn’t the only one who had a lot to think about.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for the kudos, comments and just hanging in there and continuing to read :)

Chapter End Notes
It's time to go find Virgil.

Dust floated around them from the dirt kicked up by the boots of their power armor. The stale, dry air from Sanctuary had continued today as they traveled. Sweat trickled between Alice’s shoulder blades and down her back inside the suit of power armor she wore. Trying to bow her back against the steel which encased her, she struggled to rub her flight suit against the hard surface trying desperately to get it to soak up the sweat. The cool air cycling through her suit was no match for the incessant beating of the sun from above.

The awkwardness from the day before, following her blurted confession, hounded their steps, occasionally broken by a skirmish with mutant hounds and at least once by a group of feral ghouls. She could count maybe two times she and Danse had attempted conversation - only to stop again once when it became stilted and floundering. Eventually, they’d both given up, limiting any interactions to mission specifics only.

When they’d started out this morning, the sun had been over the horizon but just barely. The yellow ball of heat had continued its standard trajectory as they’d traveled. They’d only stopped on this journey to exit their power armor for a convenient tree or to eat a bit of their rations and check their fusion cores. The HUD on Alice’s armor was on the fritz, the lights flickering in and out. No matter how much you checked and doubled checked your equipment, something still always went wrong.

The light was beginning to wane, sun heading behind some hills when Danse stopped and spoke quietly, “This is Cutler Bend.”

Alice saw the sign saying such when she stepped up behind him. Before them was a meandering body of water, boats scattered throughout, shallow banks of land thrusting up through the water here and there.

“Our patrol was down here scouting and Cutler, always joking around, grabbed one of the boats, jumped in and floated off in the direction marked on our maps. The remainder of our patrol tried pointing out the boats were old and weathered, likely full of holes but he didn’t listen, which was usually the case. A few miles down the river we caught up with him. He was soaking wet from head to toe, flight suit stuck to his skin, but his green eyes sparkled with laughter and there was a happy, crooked smile on his face. He proceeded to tell us 'we had no idea what we were missing by not floating a lazy afternoon away.' ”

Alice could hear the mirth, tinged with a bit of sadness, in Danse's voice. This was clearly a bittersweet memory, even if it brought a small smile to his face.

He continued to reminisce, “He looked at each of us in turn and asked in surprise, ‘Haven’t any of you read Huckleberry Finn?’ None of us spoke up. Of course, he knew I’d read it. ‘Really? All of you? It’s even in the library at the Citadel.’ When there was still no response, he shook his head and mumbled, ‘Every single one of you need to live a little.’ I felt like he was really talking to me. He’d told me that more than once as I climbed the ranks. Said the higher up the chain of command
I got, the more serious I became. That I didn't know how to let loose and have fun.”

Alice could hear the underlying tone of hurt in his voice. “The area was dubbed Cutler Bend after that.”

For the remainder of their journey, they were both quiet. Alice was convinced Danse was lost in thoughts of the past. As for herself, she was thinking of the differences between Danse and Cutler - wondering if Danse had really changed so much from who he’d been before becoming a Paladin.

She startled when Danse spoke up into the quiet of the evening, “It’s getting late. I think we should bivouac here.”

They had just come upon a marsh where a lone house was nestled back against a hill, the marsh spread out before it. From where they were, Alice could make out a light ahead. It flickered as she watched it, so probably a fire. She hoped it was occupied by settlers and not raiders or super mutants. Exhausted, sweaty and dirty, a hot meal and even a sponge bath would feel nice right about now. Maybe even one last good night’s sleep before the dreaded journey into the unknown. Anxiety curled around her heart, wondering what awaited them in the Glowing Sea.

The sun dipped down behind the horizon handing the night's watch over to the moon.

Monitoring the HUD inside her helmet, actually working for the moment, nothing appeared to be lurking in the lengthening shadows around the war torn house. She couldn’t detect any sounds to alert them to raiders or super mutants. Just to make sure, Alice twisted and pulled her helmet off. It was strange, their shared link suddenly severed. Their breathing and words had been linked together for all the miles they’d covered. Looking over, she observed Danse taking off his helmet as well.

Moving in closer, Alice saw that, indeed, it was a fire blazing and crackling inside a circle of concrete blocks, the shell of a car next to it. Don’t they know that’s a potential bomb?

Her attention was drawn by movement, head whipping to the right. Was that...did she hear voices? People moving around? An outline of what appeared to be corn stalks sat next to the house, a meager light coming from the broken windows. The voices drifted in the air. She hoped they were friendlies.

Answering Danse’s question from earlier, she told him, “Here is fine. I think it would be a good idea to give out a shout, though, let them know we're here and who we are.”

He nodded and walked past her, safety off his laser rifle just in case. His deep voice carried into the silence, “Hello settlers! We’re soldiers from the Brotherhood of Steel. We seek accommodations for the night.”

Not wanting to frighten anyone with two large suits of power armor, Alice held back until Danse waived her over. An adult man and two children, a boy and girl, stood off to the side. The man looked wary, the children wide-eyed with curiosity and wonder.

Looking past them, she took note of the condition of the house - the roof was full of holes, all the windows were broken, no defense against the elements. As soon as she and Danse made it back to Sanctuary, she would mention this place to Preston. It would make a strategic location for the Minutemen and at the same time, they could provide much needed support for the man and his children.

Leaving their power armor on the porch, the only place somewhat sheltered, she and Danse stepped
inside the battered home.

Looking around inside, she saw the trio had made it as comfortable as possible. A couple of chairs in a side room, bookshelves holding their treasures, a rug with the children’s toys and three beds in a larger room extending past the garden. Sheets and threadbare blankets were tacked up over the windows in the sleeping area to keep some of the elements out. It was livable...but barely.

The man, Hezekiah, insisted on sharing a meal with them. Alice learned the children were not twins and in fact, weren’t his children at all. Somehow, they’d all found each other out in the Wasteland. Each of them had a sad story but Zeke, as he preferred to be called, didn’t want to dwell on those stories or the sadness, much preferring to take joy in having company.

Alice played a game of checkers with the children, caps replacing the checkers, while Danse questioned Zeke about the area. Everyone tired from a long day, they all turned in early, Danse insisting on first watch. He mentioned checking over Alice’s HUD.

The next morning, Alice awoke feeling more tired than when she’d gone to sleep, despite Danse never waking her for second watch. All night long thoughts raced around inside her head, thinking of where they were headed. Knowing there was no way to catch up on lost sleep, she got up and set about rolling up her sleeping bag. Outside, the day was overcast, a promise of much needed rain. The timing couldn’t be worse for them, however, and before they left the homestead behind, the heavy clouds opened up, rain pinging on their armor, coloring everything around them a dismal grey. What a fitting background in which to begin their trip into the Glowing Sea.

Just past the garden, Alice turned back to see the children waving at her. She lifted a hand in farewell. Not wanting to get their hopes up, she’d spoken to Zeke alone, telling him of the Minutemen and that she’d make sure the three of them were taken care of. He’d seemed skeptical but grateful.

Turning back, her helmet swiveled from side to side, taking in the changes around her as they climbed the hills behind the house. All around her was a deserted wasteland. A place completely devoid of humanity, where nightmares were reality. Trees, stripped bare of their limbs, stuck up from the ground, leaning like drunken, skeletal soldiers.

There was very little vegetation of any kind as far as her eyes could see, most of it disappearing completely as they moved further and further away from the settlement behind them.

It was like a line had been drawn in the ground and beyond it was an alien landscape from a scifi movie. Yet, it was all too real. In the far distance, mist curled through the mountains, dark, jagged silhouettes against a pale, gray sky. The mist had found them as well, rain hitting the ground with a pop and sizzle. Her newly fixed HUD was measuring intense heat levels beneath her boots while the radiation gauge bounced up and down. What had she gotten herself into?

