

Introduction

What qualifies me to write a novelization of Fallout 4? The fact that I've played through it enough times to be bored with it. This is not authorized by any of the copyright holders; it is simply a work of fan fiction. It is by no means canon; it is merely one gamer's playthrough. I wrote this without the game being open in a separate window. This is mostly from memory. I did keep a wiki open to keep me on track, and to remind me of how the story and quests flowed.

Prologue – October 22nd, 2077

"War never changes," I said to myself in the mirror as I wiped away the steam from the shower.

"You're gonna knock 'em dead at the vetrans' hall tonight, hon," my wife, Norah commented as she placed her hand on my shoulder. "Now, quit hogging the mirror." The weight of her hand turned into a gentle nudge out of the bathroom.

"All right, all right. I'll go see if Codsworth has the coffee ready yet."

In the kitchen, our hovering robot butler was doing the dishes with two arms, and with the third handed me a steaming cup of joe.

"Seventy decimal eight degrees celcius, exactly as sir likes it," he said in his British butler accent.

"Mm hm, and what is that in American?" I smirked.

"One-hundred fifty nine point four, I believe." Either the robot wasn't programmed for snark, or he was too polite to complain.

"Thank you, Codsworth." I took a sip, as I began to peruse the newspaper.

Norah walked in and turned on the morning news on the television. I beamed at her. With my recent honorable discharge from the Army, and the birth of our son, the love of my life had dusted off her law degree and was starting to take clients again.

A faint baby's cry started up from the back of the house.

"Ah, it seems the little one is in need of attention. I'll just be a moment," announced Codsworth as he floated off towards the back bedroom.

"You know," said Norah from the couch, "I had my doubts about buying that thing, but he's been really handy with Shaun."

"I agree," I replied, as I looked up from the paper and saluted her with my perfect coffee.

She rolled her eyes and turned back to the TV. The doorbell rang.

"Could you get that?" asked Norah. "I think it's that salesman again. He was asking for you earlier."

"Ugh, ok." I set down my paper and coffee and ambled over to open the door.

"Vault-Tec calling!"

"Vault-Tec? Remind me."

"Why, yes, certainly! Vault-Tec has built one of its patented fallout shelters right here in your neighborhood! You can wait out armageddon in comfort and style! Your veteran status entitles you to a slot at no charge! Time is of the essence, so just sign these forms here and--"

"Wait, but there's room for my whole family, right?"

"Of course! Of course! No problem!"

"It's peace of mind, honey" chimed in Norah. "Go ahead."

"Ok, ok. Let me see those papers." He shoved a clipboard and pen into my hands, and I began lazily skimming over the legalease. "Say, what's the hurry, anyway?"

"Eh? Oh, you know, just a busy morning for this Vault-Tec sales rep. Ahem."

The paperwork was oddly simple. I remembered more complexity in my enlistment papers. But after only a minute or two I was done, and handed the clipboard and pen back to the salesman, which he skimmed over.

"Okay, everything looks to be in order, have a nice day!" Relief was on his face.

"Uh huh, sure. I can't wait for the end of the world."

"HA! Haha. Heh. Ahem. Yes, thank you for your time, and I'll see you at the Vault!"

"Bye." I closed the door on the salesman as he raised his hat in deference.

"Thanks for doing that, hon. I really appreciate it. He's been waiting all week for *the man of the house*," Norah lowered her voice on that last bit.

I turned back to my newspaper and coffee.

"Mister Nate?" Codsworth emerged from the hallway. "It seems little Shaun is in need of some of

that...paternal affection you're so adept at providing. Would you mind?"

"Not at all. Thank you Codsworth." I made my way to the nursery.

Entering my son's room, I bumped a table by the door, nearly knocking off a baseball glove and ball. A gift from some neighbor or other. It would be many years before Shaun grew big enough to even hold those, but I looked forward to the day I could teach him to throw.

My baby boy was fussing in his crib. I picked him up and rocked him gently. "Well, I guess you're not a morning person. You take after your old man that way. When you get old enough, I'll introduce you to coffee; yes I will."

I continued to pat Shaun as he calmed down and began to make normal healthy baby noises. Only a few months old and already trying to talk.

Norah, apparently bored with the news, entered the room. "Ah, there are the two handsomest men in the world."

"I wonder what you'll be when he grows up?" I mused.

"Well, his parents are a soldier and a lawyer...so maybe a JAG?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, sure. As good a job as any, I suppose."

"Sir? Miss? Could you come out here for a moment?" Codsworth called from the living room, concern in his voice. "There's something you should see."

"What is it, Codsworth?" asked Norah.

"Just...it's the tele...you should come and see for yourself."

Norah and I exchanged raised eyebrows, then headed to the living room. The reporter was visibly shaken.

"We're receiving reports of...explosions...yes, it's confirmed now. Atomic blasts have been reported in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles – Wait, I'm being told that planes are headed towards Boston—towards us!"

Sirens in our bucolic Sanctuary Hills neighborhood started to blare. Norah turned to look at me with fear in her eyes. She'd gone white as a sheet. I imagine I did as well. But she recovered quickly.

"To the vault!"

"Right," I agreed. "I've got Shaun. Go!"

We bolted out the door and down the street. Shaun began to wail. Army personnel were waving their arms, directing people toward the vault, which was the only place we could think to go, and probably the safest place. I hoped. The Joneses were in the street still debating what to do. Mr. Smith was struggling with a suitcase while his wife begged him to leave it and run. We ignored them and high-tailed it down a path between the houses and up the hill to a construction site. Was this vault finished? We didn't have a choice but to find out.

We came to a short line of people being checked in by a lieutenant with a clipboard, flanked by two soldiers in power armor. He waved another family through, then asked for my name.

"Adult male, adult female, one infant. You're on the list. Proceed up the hill and into the vault." He waved us through. "Next!"

Another dozen yards, and we joined a small crowd on a platform. Where was the vault?

"There's no more time!" yelled a voice nearby. "Send them down!"

There was a second of horrifying silence. Then a flash. Then we saw a giant mushroom cloud to the southwest.

"Now! Start it down, now!" the same voice yelled.

The ground seemed to give way beneath us. I could see a shockwave headed towards us. I ducked and pulled Norah down as the platform we were standing on dropped below ground level, and a gust of powerful wind and debris hit us. As we descended, a hatch slid into place at the top of the shaft, and all we could hear was the grinding of gears as our elevator descended.

At the bottom, our neighbors began to whimper. A gate retracted, and we were greeted by a representative of Vault-Tec and some Vault Security. Shaun's crying slackened to whimpering.

Mister Martinez in front of me was in shock. "My god, what if we had been one minute later getting here? What about all the people who didn't make it?"

"No, no. Don't think about that now," said the Vault-Tec suit. "The important thing is that you're here now. That you're alive. Just concentrate on that. Now, just step this way, and we'll get you oriented."

We formed a line and proceeded through an opening, past the open vault door, and into the vault proper.

Someone in a blue jumpsuit was handing out blue jumpsuits to everyone as we entered. On the back of the suit was printed "111" in large yellow numbers.

"Welcome to your new life in Vault One Eleven," she said to each of us in turn. "Just follow the doctor here, and he'll show you to a changing room so we can get started."

Norah changed first, then I handed Shaun to Norah. The vault suit fit perfectly. A bit snug, but otherwise comfortable. I rejoined my family, and we were ushered into a room with a couple dozen strange pods along the walls. Each had an open door and what looked like a semi-reclined seat inside. Fog was emanating from behind them, and technicians in clean-room suits were running checks. Some of our neighbors were already getting comfortable inside.

"What's this?" inquired Norah of the man in the doctor's coat.

"We're going to lower you further into the vault. These pods will help with the decompression. Please step into this pod here, and you can hold onto your baby, ma'am. Sir, there's a pod directly opposite for you." The doctor indicated our respective pods.

I was still too dazed to question the logic of this, but I just shrugged at Norah. Shaun began to fuss, and I touched his cheek.

"I love you," I said to Norah, and kissed her quickly. "I'll see you on the other side."

"I love you, too," she replied, and we stepped into our pods.

Before I could get comfortable, the doctor spoke: "Ok, everyone, we're going to close the pods now. Keep your arms and legs away from the door as it closes."

The door to my pod closed, and there was a window I could look out at the room through. Across from me, Norah waved from her pod, and I waved back. A hissing noise started up, and I began to feel a chill. Sound became distant, my breathing slowed, my eyelids got heavy, and I lost consciousness.

I don't know how much time passed before I began to awaken. I heard distant voices, which became clearer with each breath. I opened my eyes and saw blurred human forms outside the window of my pod. I used my sleeve to wipe condensation from the glass. A woman in a clean-room suit pointed at Norah and Shaun's pod.

"This one, here. Open it," she said.

The pod began to open. Norah and Shaun were waking up.

"Wha? What's going on? Where are we?" mumbled Norah.

"Shhh, it's ok. Just give me the baby." The suited woman stepped closer to the pod and reached for Shaun.

"Hey!" I yelled and banged on my pod window.

Norah was awake now, and realized what was happening. She pulled Shaun back to her. The woman became more insistent that she take my son, and Norah began to put up a fight. I started frantically searching for a handle, a release, anything to get my pod to open.

A bald man appeared at the suited woman's side. He was wearing a dirty, torn leather jacket and pants, and holding a massive pistol.

"Hey, now, lady, just relax and give us the child." His voice was like gravel.

Norah and the woman began a tug-of-war with Shaun, and I began to fear for his safety. The bald man lost his patience and shot Norah, who slumped unconscious back into her pod, releasing my crying son into the strange woman's arms.

"Noooo!" I screamed.

"What the fuck, Kellog?! Why'd you shoot her? We could have used her," exclaimed the woman.

"Relax," he said. "At least we still have the backup." He turned his scarred face to glare at me, gloating.

The strangers walked out of my line of sight. I pounded my fists bloody on the door of my pod. The cold returned, and I passed out again.

Chapter 1 – date unknown

I came to again, and this time my pod's door swung open. I stumbled to the floor, coughing, and crawled on my hands and knees across to Norah's pod, which remained shut.

"No, no, no, no. This can't be happening." I looked around for a handle and found one on a pole next to the pod. "Please be okay. Please be okay."

The pod door swung up and away, and I placed my hand on my wife's neck, searching for a pulse. She was cold. Dead.

I slumped to my knees and wept.

Some minutes later, I suddenly thought of Shaun. They took my son. I needed to find him.

The blood on my knuckles had coagulated and dried while I was in the cryo pod. I wiped the scabs off, then

I stood and caressed the face of my dead love. "I'll find him. I promise. I will find our son."

I closed the door to Norah's pod. Maybe, if the body were preserved, then someday...

I forced myself to look around the room. The other pods were all closed. A terminal stood blinking on a pedestal at the entrance to the room. A few keystrokes gave me results that told me that all of the occupants were deceased. Various malfunctions were listed. Strangely, mine and Nora's pods were the only ones still functioning. I left the room with one last glance at my wife.

There were several other rooms full of cryo pods in the vault. All of them had malfunctioned. I was the lone survivor.

Making my way towards the entrance to the vault, I found the path through which we had entered to be blocked. The door to the right was open, so I went that way and found a barracks. The place had been ransacked, looted. On one chair was a dessicated skeleton, shreds of cloth barely clinging to it. What had happened here? And how long was I frozen?

Back in the hallway, I heard a loud skittering noise, and then out from around the corner came a gigantic cockroach! The thing was the size of a cat. It was headed stright for me, so I kicked it to the side, but it righted itself and lunged at me again. It took several kicks and stomps to finally kill it. From old b-movie science fiction vids, I remembered giant creatures that had been mutated by radiation. But to actually encounter a giant roach...Jesus Christ.

Further down the hallway was a break room. An arcade gaming console was active, displaying some high scores. Some empty bottles and kitchen accoutrements were scattered about the room. More dessicated skeletons.

I encountered more such rooms until I came to an office at a dead end. The sign above the door read "Overseer." Inside was a fancy desk and a functioning terminal. I read several log entries and learned that an all-clear signal was supposed to have come six months after the bombs fell. Supposed to. Instead, the last log entry explained that the crew of the vault stopped monitoring the cryo pods and there was a mutiny. That explained at least some of the skeletons.

There was an option on the terminal to "Open Overseer Tunnel," so I clicked that, and a wall panel slid aside, revealing a passageway. Before leaving, I decided to search the office to see what I could scrounge. The overseer's desk had a locked drawer, which I jimmed open. Inside was a mint-condition 10mm semi-automatic pistol, and a box of ammunition. "Jackpot," I thought to myself. In the bathroom adjoining the office I found a stimpak and some Rad-Away, and pocketed those.

The tunnel was short, and opened into the generator room. A family of giant roaches took offense to my presence, but my new pistol made short work of them. A door on the opposite side of the room brought me to the foyer, where I had been handed the jumpsuit I was now wearing. I looked to my right and saw the massive vault door, sealed in place. The thing must have weighted twenty tons.

Further inspection of the room revealed a control panel with a big red button labeled "open vault door," but it was guarded by a clear sheild. Try as I might, I could not pry open the guard. The bulled I fired merely ricoched off. On the floor ot the side was a skeleton with a Pip-Boy PDA still on its wrist. The device had a male adapter dangling from it, which looked to be about the size and shape of a port next to the Big Red Button.

I picked up the Pip-Boy wrist computer, strapped it to my wrist, and turned it on. The adapter chord retracted as the device booted up, and then the screen displayed its menu. I'd used a similar device in the military, and this ciivlian version worked in a similar fashion. I plugged the adapter from my Pip-Poy into the port on the vault door console. The device chirped a couple times, then displayed the message "Vault Door Override Access Granted." The guard on The Button popped open, and I pounded it.

Alarms started to blare and yellow emergency lights began to flash. A giant motor descended from the ceiling and engaged itself with the center of the door. Gears whirred and locks clicked open. The assembly slid backwards a few feet, and then rolled off to the side. Once the door was out of the way, a metal walkway slid into place over the circular doorway. I made my way across, and out to the giant elevator, which – at least in my mind – had not too long ago brought me down here, both saving and ruining my life.

Chapter 2 – Out of Time

The elevator platform came to a stop, and my eyes took a moment to adjust. My mind, too, needed a moment, as the lush northeastern flora was replaced with a wasteland. Where there had once been a forest of pine trees was now mostly barren; a few scraggly trees, some shrubs, and some grass that was really trying. I made my way down the hill into the neighborhood of Sanctuary. A pair of xkeletons lay near the creek, a

skeletal suitcase next to them. Many of the houses were still standing, cars were rusted out, there was a lot of debris strewn about, and...

"Codsworth? Is that you?" The robot had patches of rust, and was wobbling a bit, but his humming was unmistakable.

"Mister Nate! It's so good to see you!"

"Codsworth...what...what happened to world?"

"Well, after the bombs fell, there was a nuclear winter, and then several decades of fallout. The begonias died first I'm afraid, and the car! Oh, how do you polish out radiation?!"

"Decades?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, it's been about two-hundred years, give a take a few dings to the old chronometer, ha!"

"Two hundred years? No, I can't believe it." I looked around at the houses still standing, the neighbor's grill, a deflated red rubber ball. There had been some advancements in materials engineering the last few years, but still. Maybe Codsworth's crack about a bad chronometer were true.

"By the bye, sir, are Missus and Shaun with you? I haven't seen them around, either."

"Listen to me very carefully, Codsworth. A man and a woman killed Norah and kidnapped Shaun. Have you seen anyone come through here?"

"These things you're saying, sir, are you sure you're feeling well? Perhaps they're at the park?"

"No, you're not--"

"Ah! I know, the Missus arranged a playdate for little Shaun. They must be at one of the neighbors"

And without further discussion, Codsworth pivoted and jetted off, his thruster sputtering, calling for my dead wife and missing baby. Even robots must go crazy after too much time spent alone. Having nothing better to do, I followed.

The house next to mine had collapsed in on itself, and Codsworth floated by without seeming to acknowledge it. We entered the Jones's house and had to shoot down some flies the size of rats. Bloatflies, according to Codsworth. The robot used his hedgetrimmer and some sort of blowtorch. I didn't remember that from the brochure. The bloatflies spat acid, and exploded on death, corroding a sizeable hole in my vaultsuit and singeing my skin. The next house had a few of those giant cockroaches I'd seen in the vault – radroaches. In the third house, Codsworth gave up.

"Uh, sir, it seems the missus and Shaun aren't here. I'm afraid I don't know where they are."

"Did anyone else survive? Is anyone else around?"

"Well, I believe there are a few people down in Concord, but they may not be very...welcoming. They've taken more than a few pot shots at me, sir."

"Oh? What kind of people are they?"

"I'm afraid I'm not certain. But they may be your best hope for finding Shaun and the missus. Hm...well, off you go then! I'll remain here in case your family should return."

Yep, that robot definitely needed servicing. Concord was a few miles south, and I had only my Vaultsuit and a pistol with a few rounds of ammo. Scrounging around the neighborhood found me another 10mm pistol and a box of ammo, as well as some jeans and a t-shirt. It was a bit chilly out, so I put them on over the vaultsuit. Again, how this stuff survived for so long boggled the mind.

As I crossed the bridge leading out of the neighborhood, I gazed at the river below and was suddenly thirsty. I descended on the other bank, and as my hand approached the water, my PipBoy began making a tiking sound like a geiger-counter. What a strange feature to include in the device. I thought better of taking a sip, and continued on. I heard a dog barking in the distance. Shortly, I came to the Red Rocket gas station, and a German shepherd came trotting up to me.

"Hey, there, buddy." I scratched behind his ears. "You lose your owner?"

He let out an affirmative bark.

"You know, you look an awful lot like a dog I used to have, but she ran away, and I doubt your name is fluffy."

His low, quiet woof sounded an awful lot like "no."

"Well, you're welcome to travel with me, if you like."

An affirmative bark. He had no collar, and therefore no tag.

"I'll just call you 'Dog' for now."

Just then, several mutated creatures burst out of the ground, surrounding us. My new dog friend lunged at one and tore out its throat. I shot two more. One burrowed. Dog had another by a hind leg, preventing it from burrowing, and I shot it. A moment passed, then the last creature burst out of the ground and flew

through the air straight towards me. Dog intercepted and pinned it to the ground, and I finished it off. The ground being calm, I holstered my weapon and bent down to take a closer look at the creatures: mutated moles. As if moles weren't already weird looking. And their tunneling ability was improbable. Dog was beginning to tear into one, eating as if he hadn't eaten in days.

"Well, you've gotta survive out here somehow, I suppose." I glanced over at the convenience store portion of the gas station. "Speaking of which..."

I found a can of Cram on the shelves and a sealed Nuka-Cola in a vending machine. Some 250 years ago, Napoleon invented canned food to supply his armies. 100 years after that, some scientists opened up one of his cans and fed it to a cat. The cat went on to live a normal life, thus proving that canned food can last forever. Thus I reasoned, and, well, like that cat, I suffered no ill effects. The Nuka-Cola tasted fresh, too.

Chapter 3 – When Freedom Calls

Both of us sated, Dog and I continued down into Concord. As we approached the corpse of a mutated, two-headed cow, two giant mosquitos launched into the air, and began buzzing towards me. I only barely got my pistol out in time to shoot one. The other poked me with its sword-size proboscis, and I swatted it aside. But a mere swat wasn't enough to deter this hawk-sized insect. It circled around for another attack, and I shot it down.

Dog reappeared from wherever he was hiding. He approached me and sniffed the air, then backed away and gave the corpses a wide berth as we continued down the road into town.

"What's the matter, boy?" I teased. "Afraid of a little insect?"

Dog grunted.

We passed several boarded up shops and townhouses. Eventually we heard gunfire and shouting. Around a corner, in front of the Museum of Freedom, were four men in dirty leather, wielding improvised pipe guns. Above them, on the Museum's balcony was a man in a trench coat and tripeak hat firing a crude laser rifle at his attackers.

"C'mon, man! We know she's in there!" The attackers yelled. "Just give her up and we'll let you walk away!"

"Damn raiders!" responded the man in the hat, "get the hell out of here before I kill even more of you!"

Indeed, there were several bodies on the ground, including one wearing a uniform much like the defender.

I made up my mind to help hat-man. I took cover and opened fire. The distraction allowed Dog to circle around and pin down one of the bad guys, and hat-man finished him off with a raggedy-looking laser bolt.

The other raiders were dispatched in similar fashion. As the smoke cleared, the man called down to me

"Hey, you down there! You clearly don't like raiders, either. More of them made it inside from the back. If you want to help, grab that laser musket on the steps and give me a hand."

He disappeared back inside the building without waiting for my reply.

I looked at Dog. "Welp, no going back now."

The laser musket was very primitive. To charge a shot required turning a hand-crank. It stuck me as very anachronistic. Pipe rifles, laser muskets...had the world turned steam-punk? I picked up some extra fusion-cell ammo from the pocket of the fallen soldier, then looked up at the balcony again. It was only then that I noticed a vertibird crashed into the roof of the Museum. In fact, it had wedged itself between the roofs of the museum and the church next door.

"Must have been knocked out of the sky by the EMP from the bombs," I said to Dog, who cocked his head at me.

The moment I entered the Museum, bullets whizzed past me. I dove for cover behind a mannequin in Revolutionary War garb. I peeked around and counted two raiders on the walkway above. When they paused to reload, I broke cover and took my shot, missing and hitting the railing. This musket thing was hard to aim. I accidentally cranked twice, and the rifle started to make a worrying whine. I quickly leaned out and blew a hole in the walkway, vaporizing one of the raiders in the process.

"Woah," I said to the gun.

Dog was his usual sneaky self. He'd snuck up behind the remaining raider and scared the guy so bad that he jumped off the walkway, impaling himself on some spikes below.

"Nice job," I praised Dog. He woofed at me, then snuck off to find his next victim.