She checked to make sure the bottles of Rad-X she'd brought were still stored in her power armor. Danse had insisted on taking as much as they could carry, even after they'd made the necessary upgrades to their power armor.

Overhead, lightning crackled in the sky and Alice jumped in response. She breathed in a familiar smell, even through the filters in her helmet - a rad storm. A green hue suffused the sky, the wind picking up and yellow lightning beginning to flash around them, thunder rumbling overhead. As they came up over a rise, the desolate tableau before them was illuminated by more lightning.

This...this area had been directly in the blast radius of the bomb, that volatile ball of fire and chemicals blooming once again in her mind like it had the day the elevator they stood on in the
The vault took them underground. The day she’d thought her life - the life of her family - was over. An image forever seared into her brain.

Standing here, on the edge of the Glowing Sea, she felt herself catapulted back in time, that day coming to life once more. The whispers of her neighbors, the frantic reassurance of Nate, the sound of Shaun crying. Alice could feel the heat...the wind...the debris raining down on them from above. That same bomb had obliterated everything in its path - starting somewhere out here.

She wouldn’t soon forget the sight before her now, either. Complete and total devastation.

A burnt smell lingered beneath the scent of ozone. Around her, the ground was charred, the rain turning it into a paste of irradiated ash and mud. Everywhere she looked, there was only the barest proof this had once been a thriving metropolis full of businesses, churches, schools and homes - people driving, walking...living.

Alice stepped inside the broken fence of a relay tower, struggling to process the utter absence of humanity. A monitor sat inside the fence, light still blinking. Having learned a few tricks from Nick, she tapped at the keyboard, craning her neck to watch the satellites go up. Several signals popped up on alert - an unintelligible radio signal, 181m; a distress signal, 234m, and a Skylanes mayday signal, 239m. Unable to access her Pip-boy through the power armor, she couldn't tune into them. Probably didn't matter anyway.

Danse spoke into her ear through their power armor link, sometimes yelling to be heard over the lightning. “We need to keep moving Alice. We still have a long ways to go.”

Disheartened at the loss of life around her, terrified to think of what they would be traveling through and the dangers therein, Alice warily began to trudge after him, clicking the safety off of her laser rifle. Abject fear of the unknown had her heart pounding erratically in her chest. I changed my mind. I don’t want to do this!

Danse stopped suddenly, Alice nearly running right into him. Her heart rate skyrocketed even higher, the muscle ready to burst through her chest and power armor both. Cautiously, she peaked around him, nearly collapsing in relief. He’d merely stopped because off to their right was a bloatfly, glowing a phosphorescent green, and a bloodbug. Carefully maneuvering around them, they managed to avoid a firefight.

“Best to save our ammo for bigger targets out here.”

Bigger? Well, that certainly didn’t ease her mind at all. She knew dangers out here were likely a million times worse than anything she’d encountered to date but hearing Danse say it out loud made the hair on her neck stand up. Not for the first time, she wondered if she was truly strong enough to make this journey without dying, whether by a strange creature which lived out here or her heart just stopping to beat from sheer fright. Time would tell.

They walked for hours, Alice wanting nothing more than to stop for a few minutes, before coming to a ravine. She couldn't imagine eating anything, her stomach a ball of knots and drinking was out of the question in the open but she was beyond exhausted and wanted nothing more than to just stop. walking for a few minutes. Danse followed the ravine up the steep incline. A long sigh slipping out despite her best efforts, Alice climbed slowly behind him. Catching up to him at the top, she saw the ravine opened up into a deep crater, a sharply dropping incline leading to the bottom. There was a glowing pool of water down there, irradiated barrels floating in it. The gauge on her power armor swung back and forth wildly. She’d thought it was because of the rad storm, the fourth one they’d encountered since crossing the dividing line into the Glowing Sea.
The light from her helmet didn’t reach very far into the green haze but there appeared to be an outline of a metal building sitting in the middle of the irradiated pond. *How did people live in this?*

“Alice, I suggest you take another Rad-X. In fact, take a Radaway as well. This has to be the crater of the bomb that hit when you took shelter in your vault. I can’t understand how anything - anyone - can survive out here.” It was like he’d read her mind.

“Should we go down there?”

“Yes. They might have information on the man we’re looking for.”

Alice followed his lead, staying up high as they were to avoid the pool of radiation below. They passed people dressed in rags, kneeling with their hands raised, whispering words to who, Alice had no idea. The sheer insanity of these people to stay in this hell boggled her mind. Even inside a suit of power armor upgraded to ward of radiation, in addition to having swallowed a Radaway and Rad-X, Alice still felt a sensation of dread crawl along her spine to think of how much radiation she was being exposed to. These people did so on purpose.

A man going bald, thin wisps of hair clinging in spots, spoke out loud as they passed by, “May the glow of Atom guide your path.”

*The glow of Adam?* She turned to Danse for clarification but he wasn’t paying attention. *Who were these people? Who was Adam?* It couldn’t be...no. Thoughts wrestled with themselves inside her head. They couldn’t possibly think this was caused by Adam, the first person God created, could they?

A woman, eyes red and sunken but mostly unchanged compared to many others here, called out to them, “Why do you approach Atom’s holy ground? State what your business is here or be divided in his sight.”

Pausing when she’d spoken, Danse stared at her for a few minutes before beginning to move on but Alice stepped in front of him. If it were up to him, he’d likely bulldoze his way through these people for answers. Why he hadn’t stopped with the one person willing to speak to them, she couldn’t understand. Unless it was the attitude infused in the words. The woman acted like they were trespassing. Maybe they were. Alice could only hope a little patience and understanding would give them the answers they needed.

She ignored the creaking of power armor behind her. No doubt he wasn’t very happy with her. Tough. He’d just have to follow her lead this time. Purposefully ignoring what looked all too much like a colander strapped underneath the woman’s breasts, Alice asked, “We need your help. We’re looking for a man named Virgil.”

Dark eyes assessed her, as if the woman could see inside to judge her. The words she eventually spoke didn’t make any more sense than her others, “Have you come here to this place for Division? Do you desire to merge with Atom? To be split in his infinite glory?” Her eyes narrowed, demeanor now cold and hostile, “Or do you seek to wipe us out, the followers of Atom?”

Instead of pushing her own agenda, Alice tried a different tactic, “Who are all of you and what is this place?”

The woman relaxed and gave her a beatific smile. That wasn't weird at all. “We are the children of Atom. I am Mother Isolde, their leader.” She encompassed the crater with her eyes and a sweep of her arm, “Here is where we commune with Atom himself.” Her eyes returned to gaze at Alice and
Danse, “I am surprised you have survived long enough to reach us here.”

And yet, Alice had seen her checking out their suits of power armor. She reassured this Mother Isolde, “I promise I mean none of you here any harm.”

Nodding in response, she continued, “Few make the long trek here. But very well, you may stay here for now.” A tone of warning entered her voice, “But know that we are watching you carefully. Violence is not tolerated here and we will remove you if you do not honor that.” The smile returned, “May Atom bless you with his glow.”

“Who is this...Adam? Do you mean the man created by God?”

A surprisingly lilting laugh slipped from her lips, “Oh my, no. Atom...A-T-O-M.”

Well now, that made a strange kind of sense. “How do you...survive in this radiation?” Danse let go a long suffering sigh, which echoed inside her helmet. She couldn’t help it, she was curious.

“Atom has given us, his true believers, a unique gift. He has called us here, to this perfect place. A place that cannot harm us so we are free to worship him. He has asked us to spread his word to others. We come here to soak up his love for us and take it with us when we go. Our calling is to spread his message to those in the world who do not believe. To show all his absolute power.”

Digesting the information, which sounded much like some of the religions around before the bomb, Alice turned and looked around her. The whole conversation didn’t make sense. No one lived here other than a few ‘believers.’ The woman had been surprised Alice had even made it here alive, so many must die on this...odd pilgrimage.

Turning the conversation back to get the information she really needed, Alice asked, “Do you know this...Virgil I’m looking for? Has he ever been here?”

“I know of him. Why do you seek him?”

“We need to speak to him.” She wasn’t about to give any more information than that.

“Well, he’s been here before and his visits have caused some concern among us. There are those who believe his presence is an affront to Atom. We have traded with him only a few times. He appears to want to be left alone.” She pointed in a direction. “You can find him out there, southwest of the crater. He resides in a cave. But I feel he does not want visitors. I would approach cautiously if I were you.”

With the ominous warning ringing in her ears, Alice turned to go, Danse moving behind her. They wouldn’t get anything else from these people and it was time to end this maddening encounter. Turning southwest, they climbed back up and over the ridge of the crater.

Taking the lead once more, Danse headed into the rad storm. It had continued the whole time they’d been inside the crater. Alice turned back as a streak of yellow lightning danced across the sky, lighting up the interior. Those...children of Atom remained on their knees, arms and heads raised to the heavens, some with their hands clasped in front of them in prayer and supplication. A memory came to her of doing that as a child during a time when her mother was happy, always smiling and laughing. She’d told Alice about God and Jesus...bible stories. Alice still believed...a little. But this? The god they worshipped was nothing like the one she knew. Shaking her head sadly, knowing it was likely they’d all die out here or turn into ghouls, Alice quickened her pace to catch up to Danse. Virgil was still a long way off.

It was hard to see in the Glowing Sea what with the rad storms but night had definitely come and
the only light came from their headlamps and the occasional flash of lightning. Their careful walk had slowed considerably in the face of that. Danse assured her the end of their journey was just up ahead.

Alice was terrified, jumping at every shadow, berating herself over every rock, tree and piece of metal they turned out to be. The shadows moved, disorienting her and causing her heart to jump into her throat. She was convinced it was going to remain there from this point on.

“Alice, you need to calm down.” Danse spoke inside her helmet. Her breathing was fast and erratic.

Too terrified to care what he thought, she blurted out, “Aren’t you scared? Even a little?”

His answer surprised her. “Of course I am.”

She actually stopped in her tracks, watching him walk away. “W-what?”

He stopped as well, turning around to find her several yards behind. “Alice, every soldier is afraid of the unknown. It’s what they do with that fear which defines them. Turn fear into strength.” His voice quieted but was no less powerful, “You have that ability. I’ve seen you use it before and I know you can again.” With those words, he turned and began walking again.

Panic nearly had her laughing in hysteric. Her? Strong? Right. She was the weak link in this relationship. Without Danse, she never would have been here. Without any of the friends she’d made, she would never have left Sanctuary. Without Nate, she would never have ventured beyond her life at the Super Duper Mart and her house. But...could he be right?

Squaring her shoulders, she walked past him, taking the lead. There might have been a chuckle in her ear but she couldn’t be sure as lightning flashed and thunder boomed overhead. It was loud. Louder than anything that had come before, making the ground rattle, the reverberation traveling up through her armor. Her suit shook from the sound.

Thinking the crater where the Children of Atom were dwelling was the heart of the bomb, maybe she’d been mistaken. Maybe they were coming up on that area now. The storm had intensified to a magnitude they hadn’t seen yet. Another roar sounded from in front of her and Alice couldn’t see anything, guided entirely by her HUD and careful footsteps, stumbling occasionally.

A loud roar followed by thundering footsteps made Alice pause. What the hell was that? The laser rifle, clutched tightly in her hands, trembled as the monsters from her childhood escaped and, magnified a thousandfold, scurried through her mind. She froze when the source of the sound came into view.

All she could see was a large black silhouette giving way to finer details in the light of her headlamp and another lightning flash overhead. Deathclaw, the frantic voice in her head supplied. It was nothing like the descriptions she’d received. It was worse than any monster her imagination could ever have come up with. Worse than anything in the horror movies Nate used to watch.

The monster loomed over her, arms held out to the side, ending in wickedly long, blade sharpened claws. Tearing her eyes from those weapons, her helmet craned upwards, watching the deathclaw as it watched her. Scaly skin covered the body from head to toe, sharp horns curving from the head - like a demon spawned from hell. Powerful legs kept it upright, a thick tale sweeping back and forth.

Her whole body shuddered as a red, forked tongue slipped between jagged teeth easily as long as
her hand. It wasn’t hard to imagine them crunching her bones like candy-

Heart thudding to a stop in her chest, it began again, galloping away with fear. Yellow, feral eyes impaled her with malevolent intent, her skin turning to ice inside the power armor. Time seemed to slow but Alice knew mere seconds had just passed.

Suddenly, the monster reared backwards and roared, surrounding her on all sides with its echo. The deathclaw had made a decision; she was a threat. Her blood froze and she couldn’t move, couldn’t think...couldn’t act.

The edges of her vision darkened and Alice knew this was the end. I’m not strong, Danse. You were so very wrong about me.

The monster’s arm slashed through the air, smashing into her. Sailing through her air inside her power armor, she imagined herself much like a toy thrown by a petulant child. Her breath left her lungs with explosive force as the steel suit met an immovable object, the resulting crunch of metal echoing inside her head. Spittle and specks of blood sprayed the glass inside her helmet. She thought she heard her name coming from a long ways off - I’m coming, Nate! Sweet, sweet oblivion. Darkness claimed her, vision winking out like a light.

“ALICE!!!!” Danse screamed out her name. A warning, a plea…

He watched, helpless as she soared through the air, wincing when her power armor impacted with a solid crunch against the mountainside. She didn’t get up.

Overcome with blinding rage, Danse responded to the deathclaw with a roar of his own. He aimed his laser rifle at the beast. Firing over and over and over, he moved in closer, past caring about the lethal claws ready to tear him to shreds. Let the demon do its worst.

It roared a battle cry. Spittle sprayed across the glass of his helmet, taking away most of his sight. Nimbly, he dodged the knife-edged claws. He could only feel the vibrations of its steps. Hear its labored breathing. Wounded, it was even more dangerous.

Lashing out, he punched the air. Metal fist met solid muscle. The beast moved back. Again, Danse swung out but misjudged. Stumbled from a violent swipe, claws grating across metal. Through his filters came the metallic scent of blood mixed with the radiation.

They roared at each other, both of them in rage and pain. He had to get to Alice! She was hurt. She needed his help. She could be-

No, damn it! He wouldn’t allow the thought to finish. DIE, BEAST! DIE! He fired again, and again, and one last time. The beast toppled over with a loud thud, the vibration of its fall thundering through the ground and rattling his power armor. Finally!

Danse grabbed the tail, swiped it across his visor. Not perfect but he could see just a bit better. Moving frantically, disoriented, he searched for the spot Alice had landed. There! He saw movement. A twitch - no. Her rifle had just tumbled from her lifeless hand. Gently, he picked her up, slinging an arm across his shoulder. Her heavy power armor was no match for the adrenaline coursing through his veins.
Sweeping his helmet back and forth, the headlamp landed on a cave entrance. He moved as quickly as he could while holding on to Alice, unable to make it very far inside. If this Institute scientist tried anything, Danse would take him out just like he had the deathclaw and use whatever he found in this cave to help Alice.