I continued straight ahead to the stairway, only to fall through the rotted floor and into the basement. Unlike the frightened raider, though, I landed on something soft – what had probably once been a couch. I looked around and saw the stairs back up, illuminated by the glow from a fusion core charger. The light meant that the subway-sandwich-sized battery in its port was fully charged. What the heck, I thought to myself. You

never know when you might need a fully charged fusion core, so I grabbed it and shoved it in a back pocket. I made my way up to the second floor and reunited with Dog in an exhibit on the Civil War. We heard voices arguing elsewhere in the building as we made our way through the World Wars. The Battle of Anchorage was up next, and I had to fight down a wave of PTSD.

In The Battle for the Moon, two oblivious raiders were just chatting casually. Did they not notice the battle that had just taken place a few yards away? They had their backs turned to us, so Dog and I snuck up on them and killed them without a sound. Down the next hallway I could hear the leader of this gang arguing with hat-man.

"Come on out man. Just open the door and give us the old woman, then we'll let you go." His tone wasn't fooling anyone.

"No way, asshole. These people are under my protection. I'm not handing them over to the likes of you. Besides, my friend has already taken out the rest of you. Why don't you just leave?"

"Nah, man, it's quiet out here. My guys waxed your man a long time ago."

I peeked around the corner and counted only two remaining raiders. I double-cranked the laser musket, and the troubled whine got their attention, but it was too late; they were both goo before they could bring their weapons up.

I knocked on the door. "Uh, it's me. Are you all right in there?"

The door opened I was greeted by the barrel of a musket.

"Oh, thank goodness it's you," said hat-man as he lowered his weapon. "Are there any more raiders out---oh, " he saw the stinking piles of flesh behind me. "I guess not."

I looked around the room and saw a man in overalls typing on a terminal, a young couple hunched on the floor, and what must have been the old woman the raiders were after, seated in the only chair in the room. She was positively ancient. Dog brushed past me and walked right up her.

"Dogmeat!" she greeted him. "It's so good to see you, boy!"

"Dogmeat? That's his name?"

"Oh, yeah," replied the old woman. "Dogmeat is a special dog. I saw that he would bring us someone else who was special, someone who would help us."

"Oh, come on, Mama Murphy," said hat-man. "Not more of your visions."

"What? Visions?" I was at a loss.

"Mama Murphy can see the future," the young woman spoke up.

The old woman addressed me. "Preston here doesn't believe in my visions. But I saw it. I saw *you*. You're searching for someone."

"I – yeah. My son, he's not even two years old. He's been kidnapped. How could you possibly know that?"

"Damn, that's messed up," said the man in the overalls. He was in in mid thirties, had pork-chop side burns and a gearser's hair.

"Who are you people, anyways?" I asked. "My name's Nate."

"I'm Preston Garvey," said hat-man. "I'm with the Minutemen."

"Minutemen? So now I'm travelling backwards in time?"

Preston looked at me like I was crazy. Giant insects? Mutated moles and cows? A woman who can see the future? Maybe I was crazy.

Preston decided to elaborate. "After the war, there was no one to protect us, no one to stand up for the people against raiders and other things. So a bunch of us decided to band together. We called ourselves the Minutemen, like from the old days. You know? Get there at a moment's notice? But after Quincy, well, things just weren't the same. Yesterday, there were eight of us. This morning it was six. Now, there's just us. But now that you're here, maybe we stand a chance."

Mama Murphy interrupted. "Oh, Oh, it's coming!" she said in a husky, frightened voice.

"What's coming, Mama Murphy?" asked the young woman.

"Oh, it's...huge...and...and angry! And it's got claws! And...it wants to kill us!"

"Look, I hate to interrupt," said Preston, from the window. "But it looks like there's another squad of raiders incoming." He turned towards overalls-man. "Sturges, did you say you had an idea?"

"Yeah. Say, stranger, do you know how to use Power Armor?"

I blinked. That Anchorage exhibit had brought up some bad memories. "Uh, I do. Why?"

"You see that vertibird that crashed into the roof? Well, it had a cherry set of working power armor just ripe for the taking, all it needs is a fusion core to power it."

I pulled the fully-charged fusion core from my back pocket and offered it to Sturges. I wasn't relishing the

idea of climbing back into one of those suits.

"Why can't you use it?" I asked.

"The thing is, I tinker. I'm a mechanic. I fix stuff. The fact of the matter is, none of us here know how to pilot the thing. If you can't handle the thing, then we're screwed."

I looked around the room. The young couple were hugging each other in fear. The old woman was too frail. Preston just shrugged.

"Tell him the rest, Sturges," said Preston.

"Right, so that vertibird has a minigun mounted to it, but it's no use in its current position. But the way I figure, if we – or you, rather – could get that power armor moving, then it'd be strong enough to rip the minigun right off, and you could use it to mow down those raiders. What'dya say?"

"Minigun, eh?" I pondered for a moment. "Could work."

I looked around the room. Five pairs of eyes were staring at me with hope and fear.

"Ok, let's do it." I said.

Sighs of relief from everyone.

"Hot dog! I knew you'd do it!" Sturges was ecstatic. He gave me directions to a door to the roof.

I pocketed the fusion core, and headed out. Dogmeat down sat next to Mama Murphy and gave me an encouraging bark.

Out on the roof, the power armor was not as "cherry" as Sturges had implied. It was missing the armor on its left leg, and the rest was fairly rusted. With some trepidation, I inserted the fusion core, and the suit creaked to life, opening up from behind, inviting me in. I took a deep breath and stepped in.

As the suit closed itself around me, the heads-up display booted up, and a message began to play.

"Personal log. United States Army Staff Sergeant Michael Daly. This past Saturday, October 23rd while en route to West Stockbridge, our vertibird crashed into the roof of this museum..."

"Hey, you get that think working over there?" Preston yelled from the balcony around on the front of the Museum.

I tested out the suit with a few movements as the log droned on. "...From the intel I've gathered, this was a global event. The co-pilot was killed on impact..."

"Seems to be functional."

"Great! Grab that minigun, because here they come!"

I climbed into the open side of the vertibird, and the log continued playing. "...now it's my turn to go AWOL, if that concept even applies anymore..." I grabbed the minigun, and with the power armor's strength, easily ripped it off of its mount. I tested the weapon, firing off a few rounds, and the barrels spun as if freshly greased. The log finished off "This is Mike Daly, signing out. Good luck. And God bless America. Or what's left of it."

A bullet pinged off my power armor. The HUD highlighted the shooter, and I cut him down with a short burst. A few more raiders jumped back into the street to take cover, and they began to exchange fire with Preston. They out of my line of sight, so I jumped down off the roof. The power armor took the drop without complaint, and I walked out into the middle of the street. The sandbags behind which the raiders cowered stood no chance, and the raiders crumpled at my attack. More shots bounced off my armor. Miraculously, none hit my exposed left leg.

I advanced down the street, mowing down raiders in the buildings around me. Fools, thinking the wooden storefronts could protect them from the onslaught of my minigun.

After maybe a minute, no more raiders were left alive. The street was quiet as the minigun's red-hot barrel spun down. Then I heard a creak. Then a bang of metal being deformed. A rectangular sewer access hatch at the end of the street went flying, and out of the tunnel roared a giant beast! It stood on two legs, had to be at least twenty feet tall, and was covered in dark fur. It had horns on its moose-like head, and foot-long claws on its hands. The beast roared again and charged at me. I squeezed the trigger and began backpedaling as fast as the rusty power armor would go.

Spouts of blood began spraying from the beast, but still it sprinted towards me and caught up. It swatted at the minigun and fell on top of me, clawing at the armor. I felt the armor's hands let go of the gun, and I punched at it until the beast fell still.

I pushed the corpse off, the power armor straining. This creature was heavy! I crawled out from under and stood up to hear Preston cheering from the balcony.

"Woo hoo! You did it! You showed that deathclaw who's boss! Yeah! That was amazing!"

Deathclaw. Yes, that was a good name for such a beast. I staggered back to the Museum, and the power

armor ran out of juice as I reached the steps. A power armor's last act is to open itself up, otherwise the user gets trapped inside. I eased myself out, aching from the battering that I had taken. The frame was bent in a couple of places, and I tore a pant leg on the way out. Preston spoke from the balcony above.

"Hey, gather yourself up, and come inside when you're ready. We'll meet downstairs. We need to discuss where we go from here."

I took a few moments to gather my wits, checked myself for injuries, then headed inside to meet the others. They were gathered on the floor in the middle of the museum. Preston approached me and dropped a small bag in my hand. It was light and jingled a bit. Inside were a handful of Nuka-Cola bottle caps.

"I know it's not much, but this is all we had, and you deserve a reward."

The group approached me, full of thank-yous and pats on my sore back.

"You're giving me bottle caps?" I was hopelessly confused.

"Um, yeah, is that a problem?" Preston was confused that I was confused.

"He's from a vault," the young man said as he pointed at my torn pant leg, the vaultsuit visible beneath.

"Ah, that would explain the fish-out-of-water look," said Sturges. "But we've run into vault dwellers before. And they all traded in caps with us. Which one are you from?"

"Uh, one-eleven," I said. "Actually I didn't spend much time in the vault. They had us frozen in some sort of cryo-stasis. I only just woke up a little while ago."

"Wait a minute, are you sayin' what I think you're sayin'?" Sturges couldn't let it go. "Are you from before the war?"

"Um, yeah, I guess I am saying that."

"Were you a soldier? 'Cause that'd explain how you knew how to use that power armor."

"I was. 301st Power Armor Corps. Served in Anchorage."

"Alaska? I thought that place was a myth."

"No, it's real. Was, maybe."

There was an awkward pause, which Preston broke.

"So, anyway, we can't stay here." He addressed the group. "Any ideas on where we can go? Anyone?"

"What about that place Mama Murphy told us about?" asked the young woman. "You know, the one she saw in her vision?"

"Sanctuary?" said a doubtful Preston. "It sounds too good to be true. I doubt such a place exists."

"Sanctuary Hills?" I said. "That's my neighborhood."

"You're from there?" said Preston. "Can we go there? Is it safe?"

"It's safe, apart from some radroaches and bloatflies. Plenty of houses still standing."

Preston looked at his group; there seemed to be no objections.

"That settles it then. Where is it?"

"Just north a ways. Follow the road, across a bridge. You can't miss it."

"Great, let's go everybody."

The group got up and headed out the door. I stayed put. Doubt creeping in. Mama Murphy approached me.

"You're a man out of time, kid. Lost. But I can feel your son's energy."

"Where's my son? Where's Shaun, Mama Murphy?"

She closed her eyes in concentration. "I'm sorry kid, the chems are wearing off. I just know that he's alive, and he's waiting for you. He's nearby, closer than you think."

"Right, you said your son was kidnapped." Preston chimed in. "You should head to Diamond City. They may be able to help you there."

"Diamond City? What's that?"

"The great green jewel of the Commonwealth? It's the biggest settlement in the area. Just follow the road east out of town, then south at the diner. You can't miss it. And you'll probably need those when you get there." Preston pointed at the sack of bottlecaps in my hand. "That's what we use for money." He paused in thought for a moment. "You know, we could really use someone with your skills. Maybe you could join us? Escort us up to Sanctuary?"

"I really need to find my son."

"Yeah, ok. Well, if you change your mind, you'll know where to find us."

"Sure. Catch you later, Preston."

Mama Murphy patted my hand and smiled at me, then joined her group.

I made my way towards downtown Boston. Dogmeat decided to accompany me. Remnants of the roads were still in tact; there was even some yellow paint remaining of the centerline stripe. Gone, however, were the pine trees. In their place were a few low, sickly shrubs. The road was quiet, but I kept looking over my shoulder with the eerie feeling that I was being watched.

The diner Preston had mentioned was abandoned, but looked like a safe place to spend the night. I found a box of Blamo Mac' and Cheese, but I decided against starting a fire, lest it attract any raiders or mutated creatures. There were a few unopened cans of Cram for supper. This stuff was apparently ubiquitous. Had people lost their taste for it in the last 200 years?

The sun was getting low as I entered the outskirts of town. The scene reminded me of newscasts of places hit by tornadoes: just one or two buildings left standing in a whole neighborhood, but those buildings seemingly unscathed. I approached the first bridge across the Mystic River and saw a sign for "Diamond City." The drawbridge was partially up, but a boat had lodged itself, providing a means of climbing across.

Down on the other side, another sign pointed left. In that direction was Fenway Park...of course! "Diamond" like a baseball diamond! The stadium would be pretty defensible, and would make perfect sense to take shelter in. It couldn't be much of a city, but if it was the only thing resembling civilization among these ruins, I'd take it. Dogmeat cocked his head and barked. His ears were perked up, but I didn't notice anything. Another couple of blocks on, however, and I began to hear gunshots, which got louder as we approached the stadium.

Around the corner there were men in baseball catchers' gear firing towards a building occupied by big green...ogres?! One of them was yelling:

"Weak humans, you will die, now!"

A bullet grazed the edge of the building I was peeking around from. It seemed obvious who I was siding with, so I drew my pistol and joined the fight. In spite of the boast, these monsters had terrible aim, and we made short work of them. As I reloaded my weapon and holstered it, one of the catchers approached me. "Hey, man, thanks for the help. Diamond City owes you one. Vault dweller, eh? Where'd you learn to shoot like that?"

"No problem. And it's a long story." I glanced down at my torn pant leg.

"Yeah, I get it. Well, you helped us out, so tell Danny at the gate that Dave said to let you in. You can get some fresh threads at Fallon's in the Market. Just past those turrets over there." He pointed down an alleyway.

Dogmeat and I continued around the side of the stadium where we saw a woman having a heated discussion with an intercom. The security gate to the main entrance was closed.

"Listen to me, Danny Sullivan! You can't suppress the news! Besides, I live here! Let me in!"

"I'm sorry, Piper," came a tinny voice, "McDonough didn't like that last article you wrote. He says not to let you in."

Piper grunted and stamped her foot, then noticed my approach. "Hey, you," she whispered. "You want in to Diamond City, yeah? Of course you do. Listen, just play along." Then, to the intercom she said, "What's that? You're a trader up from Quincy? You have a whole brahmin full of supplies? You hear that Danny?! You really want the City to miss out on fresh supplies? What'll McDonough say then, huh?"

"Ugh, fine, I'll open the gate," came the exasperated reply.

After a lot of grinding, the rusted rectangular slab of a gate lurched upwards barely higher than my head before coming to a swinging halt. Piper walked in like that was normal – it was supposed to retract up out of the way of the Welcome sign, some 30 feet higher.

"Piper Wright! Who the hell let you in?" exclaimed a rotund man in a dirty grey suit and fedora.

"Mayor McDonough! You should know by now you can't censor the press. You can be sure this little incident will be in tomorrow's paper."

The two continued to argue. I attempted to ignore the conversation and just mosey on into the stadium, but the mayor cut himself off mid-sentence and intercepted me.

"Ah, a visitor! And what brings you to our fine Jewel, good sir?" he asked. "Come to do a bit of trading, perhaps?"

"Actually, I'm looking for someone. My son was kidnapped. He's just an infant."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, but--"

"Ah, c'mon, McDonough," interjected Piper. "Another kidnapping? Is the mighty Diamond City Police just going to ignore this one, too?"

"Now, now, Piper. The Police have enough to worry about, what with all the mutant attacks and whatnot."

They can't go chasing down every new rumor that--"

"Augh!" Piper threw up her hands and looked like she was about ready to strangle the man, but changed her mind. The Mayor even took a step back. She calmed herself, then turned to me: "I'm headed to my office. Listen, Blue, I have an idea about who might be able to help you find your kid. Stop by my office later – Public Occurances, first building on the left as you enter. Can't miss it. You just gave me an idea for an article, and I'd love to interview you."

She gave the mayor one last disgusted sneer, then stormed off into the stadium.

"Ahem, well, yes," the mayor recovered his wits. "Well, if you do decide to do any trading, there are many shops around the market. Please, make yourself at home, and welcome to Diamond City!"

I made my way up the flight of stairs and out among the bleachers, where I found a vibrant shanty town had been built in the stands. Dozens of people going about their business, a general din of voices, as one would expect in any such community. In the middle tier were lower- to middle-class housing, and the upper deck unsurprisingly seemed more posh. People in formal attire seemed to be looking down their noses at those below. Surprisingly, a few of the stadium lights were lit. Below, on the field, was indeed a central market. Shopowners were barking about their wares and services, and a robot was serving bowls of noodles from a bar on the pitcher's mound.

There were stairs leading down to where home plate would be, and a little girl was waving around a newspaper, yelling about the main headline:

"Extra, extra! Read all about it! 'The Synthetic Truth: Is Mayor McDonough a Synth?'" She caught my eye.

"Hey, mister, buy a newspaper? Only ten caps!"

"Uh, sure kid." I reached into the pouch I had tied to by belt and pulled out the proper number of caps. "Here you go."

"Yay!" she squealed. "Thanks mister! Enjoy!" She resumed her barking.

The "newspaper" turned out to be little more than a pamphlet, but given the state of things, I found the effort to be impressive. My stomach began to growl, and I decided to try the noodle stand. I looked around for Dogmeat, intending to buy him some food, too, but he'd disappeared. Well, it wasn't like he was my dog; perhaps it was as Mama Murphy had said, that Dogmeat was his own man.

I sat down on stool at the counter, and I asked the robot "What's good?"

The robot replied in Japanese. I don't know Japanese.

The man seated next to me spoke up: "Everything that 'bot says is gibberish. Just ask for nodles and hand it five caps, and it'll hand you a bowl of noodles. Good noodles." He went back to his own bowl, ignoring me. I shrugged and did as instructed. The noodles were indeed good. I read the article in the pamphlet – there was only one. It wasn't very well written, but it accused a group called The Institute of replacing people with synths. What the heck was a synth? My hunger sated, I found the Public Occurances office back where the little girl was still hawking her newspapers. Inside, Piper was sitting on a ratty, torn leather couch, smoking a cigarette. She stood at my entry.

"Oh, hey, Blue! Nice of you to stop by."

"Why do you keep calling me 'Blue?'"

"It's that vault-suit you're wearing." She pointed at my left leg, the part below my knee completely gone now. Looks brand new, and it's a very bold shade of blue. Also, you look down, what with your kid missing and all. And I don't know your name, so 'Blue' it is. Now, about that interview. You do that for me, and in exchange, maybe I can help you."

I considered for a moment. Having no other leads, I acquiesced. I told her everything from the day the bombs fell; which for me was only two days ago.

"Woah, let me get this straight. You're from before the war? You were asleep for two hundred years, and you only just woke up? That's amazing!"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"So, how does life today compare with back in your time?"

"I mean, how can you even compare the two? The world is broken. It's just a wasteland out there. Nothing is the same. I don't know if it ever can be again."

"Ah, ok. Stupid question, I guess. Um, do you have any advice for the people living today?"

"Advice?" I was taken aback. As I pondered, I looked out the dirty, warped window at the shanty town outside. "I suppose this...Diamond City...is a start. Compared to my time, this place is just a bunch of shacks. But maybe...with time and a whole lotta effort..." I shrugged. "Who knows."

"Right, right. So what do you think of this whole Institute situation? With the kidnappings and such?"

I held up the pamphlet – newspaper, and asked "What is a 'synth,' anyway?"

"The Institute is the Commonwealth's boogeyman. No one knows where they come from, or where they take people that they kidnap. They make they synths – they're artificial people. Skin, organs, everything. Cut 'em and they bleed, just like you and me. The institute even copies the memories of the people they take, only there's always something just a little bit off. Not enough to really prove anything, but *just* enough make everyone suspicious of their neighbors. The whole City is on edge."

I scratched my head as I pondered. Artificial people? What was the point? Why would this 'Institute' take an infant? Piper finished scribbling in her notepad.

"Thanks alot, Nate. I think I've got enough here for three articles here. Now it's my turn to help you. The Police here are useless; the one you should talk to is Nick Valentine. He runs his own Detective Agency off the alley behind the market. Deals in missing people all the time. If he can't help you, no one can. Just look for the neon sign."

That was it? Just a pointer to a private eye? I sighed, and could barely keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Okay, thanks Piper. I'll head that way now."

"Oh, and Blue? If – when – you do find your son. Come back and tell me about it? I'd love to hear about it, and there'll be some caps in it for you next time."

"Yeah, sure. Catch you later."

As I left the office, there was a commotion in the market. As if to illustrate the article and my recent conversation, a man was accusing his own brother of being a synth. A crowd was gathering, and some police in their catcher's gear were arriving to try and break things up. They were unsuccessful, and one of the others shot and killed the other. There was blood spurting from the victim, but as Piper had informed me, it was unknowable if the deceased was a synth or human. Madness!

There were two alleyways leading past the market. I noticed a red neon sign to the left that read 'Valentie's Detective Agency,' contained in a red heart, with an arrow pointing me in the right direction. The alley was dark and muddy, with wooden boards laid down as a walkway down the middle. Another red neon sign hung over a door, and I entered to find a middle-aged woman in a plaid skirt and pink sweater, muttering to herself, her back turned to me.

"Oh, Nick, what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?"

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me?"

The woman was startled as she turned around. "Oh! Sorry!" She recovered quickly. "Welcome to Valentine's Detective Agency. The Detective isn't in right now. I'm Nick's assistant, Ellie Perkins. How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone. My son. He was kidnapped. He's less than a year old. Please, I was told Mr. Valentine might be able to help."

"Oh, my! I'm so sorry to hear that. But," she hesitated, a worried look on her face. "The thing is, Nick – the Detective is on another case. He's been gone for days." Ellie looked me over for a moment and seemed to come to a decision. "You look capable. I don't suppose you'd be willing to help? It's not like him to be gone for so long; he's probably gotten himself into trouble. I know where he's gone. Do you think you could go after him? In exchange, I'm sure he'd be happy to help you find your son."

I rubbed my eyes. Was everyone in the apocolypse so goddamn useless?

"Fine." I said. "Where is he?"

"He's gone after Skinny Malone to rescue a girl named Darla. Nick told me he was going to the old Park Street Station. Said something about there maybe being a Vault under there."