She couldn’t die! He needed her.
An Unexpected Surprise

Chapter Summary

The cave is a sanctuary from the Glowing Sea and just what Danse needs to render some first aid and assess Alice's injuries. But besides just being a sanctuary, what other surprises could be in store for them?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The suit’s filters couldn’t completely disguise the pungent smell of irradiated earth as Danse stood inside the tunnel. Nor could the light on his helmet completely penetrate the darkness ahead. Behind them, out in the Glowing Sea, the Rad Storm was finally starting to wane, the crackling of lightning across the sky diminishing by the minute. There was no way Danse could get both he and Alice down that tunnel in their power armor. What little he could make out in the darkness showed the tunnel narrowing and dipping down into the mountain below. He would have to get them both out of their suits before traversing the tunnel. If he waited just a little longer, their exposure to the radiation from the storm would be considerably less. He gazed down at Alice, standing upright in her dented and scratched armor, helmet listing forward. The suit itself was all that was keeping her upright.

There wasn’t time to wait; she needed help now. Popping another Rad-X, he stepped out of his suit. Fluorescent green lightning streaked across the sky and he waited impatiently to see if more would flash across the sky. Thankfully, there was a lull and he took full advantage. Holding his laser rifle in one hand, he got to work.

Punching the release on Alice’s power armor, he caught her as she tumbled out, cradling her limp body in his hands. He could feel his own heart hammering beneath her slight body, held tight against his chest. She was so small. It occurred to him he wasn’t sure when Alice had taken her last Rad-X. Had it been recently or before they’d left the Children of Atom camp? He’d have to come back out again for their supplies in order to get them. For now, he needed to get her inside the cave and check her injuries. Careful not to smack her head or feet on the rough sides of the tunnel, Danse entered, following the tunnel deeper into the mountainside. The crumbling dirt path was covered in sheets of old wood, as well as two by fours almost like steps. He wondered how they came to be placed in such a way out here. Either the scientist had put them here or this cave had served some other purpose before the war.

He stopped abruptly, a familiar whirring sound coming from up ahead. A frisson of fear raced down his spine. Turrets. There was no way to get past them and no way to take them out with Alice in his arms. Moving a few feet closer, trying to assess the situation without being shot at, he saw strings of tin cans hanging from the ceiling. Whoever was here didn’t want to be found. They certainly didn’t want anyone sneaking up on them. If this scientist was truly at the end of this tunnel, they must be extremely worried about the Institute coming after them.

Danse knew he had no choice but to keep moving, had to take a chance regardless of what awaited them.

Tin cans rattling as he walked between them, he saw two turrets nestled up against the walls,
whirring away. However, they didn’t turn and start firing. Still cautious, he moved forward once more. After passing them without incident, a protectron ambled in their direction, repeating a mantra - *Protect and serve* - but it didn’t seem to pose a threat. He passed by it, delving further into the cave. Up ahead, he saw light. There were tables littered with all sorts of paraphernalia like in scientists would use, like in Scribe Neriah’s lab. There were large computers, the kind used to analyze information, a strange sight deep in the bowels of the earth. Large pieces of meat belonging to some type of animal from out beyond the entrance lay on the table. Maybe that was the smell-

His observations stopped in mid thought and Danse came to a halt stumbling when an unmistakable stench assaulted him. He staggered, his hold on Alice loosening as memories threatened to break through walls he’d built to contain them. He knew that smell.

This was a super mutant den.

Before he could assess the cave further, the back of it was plunged into sudden darkness. A guttural voice spoke up from the shadows, “Hold it. Move nice and slow. Who are you and what do you want here?”

Confusion cleared his mind for the moment - super mutants didn’t speak like that. This voice was deep and guttural like he’d expect but the speech was all wrong. Mutants had a stilted, primitive rhythm to their words. Who was this? It had to be the scientist. A super mutant would have attacked them already, likely while they were coming down the tunnel.

Tightening his hold on Alice, Danse spoke to the disembodied voice, “I’m Paladin Danse from the Brotherhood of Steel. This Knight is gravely injured and I need to check her injuries. Are you Virgil, the scientist who escaped the Institute?”

It wasn’t a good idea to give away so much information when he wasn’t sure of the situation but he hoped it would surprise the man enough to allow them entry. The increasing urgent need to take care of Alice was nearly overwhelming. Danse was ready to stop where he was, lay her on the ground, and at least administer basic first aid. It was only his strict discipline and the unknown threat ahead of them keeping him from doing so.

The voice didn’t respond to his question. “The Brotherhood of Steel? I’ve heard of them.” The tone suggested that wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

“We’re not here to hurt you or take you away from here.” Danse wasn't sure if he sounded very convincing. Then again, he didn’t exactly give a damn right now. It felt like time was nothing more than sand, slipping through his fingers.

Silence reigned for several minutes until the voice acquiesced, “Lay her down over there. There are stimpaks and RadAway, some narrow tubing to administer it intravenously while you check for more serious injuries.”

He carried Alice to an area referred to - an indentation in the floor of the cave. This may be shelter from the direct effects of the Glowing Sea, but it was still exposed to high amounts of radiation. Ignoring his own injuries from the deathclaw, likely just heavy bruising, he laid Alice down as gently as he could on a bed made up of neatly arranged pile of discarded tires overlaid with sheets of weathered wood. A very uncomfortable place for someone to sleep. Pushing the thought from his head, he took note that Alice was breathing but unconscious, a large goose egg turning purple on her temple.

Fear, which had been his constant companion since the deathclaw had backhanded her against the rocky mountainside, eased its grip on him. Soldier’s instincts kicking in, he saw the cache of
stimpaks, thin tubing, and RadAway. Pushing aside the millions of questions that finding these items down here brought to mind, Danse set to work with a thoroughness he showed in every task he undertook.

Once the IV was taken care of, he set about checking her for any other injuries, pausing when he realized he’d have to strip off her flight suit. His back against the wall of the cave, he glared up into the shadows at whoever stood there and barked out orders, “Turn around.”

Hearing movement, he could only hope they’d done as he’d instructed. No stranger was going to see her in such a state, irregardless of the fact she was still clothed with underwear and a tank top. Undoing the many zippers and buckles, Danse lamented, not for the first time, the design of this suit. At least in times such as this. It just added more time to an already anxious situation, and he struggled not to become overzealous and simply rip off the offending material.

Finally pulling her out of it, he methodically lifted her arms, legs, propped her on each side to check her back and covered every single inch of skin with his eyes and fingertips. Her pale, soft skin was covered in old, faded bruises, assorted scars - some of which he’d been there for - and rapidly blooming newer bruises. She didn’t have any broken bones, no cuts or bleeding that he could detect and he released a pent up breath.

The most immediate concerns in the face of his inspection were the radiation exposure and that damn head injury. She was also incredibly cold.

There were supplies in each of their power armor suits; dried pieces of mutfruit and melon, radstag jerky, filtered water, an extra BOS suit, and a sleeping bag. More medical supplies such as stimpaks, Rad-X and RadAway as well.

Indecision warred inside him - Alice needed those supplies now but he couldn't leave her at the mercy of this scientist. He had no choice. “Touch a hair on her head, harm her in any way, and you’ll answer to me,” Danse growled at whoever was still concealed in the shadows.

“I won’t move from here.”

The deep, gruff voice didn’t inspire trust but Danse had no choice in the matter, hurrying outside to grab what was needed. He came back quickly. Alice remained where he'd left her, untouched. The mysterious person was still not in sight. He was beginning to wonder what they were hiding but turned his attention back to Alice who was his more immediate concern.

He tried to make her comfortable, placing one sleeping bags underneath her and the other over her. Carefully, he propper her up, trickling some of the purified water into her mouth. There was nothing more to be done, so he waited. Exhaustion nipped at his heels and Danse struggled to fight it. Reaching under the sleeping bag covering Alice, he realized she wasn’t warming up fast enough. Stripping down to his own underwear, unworried what their audience thought, he lifted the sleeping bag, intending to crawl in next to her.