Another Vault? That's the last place I wanted to go, but if it got me one step closer to Shaun, I'd do anything.

"Fine. Who's Skinny Malone?"

"He's a gangster. His whole gang even dresses up in old-timey costumes. You know, like, from before the war?"

"Yeah, sure. And?" I had no idea what she was talking about. Street gang? Mobster? Raider?

"Well, anyway, Darla is a farm girl who was attracted to the glamours lifestyle. Wanted to play dress-up maybe. Her parents want her back, and hired Nick to get her back. Only he's been gone so long, and I'm getting really worried." She was on the verge of tears.

"Park Street Station, you said? I know where that is. I'll do what I can." I left before she could start sobbing.

Chapter 5 – Unlikely Valentine

On my way out of town I stopped by the Fallon's clothing shop to trade my torn clothes for something a bit more durable. I also went to the weapons shop to sell the spare pistol, and with that money, I picked up some

basic leather armor from the armor shop. Now I felt like I was at least somewhat equipped to take on the wasteland.

The streets of Boston were strewn with debris and rusted out vehicles. The debris somewhat surprised me; I'd have thought that two hundred years of scavenging would have cleared out any useful junk. At the very least, the car bodies and parts seemed like they could have been repurposed. I even found a locked suitcase on a bus. Breaking it open revealed clothing and a teddy-bear. That Fallon's shop might have been able to sell it. Whatever.

I passed the Boston Public Library, sounds of combat coming from within. Robots versus Super Mutants, by the sound of it, but that was none of my business. In front of Hubris Comis was the corpse of a man in tattered clothing. I searched his pockets to find a few caps and some ammo. Arriving at Boston Common, I saw something large moving underwater in Swan's Pond. On the east side of the Common was Park Street subway station, and I quietly crept over to the entrance, lest I awaken whatever horror was lurking in the pond.

I saw no need to pay for a ticket, so I just hopped a turnstyle into the station proper. I had no idea where a Vault entrance might be hidden down here, so it was time to do some exploring. In the station office I searched the first aid container and found a couple of unexpired stimpaks. As I neared the stairs leading down to the platforms I began to hear growling and some automatic weapons fire.

Down the stairs I saw several inert subway cars, and men dressed as old-time mobsters wielding Tommy guns were shooting at...zombies, apparently. One of the men noticed me and turned his weapon in my direction. I took cover behind a trash can returned fire. Suddenly I found myself fending off anachronistic gangsters and the undead. What a time to be alive. When I ran out of ammunition for my pistol, I broke cover to pick up a tommy gun and then dove into an open train car. I crouch-walked through the train and fired through open windows until the dust settled. Once I had cleared the area and convinced myself that I was safe, I looted the corpses for ammunition and caps before continuing my explorations.

There was a light further down one of the tunnels, and having no real indication of where to go, I decided to follow it. A couple hundred yards in, a hole had been dug in the tunnel wall. Beyond was construction equipment and a Vault door. Several mobster goons were patrolling outside, and two struck up a conversation.

"What the hell does Malone want with a Vault anyways?" said one. So I was on the right track.

"Who knows?" said the second. "You can never tell with the boss. Maybe he's looking for a new hideout."

"I heard he finally got that detective what was after him. What'dya think he's going to do to 'em?"

"Boss should just kill him and get it done. But you know Malone: always likes to play with his victims first. Got him locked in the old overseer's office, last I heard."

The conversation died down as they went about their patrols, and I approached the door with as casual a gait as I could muster.

"Hey, who're you, buster?" asked one of the guards.

"Uh..mercenary." I thought quickly. "Malone hired me as extra muscle to help you guys out down here."

"What? Malone don't hire no mercs."

"He's here for the detective! Shoot him!"

I dove behind a backhoe. One of the guards' guns jammed and he swore as he started hitting it. I waited for the second guard to reload before breaking cover and mowing them both down. I looked around to be sure no one else was around, then entered Vault 114. How many of these shelters did Vault-Tec build, anyway? Would I find more cryo-pods like in my 111?

The answer was no. In fact, the place looked like it was never finished. I found half-built walls, exposed pipes and wires, and tools scattered all around. I picked up a large knife from an open toolbox. The elevator wasn't working, but down a hallway was a hole in the floor where I dropped down to the next level below. In the reactor room I came across a mobster tinkering with some machinery. His tommy gun was on the floor next to him, so I snuck up on him and slit his throat with the knife.

I continued through the unfinished Vault until I came to a large, wide-open room: a cafeteria, by the looks of it. Crates of unpacked kitchen equipment were stacked along one wall. At the far end, on the level above me was a mobster, more nattily dressed than the goons I'd come across so far. He was yelling at someone through a thick round window. Inside was the silhouette of a man in a fedora and a trench coat. The sign above an adjacent door read "Overseer."

"Just you wait, Valentine," the mobster was saying. "When Malone gets here, your time is up!"

"Are you sure about that, Dino?" Valentine's calm voice sounded like something out of an ancient noir

detective movie. "Your boss knows about how you've been cheating at the card tables lately."

This was the man I was here to find. Who's help I needed to navigate this new world and find my son. I crept up the stairs as the conversation continued.

"How could you possibly no that? No way the boss knows."

"I took a peak Malone's little black book before he caught me. Inside I saw your name, crossed out three times."

"What?! In the black book?! Oh, no! I gotta get outta here!"

My shoulder bumped a ladder at the top of the stairs, knocking a screwdriver to the metal floor. The loud clank alerted Dino, who was turing towards me to leave, anyway.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm here for Valentine." I aimed my tommy gun at his chest. "Your move."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," said Dino. "I don't want no part of this no more. Here, take the keycard. Just let me go."

He held out a keycard to me as I considered. A gunshot would echo loudly in this metal-walled cavern. So I stood aside to let him pass, keeping the barrel pointed at him as he went.

"I'm outta here," he said as he scurried away.

I lowered my weapon and walked over to the door.

"I don't know who you are, friend," Valentine spoke as I passed the window, "but you just saved my bacon." The door opened and I stepped in.

"My name's Nate, I need your help to--" I stopped short. This was no man, but an android! His skin was plastic and torn in places; the face intact, but exposed metal a spinning gyro was visible behind one ear. One of his metal hands was completely exposed. "What are you?"

"Yeah, that's a pretty typical reaction," he chuckled. "Explanations should wait, though. We should get out of here before more of Malone's goons show up."

"Uh, right. Sure." I blinked a couple of times, scratched my head as I turned to escort the robot back the way I'd come.

"No, not that way," said Valentine. "Overseer's offices always have a back door of sorts." He – it? Strolled over to a terminal and started typing. "And... there!" A wall slid aside, revealing a door, which opened in turn, revealing a tunnel beyond. "This should be a shortcut back to the surface. And with any sort of luck, we'll run into Skinny Malone on the way. I owe him one."

We climbed some stairs and passed through hallways and rooms. More construction clutter blocked the direct route, forcing us to zig-zag through the Vault. We made conversation as we went.

"So, what are you, Nick?" I asked.

"Me? I'm synth. The Institute made me."

"A synth? But I thought-- "

"I'm a Gen-II, not like those skin-jobs, the Gen-IIIs. And definitely not like those Gen-Is – those things aren't much more than walking toasters. And before you start going on about the evils of the Institute, I'm not with them, and no, I don't know where they are." He paused at another stairwell. "Damn, that's a lot of stairs. Was the architect some kind of fitness freak?"

Did androids get tired?

"Are you really a detective? A robot?"

"Synth. And yes. I got programmed with the personality of some pre-war detective. That's why I sound like this. Anyway, I'm on a case. There's a dame named Darla who's hitched herself to Skinny Malone – the name's ironic, by the way. Her parents hired me to find her and bring her home. Rich Diamond City folks. Seems she gets bored on occasion and runs away on adventures."

We came to a locked door. Nick pulled out a set of lockpicks and got to work.

"This will just take a moment. Malone and the rest of his gang should be on the other side. Now, you said you need my help, but the only way out is through Skinny and his goons, so I'll do the talking and you be the muscle, all right?"

I sighed, "Yeah, fine." I reloaded and cocked my tommy gun as the lock clicked open.

On the opposite end of the large storage room, was a rotund man in a black pin-striped suit. Hanging on to him was a youngish woman in a green dress and too much makeup. Flanking the pair were four triggermen guards. These goons looked bored, their eyes glazed. Even with them drugged, I didn't like my odds.

"Well, Nicky," said Malone. "This is the end for you. I don't care that you brought backup."

"Yeah, you tell 'em, honey," cackled the woman, her voice high-pitched and nasaly.

"Shut up, Darla, this is between me and Valentine."

Darla frowned, but kept her pose. Nick spoke up.

"Darla, there you are. Your parents are worried about you. Why don't you head on home."

"What'd those loser old folks ever do for me, huh?" she spat. "They just sit on their balcony looking down on the rest of 'em. Besides, we're in love! Isn't that right snogums?"

Darla gave Malone a peck on the cheek, but he wasn't having it.

"Darla, please. The men are talking."

Darla pouted. The triggermen's trigger fingers looked itchy. I considered options while Nick tried to talk us out of there.

"Listen, Skinny, this doesn't have to end with violence. Maybe you and me can come to an arrangement."

"An arrangement? After all you've done to me? What could you possibly have to offer?"

"Listen, Darla." I spoke up. "Malone's no good for you. I think you can see that. Get out of here before things get ugly."

She looked uncertain. Apparently I had hit a nerve.

"Oh, things are going to get ugly, all right!" A sparkle glinted in Malone's eye as he motioned his goons to shoot.

A lot of things happened all at once. Darla shrieked and ran away. Nick and I dove for cover. I sprayed bullets without aiming, and Nick had pulled his own gun from somewhere. Bullets and shrapnel ricocheted off the metal walls. One caught me in the shoulder. I jabbed my arm with a stimpak and swapped magazines, then emptied it in the general direction of the bad guys.

When the smoke cleared and my ears stopped ringing, the robot man found me and asked if I was ok. The bullet hole on my shoulder was sealing, but it ached a bit.

"Yeah, fine." I rubbed my arm and inspected the bodies. "Is it over?"

"It's over. Though I wish that could have ended without bloodshed, but it looks like Darla made it out ok. She'll be high-tailing it for her folk's pace in Diamon City. Which is where I should go to make some repairs before too long." He held up an arm that was leaking fluid. "Why don't you come with me? Now that this case is closed, you can tell me about yours."

Back up at street level, we walked back to the stadium.

"Detective—"

"Call me Nick."

"Nick, my son may have been kidnapped by the Institute. Can I trust you?"

"They made me, sure. But that's all I know. Every time I try to remember something about them, there's some kind of block."

"But you must know where they are, where you came from."

"No, I'm sorry. That block is some kind of failsafe. Maybe the information gets erased whenever a synth leaves. The Institute is so secretive that they must not want even their own creations giving them away. But why don't you start at the beginning. Tell me everything; don't leave anything out. Even the smallest detail might help."