How many times had he, Haylen, Rhys and the others slept close to each other for warmth? How many times had he done that with Cutler, even before the Brotherhood? This was no different. At least, he tried to tell himself that. Her body was so pale, so small and fragile. Guilt cascaded over him. He should never have let her join the Brotherhood. She was much too small, too slender and fragile to be a soldier. How was he supposed to lie next to her and not...break her?

Lowering himself gingerly onto the makeshift bed, he winced upon feeling her cold skin touch his. As if he was like the wood they lay on, he remained stiff and unyielding beside her. Maybe this would be enough, maybe…
His thoughts were cut off when she shifted, moving up next to him. Danse tried to find a way to get comfortable without disturbing her. Awkward because of where his thoughts kept straying, he somehow managed to cradle her head with his arm. It was the best he could do but she didn't wake up, so it must be okay.

As he recited the codex in his head to keep his wandering thoughts at bay, sleep placed its hooks in him. He was powerless to fight it. Making sure his laser rifle was near him on the floor, he let the sandman claim him.

His last thought was that he hoped this place wouldn’t be their grave, fitting as it was beneath the earth.

~~*****~~

Danse snapped awake all at once. Something was different and he attempted to analyze what it was. Slowly, the events of the last few days came back to him. It was then he noticed something lying on his chest besides his dog tags - a small, delicate hand rested on his heart. He very nearly scrambled backwards off the makeshift bed to fall into a heap onto the floor. The only thing saving him from such an ignominious state was his ability to adapt. Still, he felt just as awkward as when Haylen had come crying on his shoulder.

This situation was far beyond his element of expertise. Not to mention they were both clad in only their underclothes. Thankfully, none of the Brotherhood could see him - them - thus. And they’d certainly never hear about it from him. He wasn’t entirely sure about Alice but didn’t really think she’d mention it either.

Willing his wildly beating heart to calm down, it almost rocketed out of his chest when soft words whispered past his ear, “Thank you.”

His brows rose in silent question. What was Alice thanking him for? He’d only done what any soldier in the Brotherhood would have done. Looking down, he was captivated by the lucid, vivid blue eyes staring up at him. “You saved my life. If you hadn’t been there…” her tiny body shuddered with those words.

Without thought, he tightened his hold on her. “It’s okay. You’re alive, just focus on that.” Where had those words come from?

As if they’d actually comforted her, she moved in close to him, tucking her head beneath his chin. Danse stiffened in response, even more painfully aware of their lack of clothing. Guilt assuaged him. He was a Paladin of the Brotherhood, sworn to uphold their values in the strictest sense, and she was a Knight under his sponsorship. And here he was, lying in bed with her.

It shouldn’t be any different than lying with any of the Knights who’d been under his command. But it was. It was very, very different.

Her soft lips moved against his skin, words quietly spoken yet loud in the silence, “Thank you, Danse, for saving me.”

Her words felt heavy, weighted, and he wondered if there was more to them than they implied. There was no time to ponder the thought. Movement, a shadow, in the corner of the cave caused his eyes to snap towards in that direction.

How could he have forgotten his observations from the day before? Or that they were not alone?
Instincts kicking in, he snatched his laser rifle, still lying at his side. Springing up from the bed, no thought to his state of undress, he called out, “HALT!”

The large shadow stopped. Danse didn’t hesitate, he reached out and turned on the lights he’d seen earlier. Super mutant. Images of Cutler overlaid by a super mutant’s snarling face exploded in his mind, followed by a single, searing thought - He’d kill this one too.

Unafraid, willing to risk his death to save Alice from becoming one of them, he thumbed the safety off his laser rifle and held it up to the mutant’s head. It never occurred to him it wasn’t fighting back. “How did you get in here?”

“I’ve been here all along.”

Laser rifle pushing into its cheek, he argued, “Impossible.” There was no way he’d have missed such an important detail. He snarled at it, spittling flying from his mouth, “You’re an abomination, not fit to live.”

“Danse.” His name was spoken quietly but firmly.

Danse was disoriented at first, hearing Cutler’s voice in his head. But...Cutler was dead, killed by his own hand. Something soft landed on his forearm and he nearly jerked at the unexpected touch, his head completely filled with the lust for revenge. Endless, all consuming revenge.

“Put your rifle down, Danse.” Her hand pushed down forcibly on his arm.

He looked down, frustrated at Cutler’s resist--

That wasn’t Cutler’s hand. He looked up to see Alice standing next to him in her tank top and underwear, wan, tired, but also very determined. She wasn’t in any shape to be up and about. But any concern he had for her was being drowned out by the urge to kill, to exact revenge on the loss of his only friend, even if it was a long time ago.

Alice moved to stand in front of him, her back to the super mutant. He couldn’t comprehend what she was doing. “Alice, get behind me. Super mutants are abominations and I’ll wipe this one out like all the rest.” Wrapping his hand around her arm, he moved to push her behind him, shocked when she struggled with him.

“Stop it!” She moved back in front of him, frustration evident in her expression, “This isn’t the way Danse. He’s clearly not like other super mutants. Let’s hear him out.”

She didn’t wait for his answer, turning to face the mutant, “Are you Virgil?”

“I am. Why do you care?”

It appeared Alice was right. Virgil, the Institute scientist, was a super mutant and he could hold a conversation. How could this be? Everything Danse had been taught by the Brotherhood was at war with what he saw before him. Images of Cutler, before and after the transformation of the FEV, played like a gruesome scene through his mind. I must be hallucinating. Maybe the deathclaw had knocked him out as well and this was just some strange nightmare he’d wake up from.

No one knew better than he that super mutants must be destroyed. They were a plague on humanity, killing anyone and anything in their path, even going so far as to convert innocents into unspeakable monsters which preyed on the people of the Commonwealth. Killing them was what the Brotherhood had trained him for, all the more easy to accomplish after what they did to Cutler.
Pushing aside the painful memories with laborious effort, Danse tuned into what the mutant and Alice were talking about. It thought they were with the Institute, sent by Kellogg. If this truly was the scientist, he’d clearly missed the part of the conversation where Danse had mentioned they were from the Brotherhood.

Alice was trying to explain and finally said, “Virgil...Kellogg is dead.”

Disbelief colored its response, “Dead? Kellogg is...dead?” Snapping his head down to look at her, pale green eyes behind yellow-rimmed glasses glared at her, “Don’t lie to me!”

Not liking the tone of voice or the threat carried by it, Danse moved to protect Alice but she pushed him away. How could someone so small have so much presence?

She faced down this mutant three times her size, “He is dead, whether you believe me or not.” Crossing her arms, it was like she dared it to disbelieve her. Danse was liking this conversation less and less.

The mutant turned and moved a few feet away, muttering, “It’s just...it’s hard to believe. The man was ruthless. He was the perfect mercenary for the Institute, nothing to lose. They used him for a very long time, always doing their dirty work for them, running experiments on him. He liked what he did, said it suited him well. He didn’t care about the experiments, didn’t care if he lived or died from those or the job. I knew they’d use him to come after me. He was relentless on a mission.” Pacing back and forth, the monster continued to talk, “I tried to prepare for it. I wasn’t even sure coming out here would be enough to survive his reach.” Turning, those beady eyes assessed her from head to toe, “You? You killed him?” Clearly it didn’t believe she could.

Danse would have thought the same - if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes.

Alice answered with no emotion in her voice, something which concerned Danse, “I put the bullet in his head.”

The mutant studied her and then nodded, “Okay then. Now, why did you come here? What do you want from me?”

“I need to know why you left the Institute, why you escaped. I know that’s where you’re from.”

Eyebrows rising in surprise, it asked, “You know I escaped the Institute? But...how? I was careful!” The mutant shook its head, “Doesn’t matter now. I’m not going back.” It stepped forward and Danse tensed beside her, finger tightening on the trigger of his laser rifle, “I can’t go back!” It asked again, “Why are you here? What do you want?”

Alice placed a hand firmly on Danse’s wrist to keep him from pulling the trigger. She took a deep breath, “I need information from you.” Pausing to let it digest that, she added quietly, “I need to know how to get inside the Institute.”

He gaped at her in astonishment, such a human like emotion from a super mutant, it was almost comical. “Excuse me? You want to get into the Institute? Have you completely lost your mind? Yes, of course you have. It must have been the hit to your head.” Its eyes looked at the goose egg on her head and then continued, “Besides being nearly impossible, even if you actually succeeded, it would almost certainly end in your immediate death.”

Danse stared down at her. Her death? That was not a chance he wanted her taking. She simply wasn’t thinking clearly. The hit to her head - he couldn’t believe he and that...that thing...were in agreement on something.
“Why would you even entertain the possibility of taking a risk like that?” Something else he and the mutant were in agreement on. He needed to get far away from this place, from this creature that defied explanation.

She answered him without hesitation, “The Institute, they...kidnapped my son. Kellogg told me he was there. They took him when he was a baby and now he’s a ten-year-old boy. I have to get him back!” Her voice cracked on the last word, impassioned with emotion.

The mutant changed before Danse’s eyes with that information. Gave in. “Oh...well that certainly does change things. I’m so very sorry. That’s something the Institute has done in the past - take people from the Commonwealth. I see now why you’d want to go inside.” The only sounds for several minutes were the whirring of the turrets, the protectron repeating its mantra and their breathing. The monster started at the whole time and then nodded, “Fine, I’ll help you. But I want something in return.”

Alice didn’t even hesitate, “You help me and I’ll help you.”

Danse glanced from one to the other, alarm in his voice, “Alice, you can’t-”

“He doesn’t either but this is all I have. I have to. I have to get my son back. He’s all I have.”

He refused to acknowledge the stab of pain her words caused him. His eyes searched hers for several minutes, body tense with frustration and fear. Finally, he nodded, blowing out a breath. He wasn’t happy about it but he wasn’t going to stand in her way. How could he begin to understand what she was going through? Leaning close to her, his lips against her cheek, “I still don’t trust this...this mutant but I’ll help you in any way I can.”

Reaching up, she placed a hand against his jaw, holding his head in place against hers for a little longer. “I don’t either but this is all I have. Trust me, Danse. Please? I won’t let you down.”

He knew she wouldn’t, at least not on purpose. Reaching up, he placed his hand over hers and squeezed lightly. It was all he could give her and apparently, it was enough. Pulling away, she gave him a bright smile.

Turning back to the mutant, she waited to hear what it wanted in return for helping her. “Before I had to escape, I was working on a project. A serum which would reverse the effects of this mutation and return me to my normal state. If you actually do make it in there, I need you to find the serum in my old lab. No idea if they’ve been in there after what happened. If you find it, bring it back to me. Will you do that?”

Alice nodded, “Sure. I see no problem with that. Now tell me what I need to do.”

“We need to work out a few details first. Do you happen to know how synths get in and out of the Institute?”

“Teleportation.”

“You’ve been doing your homework. That’s a very closely guarded secret many don’t know about. The Institute refers to it as the molecular relay. Have you ever seen a courser?”

She had no idea and was about to say so when Danse spoke up over her shoulder, “I have. Why?”

He knew what a courser was, which made him even more suspicious.

Those yellow eyes landed on him and it made Danse feel distinctly uncomfortable. “Few see them,
so it’s a rare occurrence you have. They have one purpose only...hunting escaped synths and cleaning up situations that have gone wrong. They excel at what they do - relentless, powerful, committed.” He turned to look at Alice, “You need to kill one.”

“Now, wait just a minute-” Danse bristled at the idea.

“Let Virgil finish.”

Virgil. As if this thing before them were an actual person. There was only so far Danse was willing to take this charade. Giving it an actual name, even if that was who it had been once, was much too far.

“Why do I need to kill one?”

“To get inside. A courser is your key to getting in. They’re fitted with a special hardware which gives them complete access in and out of the Institute. A chip is embedded in their head. you need to get it.”

“Fine. Now, where do we find one of these coursers?”

Danse was amazed she didn’t even flinch at the idea. He was liking this plan less and less the more he heard of it.

“The main insertion point for coursers is in the ruins of CIT. It sits right on top of the Institute.” At there surprised expressions, he nodded, “Yes, it’s underground. Now, when you get there, use the radio on that Pip-Boy you have at the lower end of the frequency. Follow that to find a courser. Just...try not to get killed.”

Danse tensed at those words. If there was any way he could stop Alice from doing this, he’d find it. Barring that, he’d damn well put himself in the line of fire and take out this courser himself. If anyone would die, it’d be him. Someone else could take his place in helping her find her son.

“I really do hope you get inside the Institute and find your son.” He sounded sincere, then added, “And don’t forget our bargain. I need that serum.”

Of course. To Danse, it seemed like everyone wanted something from her, wanted her to help them but didn’t always want to be there when she needed something. This...mutant, scientist...whatever it was, wasn’t any different.

Alice just nodded and made her way slowly back to the bed. Danse could see how tired she was. Although he was ready to leave immediately, he knew she needed rest. As she drifted off to sleep, he stood at attention, back to the wall.

His eyes never left the mutant until Alice woke up several hours later and they made the long trek back to the Commonwealth.

Chapter End Notes

Finally! This chapter kicked my butt and I think that's why it took so long. I've finally wrangled it into submission now, though. Hope you like it and thank you to all of you sticking around while I struggle getting this fic done. It truly means a lot you're still here reading, loving Alice, and waiting for that next chapter to update ;)
“Absolutely not! That is unacceptable, Knight. I will not allow you to take such a risk.”

Danse had stopped working on his power armor, turning to face her. A torch in one hand, the other was gripped into a fist at his side. Clearly, he wasn’t happy with her decision.

The top of his orange and tan Brotherhood fatigues had been unzipped while he’d been working, the arms tied around his waist to keep it out of his way. By this point, the heat was such that he no longer even wore the standard issue tank top beneath, having tossed it aside.

It was at that, Alice was keeping her eyes trained, not an easy feat when where they wanted to look instead was at the very fit man before her; the defined muscles of his chest and abs, the strong, muscular arms, the sweat dripping down his chest and through the dark hair that clung to...

*Whoa!* She really needed to get a grip on herself. Flashbacks to waking up in the cave, cradled safely in his arms fired across her brain.

Danse was so agitated, she doubted he realized his state of undress. Having walked up unannounced, she’d begun speaking a few feet away so as not to surprise him. She’d gone over to Sanctuary, leaving him to his power armor - and hers - at the Red Rocket while she took care of some things.

Obviously, he thought he’d be alone for some time. She looked away from his tank top to gaze up at him. That wasn’t a good idea either. Thick black brows slanted downward over his eyes, face set in a stern expression, the resulting look no BoS recruit cared to be on the receiving end of.

There was a time Alice would have been in that majority. In fact, it was taking quite a bit of willpower even now, after all she’d been through, not to succumb to it and meekly proclaim, ‘Yes, sir,’ letting Danse do all the dirty work. In this case, taking on a courser. However, she’d come too far to back down now. Learning to stand up for herself was certainly not a bed of roses. More often than not it felt like wading through a bed of thorns, leaving her torn and bleeding.