And so I spilled my guts to the mechanical man. About when the bombs fell, my short time in the Vault, waking up to watch my family get destroyed, my adventures since unfreezing. Everything. Nick asked questions along the way, clarifying details. I could see the wheel turning inside his mind, literally, if that gyro in his skull was any indication. Before I knew it, we were back in his office, being greeted by his relieved assistant.

"Oh, Nick, you're back! Thank goodness! And you're leaking! I'll get the repair kit. I told you to be careful."

"I'm fine, Ellie, thanks to the friend here you sent."

Nicked finished patching himself up and sat down at his desk. His assistant, Ellie, tried to stop fussing and pretended to look through a stack of files.

"So, this case of yours," Nick began. "I've been doing some thinking. Your description of the man you shot your wife sounds familiar. Ellie? What do we have on the Kellog case?"

"Here it is." She just happened to have the file. "The description matches. Gravelley voice, bald, scar across his face. He has an apartment here in town, and he was seen recently with a young boy – about ten years old."

"No, my son is an infant, that can't be Shaun."

"Well, he's a little bit older than your kid, sure," said Nick. "It's been two hundred years or so since the war,

and we don't know how long you were asleep the second time."

"I – yes, I see." Regardless of how old he was now, I had to get my son back.

"Even if the kid isn't your son," continued Nick, "Kellog is definitely your man. We find him, and we'll find your son, I'm sure of it."

"We?"

"Yeah, I owe you for saving my skin, even if it's made of plastic. I'm going to stay with you until you find your kid."

"Not again, Nick," worried the assistant. "We just got you patched up! Kellog is really dangerous."

"I'll be careful, Ellie, I promise." Nick patted her hand and then turned back to me. "Now, I'll go check around town, see if I can find Kellog, or at least his place. You look pretty tired, so you rest up while I'm gone. There's a cot in the back you can use."

Nick stood up and left the office. Ellie showed me to a private room off the office.

"You can rest up here. Make yourself comfortable. I've got some filing to do, but let me know if you need anything."

Chapter 6 – Getting a Clue

I was awakened several hours later to the sound of a door closing and Nick announcing himself.

"Ellie, I'm home!"

The detective and assistant struck up a conversation in low tones. I sat up and rubbed my shoulder. The stimpak had done its job stitching up torn skin and muscle, and I had full use of my arm, but I could feel the bullet still in there somewhere. It could wait until I'd found my son. Lead poisoning could wait. I put on my boots and joined the others in out in the office.

"Ah, you're awake," Nick greeted me, "and well rested, too. Good. I have some news. Some folks I spoke to said they saw Kellog leave town not too long ago, and I managed to locate his apartment. I wanted to wait for you before I broke in to look for clues, so if you're feeling up to it..."

"Absolutely, let's go." I said. Shaun was close. He had to be.

Just outside the door, Dogmeat sat panting.

"Hello, again, boy." I patted his head.

"Want to help us catch a bad guy?" asked Nick.

Dogmeat replied with an affirmative bark, and we set off towards the middle tier of the stadium. The stands were lined with shacks and lean-tos, assembled with sheets of metal, wood, and plastic. At the end of the walkway we came to a locked door. Nick knelt down and set to work with his lockpicks while I kept watch. Dogmeat sniffed around for a while and relieved himself on the railing. He barked as the lock clicked open. "Aha!" exclaimed Nick. "After you."

I nodded and entered the tiny shack. Inside there was a television on one wall, and a bookcase opposite.

Between was a desk facing the door, and some stairs leading up to a loft. In the loft were a nightstand and a bed, some miscellaneous junk scattered about. Nothing stuck out at me, but I'm not a detective.

"My sensors might need calibration, but does it seem smaller in here than it was outside?" asked Nick from below. "Look around, see what you can figure."

It did seem a bit claustrophobic, but the dim lighting made it hard to tell. As I descended the steps, I noticed a red button under the desk. I pushed it, and the wall next to the bookcase slid aside, revealing a closet-sized room.

"Hello, what have we here? Nice job, friend."

In the hidden room was a weapons locker and a chair with a small table next to it. I wasn't sure what to make of it, but Nick picked up a half-smoked cigar from the ashtray on the table and peeled back the label.

"San Francisco Sunlights. That's Kellog's brand all right. And it's still warm."

"I wonder if Dogmeat can follow the scent," I mused aloud.

"Good idea! We'll make a detective out of you yet." Nick held out the cigar for the dog.

Dogmeat sniffed at it for a moment, a look of concentration on his face. Then he barked sharply, turned around, and took off at a trot, sniffing the air.

"That's it, boy," I said, following out the door. "Take me to Shaun. Take me to my son."

Chapter 7 – Reunions

Dogmeat led us out of the stadium, out of town to the west, pausing occasionally to sniff around. We came to

a pond at the edge of the city, where we found another half-smoked cigar. Dogmeat sniffed it, and then set off along some railroad tracks. A mile further on, we were attacked by some giant scorpions. I was unsurprised, given the mutated creatures I'd seen so far. They were twice the size of Dogmeat, but we put down with ease.

Without pausing for a snack, Dogmeat picked up the scent again. And in a small rail station, we found yet another half-smoked cigar. Nick and I both began to suspect that Kellog wanted to be found. Nick mused on why that might be, but I didn't care; I just wanted the son-of-a-bitch who killed my wife and kidnapped my son.

Dogmeat led us up the hill to Fort Hagen. We came to the front entrance, and he pawed at the sandbags blocking our way in.

"Gotta be a back door," offered Nick.

We walkd around the perimeter of the building, eventually coming to another door, but it seemed barricaded from the inside. There was some scaffolding along one wall, and we decided to search the roof for a skylight or some other way in.

"You know," said Nick, "the inside of a place like this is probably no place for a dog. You should send him home – for his safety and ours."

I looked a Dogmeat, who cocked his head at me and whined.

"Yeah, he's right. You'd best head home, boy."

Dogmeat grumbled, then barked, and turned to trot away back towards the city.

Nick and I climbed the scaffolding to the roof. There was a roof access hut, but that door too was barred from the inside. More searching didn't reveal any skylights, but there was a hatch that was unlocked, and a ladder led inside.

The upper floor was ransacked, but otherwise empty. We descended to the ground floor, and heard some metallic voices chatting.

"Movement detected on sensors."

"Is anyone there? Reveal yourselves."

I rounded a corner to see several skinny robots with laser rifles searching through the rubble. One of them noticed me and opened fire. It was a bad shot, though, and I managed to doge the white laser bolt and shove Nick back into the stairwell.

"Contact!" barked the robot. "Combat initiated!"

"Damn Gen-Is!" said Nick. "Let's just destroy them so we can find Kellog!"

Together, Nick and I swept through the floor, blowing up robots. A laser bolt lit Nick's trechcoat on fire, and I helped him tamp it out. Sparks from a destroyed synth started a fire in one corner office, triggering the sprinklers on that floor. Any remaining robots shorted out, and Nick managed to retreat to the stairwell where it was dry.

Soaking wet, I went room to room seeking out any remaining synths. Finding none still functioning, I rejoined Nick.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"It's a good thing I wear this had. Otherwise I'd be looking like the rest of those robots right now. I'll need Ellie's help with my hand when I get back, though." Nick held up his metal hand, which appeared to be locked stiff.

"Maybe you should head back now."

"No way, pal. I'm seeing this through. But maybe you should lead from here on. You know, in case we trigger more waterworks."

"Ok, fine. I didn't find anything on that floor. Maybe there's a basement."

"Must be. Since those synths are here guarding Kellog, there's a good chance the Institute knows we're here."

"And so does Kellog. He'll be prepared."

"Right behind you, partner. I've got your back."

We decended the steps to the basement. We searched bathrooms, a utility room, and a cafeteria. I looted a dry, fully charged laser rifle, of the kind the Institute synths were carrying. Beyond the generator room were more stairs down, and the sound of more Gen-Is scuffling about, vocalizing nonsense about their sensors or somesuch.

A voice crackled from speakers in the ceiling.

"If it isn't the frozen popsicle." The gravely voice was unmistakeable.

"Damn you, Kellog, show yourself!" I yelled.

"I know what you're after." His voice remained calm. Evidently he couldn't hear me, but there must be cameras around. "Well, come and get it."

I looked at Nick, and he nodded his readiness. Taking the stairs three at a time, I bounded into the hallway below and opened fire, sweeping white laser bolts side to side. Sparks flew and robots exploded. There was no cover in the narrow hall, so I kept firing and advancing, until we reached some barracks and quarters. We took cover in those rooms to reload. The hall opened up at the end, and there were heavy doors behind a desk. No doubt Kellog was in there, but first we had to get past a horde of synths blocking our advance. I looked around the barracks where I had taken refuge. Along the right was a weapons locker. I rose and walked over to it. It was locked, but a few strikes with the butt of my laser rifle were all it took to bust it open. Inside were spare energy cells for the laser rifle, a box of grenades, and a bomb made of plastic explosive.

"Bingo." I said to myself, as Nick kept up the pressure on the synths. I pulled the pins on three pineapple grenades and tossed them down the hall.

No more laser bolts were flying, and I strode confidently to the heavy double-doors as the dust settled. Nick emerged and picked up position. A speaker crackled to life.

"Ok, fine." Kellog seemed resigned. "I can tell you're not going to give up. I'm opening the doors. Let's talk, warrior to warrior."

I exhaled, and strutted into a large room filled with cubicles and inert terminals. Three Gen-I synths stood spaced evenly around the room, their laser rifles at ease. Kellog's bald and scarred head emerged from the middle of the room, hands raised. We approached each other and stood five paces apart. I lowered my weapon and he put his hands down.

"All right, you wanna talk? Talk," I growled.

"You're here for your son. I--"

"Where. Is. My. Son!" I yelled at Kellog, barely able to contain my rage.

Kellog didn't flinch. "He's alive. Maybe a little older than you were expecting, but he's safe. He's at the Institute."

I cooled. A little. "The Institute. Where is it?"

"Even if I knew, I can't get you in."

I raised my weapon slightly.

"Wait!" Kellog was starting to sound nervous. "I've been there, it's true. But they do something to my mind every time I leave. I don't know where it is. You and I are not so different, See, I'm a merc, like you..."

"You and me are nothing alike, asshole!"

"They hire me from time to time, and when they want me, they find me. There's information on that terminal over there that you'll find useful. You're smart. Maybe you and that detective can figure out a way in. Now, let's let bygones be bygones and go our separate ways."

"Not a chance. You killed my wife you bastard!"

I aimed my rifle at his head, but Kellog ducked and disappeared. He must have had a Stealth Boy in his pocket. The three Institute synths opened fire. One laser bolt hit me in the hip as I ducked into a cubicle. Nick quickly took out one with his robotic reaction time. Ignoring the pain, I rose and fired. Together Nick and I downed the other two.

In the silence that followed, the door at the far end of the room rattled. I noticed the shimmering of a stealth field next to it. Switching my laser rifle to full auto, I held down the trigger, sweeping the weapon back and forth. The stealth boy timed out, and what was left was the smoking remains of Kellog, in two pieces.

I dropped the overheated laser rifle and turned to Nick.

"Check out that terminal." I pointed to the only one still working in the office.