She was determined to be a good soldier, one worthy of his praise and willingness to sponsor her. The rest of the Brotherhood didn’t matter to her, not even Elder Maxson. Though she wasn’t about to say that to Danse. Right now, though, he was making the ability to stick to her goal damn hard by being inflexible and confining.
Maybe there was a way around it. “You aren’t allowing me anything. As a Knight of the Brotherhood, and under your sponsorship, I have a right to do this. An obligation not just to myself and to Shaun but also to every soldier within the Brotherhood.” So there.

The stern look vanished, replaced by irritation. Whether from the truth of her words or because she refused to back down in the face of his authority, Alice didn’t know and honestly, didn’t care. A long suffering sigh slipped past his lips, a hand covered in oil and grease tunneling through his hair. The action causing it stick out in all directions.

She nearly laughed out loud at the picture he made, usually so fastidious in his appearance and dress. Turning away, she struggled to stop her burgeoning grin.

A shadow fell across her and Alice looked up, startled. It never ceased to amaze her how such a big man could move so silently. He stood close to her now. Once again, his expression had changed, but this was one she’d never seen. He was an open book most people didn’t ever stop to read. To her, it was the most fascinating one she’d ever run across. But now? She wasn’t sure she could give this look a name if she tried.

His mouth open and closed a few times, making him look like a fish floundering for air.

He settled, finally, for looking over her shoulder, gazing at what she couldn’t even begin to guess, but eventually he found the words he wanted, though still refusing to look at her. “You’ve become an exceptional Knight, Alice, going far beyond my expectations. You are an asset to the Brotherhood and I’m proud to be your sponsor.”

From anyone else, Alice would think they were empty words, meant to persuade her from her path. Not so with Danse. He meant everything he said, was sometimes brutally honest when tact and persuasion would gain more ground. Still, despite the way the words made her feel, she knew there was a ‘but’ following them up. Turned out she wasn’t one hundred percent correct.

He looked back down at her, then turned and stepped a few feet away and began to speak, “I’ve been in the Commonwealth for a while now. I was tasked with a squad, Gladius, to do recon in the Wasteland. We left the Citadel, in the area you likely once knew as Washington, D.C., traveling here to catalogue and report back our findings. We were the third squad sent to this area. Our mission did not go as planned. When your convoy came to Cambridge to lend a hand, they encountered the remainder of my squad; Knight Rhys, Scribe Haylen, and myself. The rest had all died under my command.”

Alice wasn’t sure what to say, didn’t think Danse needed to hear empty words which could not assuage his pain or the guilt she knew he felt, even if he never said as much. He was just one of those people who felt responsible for everyone around them and took their deaths personally, as if he’d not done enough to stop it from happening.

Confident platitudes were not what he needed to hear, she simply walked up next to him and placed a hand on his arm. At her touch, he stiffened at first, then relaxed. Everyone in the world, whether they knew it or not, needed to be touched, held, sometimes even hugged. Maybe Danse was beginning to understand that. He nodded at her small gesture, the only concession to her attempt at comfort. It was a start.

“When I met you, back at Cambridge, I--” his words stopped.

Alice waited patiently. Whatever he wanted to say wouldn’t be easy for her to hear, she was sure. The person she was then...well, a soldier like Danse wouldn’t have wasted time on her. And he didn’t, really. He’d escorted her to Diamond City and left her behind. She could understand that
now. Why he’d done that. All she’d been was a liability to anyone who traveled with her.

She wasn’t a liability anymore. At least, she hoped she wasn’t.

“Say it, Danse.”

“I didn’t think you’d ever leave Diamond City. And if you did, you’d never survive this harsh environment.”

Even knowing what was coming, it still hurt to hear it out loud. She could see them for the truth they were. This world was harsh, unforgiving. But despite all the odds stacked against her, she’d made it where she was today. Thanks to all those who stood beside her and the man now by her side, never giving up and being harsh when she needed it - even if it had caused her pain.

A surge of pride ran through her; she was strong. She’d proved it.

Turning and looking down at her, Danse said, “I was wrong about you. Unequivocally. You’re standing here today, alive, and come further than many a brother or sister who’s joined our ranks from the Commonwealth. I’m proud of you Alice. If I--” he paused, took a deep breath, “If I seem...hesitant...to let you take on a courser, it’s because you’re a damn good soldier and I won’t lose another member of my squad.”

Okay, that made sense. She could certainly understand his hesitation in such a regard. So, why did those words cause a pang in her chest, instead of making it swell with pride? It made no sense. He gazed at her, his face open and trusting with an air of expectation.

Alice smiled, though in reality it felt forced. He was proud of her, was admitting why he’d been so confrontational when she’d mentioned her plan of action. So why wasn’t she happy?

“I’m glad you told me that, Danse, and thank you for believing in me.” He smiled and more words tumbled from her lips, words she’d never planned to say, “I didn’t even believe myself but...you made we want to try.”

His eyes opened wide in surprise, “I did?”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t be where I am now without you pushing me and then standing beside me with all I’ve been through since Kellogg.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Alice didn’t hesitate, “Say you’ll go with me to take out his courser.”

He eyes searched hers for several seconds. Apparently, satisfied, he said, “I’m your sponsor, of course I’ll go.”

Not quite the winning endorsement she was expecting, but it would have to do. “Thank you.”

“All right, let’s get these power armor suits ready to go and we also need to replenish our supplies. Coursers aren’t easy to take down, so we need to be prepared.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent getting everything ready for the arduous task ahead.
They sat out underneath the overhang of the Red Rocket, a small bonfire warding off an unexpected chill. Dogmeat had wandered over and sat nearby, head on his paws, sleeping peacefully. A hand threaded through his fur, Alice gazed up at the stars in quiet contemplation while Danse’s attention was on the dancing flames. She startled, his deep voice loud in their companionable silence.

“I was hoping you might have the time now to talk about Scribe Haylen. I’d like to know what you think of her.”

Turning to him, she couldn’t make out the expression in his eyes but his voice was hesitant almost. He’d mentioned Haylen once before while they’d been traveling, wanting Alice’s opinion on her, but they’d been beset by raiders and a little further along they’d encountered feral ghouls. The talk had ended there as they’d then headed out into the glowing sea.

Alice thought about Haylen now; her friend, now a fellow soldier in the Brotherhood. Haylen had a caring nature and an amazing ability, to Alice, of putting Rhys in his place. Her smile and laughter were infectious and she possessed an inner core of incredible strength. Haylen had been there at Cambridge, right at the beginning of Alice’s journey; concerned, helpful, friendly, understanding. A beautiful soul, inside and out. She was also tough and could hold her own. Alice admired her immensely, wanted to be just like her.

“She’s amazing, in many ways. Why do you ask? Have you heard something? Is she okay?” Immediately, every kind of disaster that could happen in the Commonwealth ran through Alice’s head.

Surprise lit Danse’s face, “No! She’s fine.” He took a breath, “I just...wanted to know what you thought of her before I ask your opinion on something.”

Alice felt a surge of relief, “Oh, that’s good then. I consider her to be smart, compassionate and tough. An amazing scribe and a good friend. Does that help?”

Nodding in response, he added, “It does. I wanted to know what you thought of her as a person and not just as a scribe. I believe your description delivered exactly that.”

Looking more closely at him, wondering where the conversation was going, Alice told him, “‘As a person?’ That’s a...bit odd coming from you.”

Embarrassed at her observation, he nonetheless admitted, “It is, I know. To be honest, I’m...well, I’m worried about her. I feel you and I are getting along well enough now that I could confide in you, get your honest opinion.”

Alice was becoming more confused with each passing second but intrigued as well. “Of course I’ll be honest with you. After all, you extend me the same courtesy. Although, I guess I’m a little surprised you seem worried about her. I feel you and I are getting along well enough now that I could confide in you, get your honest opinion.”

Alice was becoming more confused with each passing second but intrigued as well. “Of course I’ll be honest with you. After all, you extend me the same courtesy. Although, I guess I’m a little surprised you seem worried about her. Haylen seems perfectly capable of handling herself in any situation. I could learn a lot from her.”

“‘She’s one of the best Scribe’s, exemplary on and off the field, but this conversation isn’t about her abilities as such. This is more...personal.”

Well, that made more sense...kind of. Anything of a personal nature was not something Danse was comfortable with. That he was even having this conversation meant it was important. However, talks in that vein weren’t Alice’s strong point either. There were a million ways this conversation could go wrong. But if Danse was willing to try, Alice could do no less.
“Go on.”

He continued to stare into the flames quietly, then began to talk, “It was a few months before you encountered us at Cambridge. One of my squad was seriously injured. He’d been shot by Raiders multiple times and it was clear he was gravely injured. Regardless, Haylen stayed by his side, administering what aide she could, trying to make him comfortable, trying to...save his life. For two days, she did everything she could, not sleeping or eating. I had to force her to take a break at one point. But she was right back to it and no matter what she did, he was clearly declining. Haylen refused to give up.”

“That sounds exactly like what Haylen would do.”

Danse nodded in response, pausing with his story as if lost in the past. Shaking his head as if to clear it, he went on, “I made a command decision. The Knight’s suffering needed to end, as did Haylen’s honorable but fruitless effort to save him. I...ordered her to administer a lethal dose of painkillers to...let him die with dignity. It was clear she wanted to argue with me, wanted to keep trying. But in the end, she followed my orders. Without question.”

It became quiet, the only sound an occasional whimper from Dogmeat and the crackling of flames as they devoured the wood.

Finally, Alice spoke up, “I’m not sure if you’re asking for my approval or not, but I think you did the right thing. I’m sure your Knight would have said as much if he could have. Haylen was following your orders, just as I’d expect she would.”

He stared at her across the flames, “Of course she did. I don’t regret any order I’ve given; I stand by them all and Haylen has never been insubordinate, no matter what she might think or feel. This isn’t really about the soldier’s suffering in any case.”

Alice waited, more confused than ever now. Her attempt at understanding had been met with indignance at her observations.

“Later in the evening, Haylen came to me. I was on watch at the time and immediately I knew something was wrong. We stood there together, gazing out into the night. Then suddenly, she collapsed into my arms in tears. I...didn’t know how to react - what the right thing to say or do could be. I just...held her for a while until the tears ran their course and subsided.”

He got up then, walked a few steps away to stare up at the sky, hands clasped tightly behind his back. This was a side of Danse she knew existed, though doubted few had ever seen. This soldier was capable of so much compassion for others, it was a beauty to behold. He was a lot like Nate...and yet, nothing like him. Alice constantly found herself fascinated by ever facet she uncovered about Danse in their time together.

“Once the tears were gone, she reached up and kissed me on the cheek,” his hand reached up to touch the spot in remembrance, “said ‘thank you,’ and then she went back inside.”

He remained quiet for so long after that, Alice thought he was finished, wondering why he’d asked to her to hear him out. Maybe it hadn’t been for an opinion after all. Maybe he just needed to say it aloud, have an audience to make the words real. She opened her mouth to say something, unsure of what he was looking for when he began to speak again. This time, it didn’t have quite as much to do with Haylen as it had to do with him and what he’d asked. As per usual, he was being much harder on himself than the situation warranted.

“After she went back inside, I had sudden insight into the situation and wondered if it was possible
I’d pushed Haylen too far, crossing a line. She’d been taught to save lives, not to take them. With my orders, I’d commanded her to ignore her medical training...her instincts...to help and to heal those in need. I can’t help but worry about her now,” he turned, deep brown eyes locking onto hers, “or anyone under my command.”

It was obvious he wasn’t seeing the bigger picture. Alice had talked to Haylen for long periods of time. “Haylen is fine, Danse. Honestly, I’m more worried about you.”

That surprised him. “Me? How so?”

“There’s clearly more going on than you’re telling me.”

He sighed, a quirk of his lips at her astuteness. The motion gone and his mouth settling into a grim line. “Over half my team is gone. Four soldiers out of a squad of seven. Every death has been a result of an order I made, an order carried out with confidence, no questions asked. Every one of us understands the risks that come with being a soldier and yet...how can anyone have confidence in me as a leader? As a Paladin in the higher ranks of the Brotherhood who’s looked up? Someone who has the trust and the ear of Elder Maxson?”

This was so much more than just about Haylen. In fact, Haylen barely played a role in this discussion. Danse was doubting his role in the Brotherhood, his role as a Paladin. Alice had no such doubts about him, and was quite sure no one else did either. She didn’t think he was ready to hear that though, not yet. It would be better to wait until he was done laying everything out.

His voice quieted and Alice almost didn’t hear him as he gazed upon the stars above one more, “How can I have confidence in myself?”

And there it was. They’d come far in their relationship, whatever it was, if he was willing to share something so personal with her. A monumental moment. He was a Paladin of the Brotherhood, an exemplary soldier and he was having doubts about his abilities. But what made Alice’s heart soar was Danse was sharing with her a piece of himself she was sure no one else ever got to see - not even Elder Maxson.

Alice felt like no matter how she stepped in this field, her foot would come in contact with a land mine and it would blow up in her face.

She had to try, “Would it help if I said I believe in you?” Before he could answer, she stood up and went to him, slipping her hand into his and twining their fingers together. “You never sway from your beliefs. Your conviction is to be admired but it’s your compassion for others, your very real doubts and fears which makes you human, Danse. Sometimes, it’s nice for those of us down here at the bottom to know that someone as high ranking, as focused as you are, still has that quality.”

He was so still, almost rigid as he processed her words and then finally, after a time, he relaxed. “Thank you.” A note of wonder entered his voice, “It does help to hear that, to know...you believe in me.” A small smile appeared on his face, “Well, it looks like things have turned around. I signed up to sponsor you and teach you everything I know. Yet, here you are giving me a lesson.”

Turning to her, he said, “I’m glad we had this discussion. Thank you, Alice, for listening. You have a lot going on in your life and it means a lot you took the time to hear me out, to offer your insight.”

“I will always take the time to listen when you need someone to talk to Danse. Never forget that. I want to be here for you.”
The smile she received in return was spellbinding in its intensity and the fact it was so rare. She’d treasure it.

“It’s nice to be able to talk like this, not...just as your commanding officer.”

Alice had no idea when the devil on her shoulder had become so outspoken but it chose to show up now. She looked up at him innocently, her thoughts anything but, “So, does this mean you’ll hold me when I need to be comforted?”

His hand dropped hers in astonishment, thick dark brows all but disappearing into his hairline, “I...uh...well, I never expected a question like that.” Danse continued to stumble over his words, flustered, “I suppose it would...depend on the circumstances. We’ll just have to see what happens...when the...uh...when the time comes.”

Alice felt her face flush with embarrassment for him and for herself. What on earth was wrong with her? She just knew this would end badly. Quickly, Danse moved past uncomfortable and back to the business of being serious. Sweeping embarrassment under the rug, so to speak, where it belonged.

“Thank you for listening. I apologize you had to see me at my worst, instead of my best.”

“We all have our moments of doubts, fears, insecurities. It’s just nice to know you’re not above it all, that you’re just like the rest of us. Thank you, Danse, for sharing that with me.”

He smiled down at her and then he nodded towards the building, “Would be a good idea to get some sleep. Go bed down for the night; I’ll take care of the fire.”

The mission ahead surged to the forefront once again. She wasn’t likely to get any sleep tonight.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!