Nick nodded and complied, silently respecting the completing of my revenge. I felt – I don't know what I felt. Oddly unsatisfied, I suppose. I went over to search Kellog's remains. I found a holotape, but my PipBoy only showed data.

"Bah," exclaimed Nick. "This terminal is locked with a code even I can't break."

I tossed him the holotape. He looked it over, then inserted it in the terminal.

"Aha! That did it." He typed a few keystrokes, and the door by Kellog opened up. "A few logs of Kellog's. They detail his time with the Institute. Something about cybernetic implants that allow him access to their secret lair."

An idea occurred to me. I picked up one of the Gen-I's laser rifles, and used it to sever Kellog's head. I found

a large plastic lunch bag in one of the cubicles and stowed the head in it.

"What the hell are you going to do with that?" Nick sounded disgusted.

"I don't know yet," I said. "But if his implants can get me into the Institute, I'm taking this with me."

"Whatever. Let's just get out of here so we can plan our next move."

The unlocked door led to an elevator, which took us to the roof. We unblocked the door and stepped out. The sun was setting. It was probably beautiful, but I was too numb to notice. Nick pointed to the north.

"What the hell is that thing?" he asked.

It was a huge airship, escorted by vertibirds. His question was soon answered, as a strong voice erupted from a loudspeaker.

"People of the Commonwealth! We are the Brotherhood of Steel. We come in peace to restore order to these lands. Do not interfere."

"Yeah, that sounds peaceful," I remarked. "Who's this 'Brotherhood?'"

"They're a military outfit. They search out and find any pre-war technology. They keep anything they deem to be 'too dangerous.' Heh, like yours truly. Come on, maybe we can sneak back to Diamond City without them noticing."

We started limping our way south.

"Are they dangerous? Where'd they come from?"

"Dangerous? I don't know. I guess we'll find out. As far as where they come from...Last I heard, they were operating out of the Capitol Wasteland, down south. How they came to approach from the north is anyone's guess. Maybe that's where they found that flying contraption. They're probably here for the Institute's technology, though. Anyone with half a brain knows *they're* a threat."

"Yeah," I mused. "I wonder if they can help me get Shaun back."

"Maybe. I think we should wait and see how they operate, though, before we approach them. See if they're as friendly as they seem."

"Right."

We made the rest of the trek back to the city in silence, occasionally hiding from the vertibird patrols. The airship came to a stop at the Logan airport.

It was dark when we stumbled in to Nick's office. As expected, Ellie began to fuss over us.

"We're all right, Ellie," explained Nick. "My hand is locked up again, though. Be a dear and grab the oil for me. And my partner here could probably use a stimpak."

"Right away, Nick." She rummaged in a first aid kit. "Here you go. I'm guessing you didn't find your son?"

"No, but I did avenge my wife," I offered before stabbing my hip with the stimpak and sank back in the chair.

To Ellie's confused look, Nick pointed to the soggy lunchbag that I had set at my feet, blood beginning to ooze onto the floor. "We did find a clue, though. Kellogg's severed head."

"Eek!" Ellie covered her mouth with both hands.

"Don't worry, it can't hurt you. Why don't you head on home. While our friend heals, I'll think about what to do with that thing."

Chapter 8 – Dangerous Minds

I jerked awake, still in the chair in Nick's office. Sunlight was shining on the small, dirty window above me.

"Good, you're finally awake." I was greeted by the detective's unexpressive plastic face.

"Hmm, hungry." I stretched. The pain in my hip was gone, but I could still feel the bullet in my shoulder.

"Right. I may have an idea. Take care of your biological needs while I go run an errand, and I'll meet you in the Market in a bit."

I yawned and waved my acknowledgement as Nick headed out the door. I used the facilities in the back room, then went out to explore the market area. A vendor was selling some meat of questionable provenance.

Dogmeat was there, begging for scraps. The butcher was shooing him in vain. I dropped a few caps to the man, who tossed a slab of unidentifiable, stinking raw meat to the dog. I opted for noodles from the Japanese-speaking robot again.

My belly full, I considered gear. Kellogg's custom gun had somehow found its way into my pack. Powerful as it was, I didn't want the gun that killed Nora. My wife, the mother of my son. I traded it for a .44 Magnum and a box of ammo. I also sold the Institute laser rifle that I had pilfered, it being rather bulky to lug around the Commonwealth. The armorer had a set of light combat armor in stock, which I was able to acquire for what remained of my leathers, plus a chunk of caps.

There was a surgeon at the edge of the square announcing his services. I decided to see about having that

slug removed. The service was done for a surprisingly nominal fee in caps. The doctor had sewn me up and was applying a poultice when Nick approached.

After exchanging friendly greetings with the surgeon, Nick told me we had to go to Goodneighbor.

"I know someone there who might be able to help with...that." He pointed to the lunchbag, the blood on the outside dried and crusty.

"I remember Goodneighbor. Kind of an historical area, I think."

"Maybe in your day, but I think you'll find it's changed somewhat since then."

We spent an uneventful hour walking across town. Nick's mechanical eyes constantly swept around, alert for threats. There were scrambling noises and whispers coming from the ruins as we passed, but nothing jumped out at us. The few skyscrapers still standing creaked ominously. We had to pass by Swan's Pond again, with that large *something* still swimming just under the surface. I got goosebumps, but Nick seemed not to notice. We rounded a corner to find a blockade, but above an otherwise uninviting door was green neon sign announcing that this was, indeed Goodneighbor. Through the door was a different place than I remembered. Instead of actors in period costumes, I was astonished to find zombies like I had fought in the tunnels of Park Street Station. But these weren't attacking me, and they were clothed and speaking with one another as if civilized. Nick noticed my confusion.

"Oh, right. I should probably explain. Radiation affects the human body in different ways. Some turn into ghouls. Most turn feral, like the ones in the tunnels down by Vault 114. But some stay themselves. They live a long time, too. Daisy, the merchant over at the general store there, she's been around since before the war. I'll bet you two could swap some stories."

I was rooted in place, not sure what to think about all this.

"Come on," Nick beckoned. "Our destination is just over here."

I gathered my wits and hurried to catch up to the detective. The sign over the building that Nick entered read Memory Den. Inside there were strange pod things – not like the ones in Vault 111. These looked comfortable, and had retractable plexiglass lids which were open on the sides. One was occupied by an eerily familiar-looking man. I swear I had seen him somewhere before...

Nick was greeting a tall, buxom blond. She was wearing lush red robes with fur fringe. Obviously the proprietress of the place.

"Irma, doll, how the heck are ya?"

"Nicky-baby! It's been too long." Her voice was a sexy contralto, with a smoker's rasp. Indeed, she held a lit cigarette daintily between two yellowed fingers.

Nick and Irma exchanged pecks on the cheek. This robot got a lot of action. I shoved aside a disturbing question of anatomical correctness.

"I'd like nothing more than to regale you with adventures of derring do, Irma, but we're here on business. You see, my friend here is looking for his kidnapped son."

"Oh, you poor dear," Irma looked me over. She was the type of person who could read you at a glance. Judging me sincere, a look of concern swept over her face. "How can little ol' Irma help with that?"

"Actually, I think this is a case for Doctor Amari. Is she around?"

"Downstairs, darling. Tell her I said to stop tinkering with her machines and help you out, all right?"

Irma noticed the bloody lunch bag I was holding and cocked an eyebrow, but didn't ask any questions.

"What exactly is this place?" I asked as I gestured at the pods.

"This is the Memory Den, darling," Irma explained. "People come here relive better times in their lives. Is there some moment you'd like to see again? I'd be happy to set you up."

"Ah, not right now. Maybe later." I was beginning to see what Nick had in mind.

I followed Nick to the back of the salon and down to the basement. Bent over a broken machine and cursing was a petite woman in a dirty white lab coat. Nick seemed reluctant to interrupt her. After an awkward moment, I cleared my throat. The woman startled and turned around. She noticed Nick, first.

"Mister Valentine! What an unexpected surprise. You're not due for a checkup, are you?" Dr. Amari's jet-black hair was pulled back in an uneven pony tail. She had bags under her eyes and her face was creased with worry lines. A workaholic, no doubt.

"No, no, I'm fine, Amari," replied Nick. "I'm here on business, actually. This man's son has been kidnapped, and I think you might have a way of helping."

"That's not exactly my area of expertise, Nick, what could I possibly do?"

"Well, it involves these here memory gizmos of yours," Nick began, and gestured towards me.

I took the cue and pulled Kellogg's head out of the bag. The stench was overpowering. Dr. Amari recoiled and

pinched her nose.

"Oh, my god! What the hell is that? I can't extract memories from a corpse. The memory loungers only work on living brains."

"I know," said Nick. "But Kellog here was unique. He's got some cybernetic implants that we're hoping your machines can interface with. You see, this is the man that kidnapped my friend's son."

"And you killed him?" Amari addressed me.

"He killed my wife, too," I explained.

"I see." She put her hands on her hips and pondered a moment. "So you think I can pull some memories out of a dead man's implants? Very well, put that thing on the table here and I'll take a look."

The doctor snapped on some rubber gloves and began examining the head.

"Hm, yes. Interesting. There's a port here on the back of the skull. I think I have an adapter that should fit." She rummaged through some drawers until she found what she was looking for. She pulled a cable from one of the nearby loungers and, with the adapter, attached it to Kellog's head. She flipped a few switches on the lounge, but nothing happened. She frowned.

"I think we need an active brain to interpret the data. Kellog worked for the Institute, yes? Mister Valentine, since you were also made by the Institute, your circuits should be compatible. Would you be willing to volunteer?"

"Whatever you need, doc."

"Okay, just sit in the lounge then, and I'll hook you up." Amari flipped a few switches. "There. Are you seeing anything?"

"Ugh," Nick winced in pain. "Just...flashes...and static."

"Okay, that didn't work. Since Kellog was a cyborg, perhaps we also need an organic brain in parallel to make sense of his memories. You there." She pointed at me. "Have a seat in this other lounge."

"Me? Why can't you do it?" I asked.

"I have to sync your minds and monitor your vitals. It has to be you."

I took a deep breath and sat in the open lounge. What choice did I have?

"Good, now just relax and close your eyes. I'll pull you out if anything goes wrong."

That last comment was anything but reassuring. My heart began to thud as my senses faded.

Slowly, a scene came in to focus. I was in a small room. A young boy was seated on a bed, playing with some toys. A woman I took for his mother was seated on a chair next to the bed, reading a magazine.

"You should be seeing something now." The voice was coming from everywhere. It was the voice of God. It was Doctor Amari's voice.

From outside the bedroom came the incoherent yelling of an angry drunken man. The boy and his mom winced. I somehow knew that the boy was Kellog.

"Hm, no, that's too early." Said Amari-God. "Let me fast forward to the next memory."

The scene blurred and shifted to an apartment. Kellog was a strong young man. He was washing dishes at the sink. A young woman, seated at the kitchen table was conversing with him. Out the window was a ruined Golden Gate Bridge. The couple seemed happy. A baby was making ga-ga noises from a crib.

"Still too far back," announced Amari. "I'll skip ahead a bit more."

The scene of domestic bliss faded out. The next scene was Kellog, dressed in combat armor, storming down an industrial tunnel. He was angry. He stopped and pounded on a metal door, and a slit in the door slid aside. Angry words were exchanged. The slit closed. Kellog drew his gun and the door opened.

"Yikes, sorry about that. Let's see what else I can find."

The next scene was in a closed room, modern machinery decorated the walls. A woman in a too-clean lab coat was seated behind a card table. Two men in long leather coats and mirrored sunglasses stood at attention to either side of her. She was saying something about her organization being able to make use of his skills. Also, she expressed sympathy for the family he'd lost. The parallels between Kellog's life and my own life were disturbing.

"Ah, this must be when the Institute first hired Mister Kellog. Interesting, but still not quite what we're looking for."

That room faded to a location I recognized all too well: Vault 111. Kellog and the woman in the hazmat suit standing in front of my wife's pod. From Kellog's eyes I saw the pod open. There was a struggle. Kellog lost his patience and...I saw my wife die again. The woman scolded Kellog and walked off with my infant son. Kellog turned and looked into the window on my pod. It was weird seeing my face from someone else's

perspective. Not at all like looking in a mirror. He muttered something about still having a backup. The scene froze and faded out.

Amari spoke into the darkness. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry I made you go through that again." She let a respectful moment pass. "Let me try again."

Suddenly I was in Kellog's Diamond City apartment. Kellog was seated at his desk, cleaning his gun. A young boy of about ten was sitting on the floor, playing with some toys. The radio was playing an episode of "The Silver Shroud." Was this Shaun? The memory must have been recent. My heart ached to reach out to him, but I was only an observer.

"Aha! This must be what we're looking for. Let's let this play out, shall we?"

A full minute passed, and I was beginning to wonder at the significance of such a mundane memory.

Without warning, there was a bright flash, an arc of lightning, and a man in a long leather coat and mirrored sunglasses materialized. An institute agent, just like from the earlier memory.

"Hello, Kellog." The man's voice was monotone. "It's time. I've come to take the boy."

"Gah! Damnit!" Kellog was annoyed. "Would you stop dropping in unannounced like that? I nearly shot you."

"Hello, ex six eighty-eight." The boy addressed the agent as he stood up. "Are you here to take me to the Institute?"

"Yes, Shaun. I'm going to take you home now. Stand close to me."

It was Shaun! The boy was my son!

"It's about time," Kellog grumbled, but I sensed a bit of sadness in him. I refused to feel sympathy for this man. "And my payment?"

"Your payment is waiting for you at Fort Hagen," replied the monotone Institute agent. "Goodbye, Kellog. This is X6-88, requesting recall for two."

There was another lightning bolt flash, and the agent and Shaun disappeared. The scene froze and began to fade.

"So the Institute uses teleportation!" Amari said excitedly. "That explains why no one has ever found their base of operations. I think we have what we're looking for; I'm pulling you out now."

My head ached terribly. The lights in the basement were too bright. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Easy now. Don't get up yet. Take your time." Amari's voice was soothing. "That was quite an ordeal you just went through. How are you feeling?"

"Like the morning after shore leave," I groaned. A few more breaths, and the hangover feeling began to clear.

"Yes, your vitals are stabilizing," said Amari in a clinical voice. "I think you're going to be ok. I wasn't so sure there for a while, but you are quite strong."

I blinked away the last of the headache. I let that last comment go.

"So, do you happen to have a teleporter around?" I asked.

"Well, no, but I know someone who might be able to build you one. But there's a slight problem."

"Spit it out, doctor. I am so close to finding my son. Please."

"His name is Doctor Virgil. He escaped from the Institute."

"That sounds promising. What's the problem?"

"You see, he's hiding out in the Glowing Sea."

"The...where?"

"You must not be from around here. The Glowing Sea is an area to the southwest of here. It's where most of the bombs fell. It's still highly radioactive. You'll need protection from that. And probably a lot of Rad-X and Rad-Away, if you can find any."

I passed my hand along the chest of my combat armor. No lead lining there. Power Armor would work, but the only suit I was aware of was incomplete and out of juice besides. It would have to be chemicals.

"Thanks, doctor. You've been a huge help. Where's Nick?"

"He's upstairs. I think I heard him speaking with Irma. Good luck! I hope you find your son."

In the salon, I found Nick seated on a bench next to the exit, staring blankly into space.

"You all right, Nick?"

A familiar, staccato voice came from Nick's mouth.

"Did you have fun poking around in my head, pal? I told you we were alike."

"Kellog? How the hell did you get into Nick? Don't make me kill you again you sick fuck!"

"Bwa, wha?" Nick spoke in his own voice. "Oh, hey Nate. Why are you looking at me like that? What are you yelling about?"

"Just now, Nick, It was Kellog speaking speaking though you."

"What? No. Just give me a sec." The android made some ticking noises. Then, "Hm, diagnostics don't show anything unusual. But if what you say is true, then I sure hope it doesn't happen again. For both our sakes. Anyway, what did Amari say?"

"The Institute uses teleportation. She thinks an escaped scientist by the name of Virgil is hiding out in the Glowing Sea."

"The Glowing Sea, you say? I'm immune to radiation, but you're not. You'll need to stock up on-- "

"Chems, yeah. Know where I can buy some?"

"Not something I keep track of, but Daisy might have some in stock."

Chapter 9 – The Glowing Sea

It took us a whole day to reach the remains of I-95. I made camp under a collapsed section of freeway. To the southwest was a radioactive wasteland, shrouded in fog. At first light, I popped my first dose of Rad-X and ventured forth with Nick.

"In the middle of this mess, the Children of Atom have a...settlement of sorts in a crater," Nick explained.

"They're a bunch of nut cases who worship radiation, or some such nonsense. If this Virgil fellow isn't among them, they'll probably know where he is."

"How are we going to find our way in this mess?"

"I've been there once before on a case, and my interal gyros should keep us on course."

The trek was slow and filled with hazards. The occasional crack of static lightning kept us alert. There were pools of glowing green radioactive goo. Half-buried buildings served as landmarks of sorts. There was a church filled with feral ghouls that we took a long detour around. And then there was the wildlife: blootbugs, radscorpions, radroaches, and molerats had to be fought off at intervals. At one point the fog cleared for a moment, and we saw a deathclaw at the top of a hill. Thankfully we didn't have to fight it.

Late in the day, as I was running low on Rad-X, we finally stumbled into the Children of Atom's Crater. Airstream trailers had been arranged as housing, and they had erected a giant metal radiation sign – their religious symbol, apparantly, as everyone there also had small ones that they wore on necklaces. The peple wore what looked like burlap sacks, and their hair was falling out in clumps. Nick reminded me that everyone reacts to radiation differently; most of these folks would die soon, others might turn into feral ghouls. A very few lucky ones had a natural resistance to radiation.

It also turned out that while they all worshiped "Atom" with equal fanatasism, some took Rad-X to stay alive and healthy. I traded with their merchant for extra supplies of chems. We spoke with their leader, and after some mad ravings, admitted to meeting Virgil recently. Only after agreeing to pray with him, he directed us to a nearby cave.

Inside the mouth of the cave were some empty cans on strings hanging from the ceiling. A primitive warning system, but one that would be effective against the mutated creatures of the Wasteland. Just beyond was an autoturret.

"Uh, hello?" I called out. "Is anyone home?"

"Who's there?" called a low, gravely voice from deeper in the cave, followed by thudding footsteps.

"My name is Nate. I'm looking for Doctor Virgil."

A super mutant emerged from around the corner. He was unlike other super mutants in that he was wearing clothing, and had eyeglasses. All were stretched to their limit, but they still lent him a relatively civilized air.

"Yes, I'm Virgil. What do you—oh, you're with the Institue." He must have noticed my combat armor and the fact that Nick was a synth. "Honestly I'm surprised it took you this long to find me. Well, let's get it over with, then."

"We're not with the Institute. In fact, I came to find you because I need to get *into* the Institute."

"You mean you're not here to kill me? Well, that's a relief. Wait, did you say you want to get in to the *Institute*? You must be crazy."

"They kidnapped my son. I need to rescue him. We learned that they use teleportation to get in and out. Doctor Amari in Goodneighbor said you might be able to help with that."

"Doctor Amari sent you? She's a good egg. Well, if she trusts you, you're probably ok. You must be tired after walking all that way. Come on in, take a seat anywhere."

Virgil deactivated the autoturret and motioned us in. The cave opened up into a larger chamber.

Scientific equipment and other tools were strewn about. The ceiling of the cave was high enough for a super mutant to stand comfortably erect. Speaking of which,

"So, you're a super mutant?" asked Nick. "I thought the Institute was all about purifying humanity."

"Yeah, about that. I was assigned to researching the FEV. But the experiments were going nowhere. I got exposed accidentally when I broke out of that place."

"What's FEV?" I asked.

"It stands for Forced Evolutionary Virus. Some madman out on the west coast came up with the stuff. It—well, it turns people into this." He gestured to indicated himself. "The Institute thought it might make better humans. It does make people stronger, tougher, and longer-lived, but they never could get rid of the side effects. It also makes you sterile. Not worth it in my opinion."

Virgil trailed off and seemed to get lost in thought.

"So, do you know how their teleportation works?"

"Hm? Oh, right your son. I'm sorry about that. Part of the reason I left is because those people really lack ethics. Yeah, I can draw up some schematics for you, but you have to promise to do something in return."

"Of course, anything." Anything to get my son back.

"When I left, I was working on a cure for my condition. It was done, but I had to leave in a hurry and I left it behind. You have to promise me that when you do get in, you'll find my cure and bring it to me. I realize there's nothing holding you to that, but you're my only hope at this point, and you seem like the trustworthy sort."

"I can do that, sure."

"Great, thanks. Now, there's one component that you won't be able to make yourself: a Courser Chip.

Courser's are the Institute's muscle, their enforcers. They're Gen-III Synth's, but they've been programmed for combat, and they're ruthless. They have a cybernetic chip in their heads that serve as beacons, so you'll need to find and kill one, then pull the chip out of its head. They piggyback their teleportation signal off the old classical radio station, so you can home in on that to find a courser."

"I'm no stranger to combat," I offered.

"Yeah, you look like you can handle yourself; otherwise I wouldn't have agreed to this." Virgil looked me up and down. "Let me see your PipBoy. I can modify that to track the courser's signal."

I handed him the device, and he took it over to a workbench to tinker with for several minutes. Virgil let loose a few choice words.

"These stupid huge fingers are hard to work with. There." He handed my wrist computer back to me. "Now for those teleporter plans."

He spent a long time scribbling, bent over a sheet of papers. I eyed a cot in the corner, and it looked inviting. Nick offered to keep watch, and I lay down and closed my eyes for a bit. I must have needed the rest, because it seemed like only a second had passed before Virgil's booming voice woke me up.

"All done! Here you go." He handed me a thick wad of paper. "The teleporter I've designed for you is going to be pretty big. I doubt you'll be able to build it on your own. Oh, you'll also have to find someone with some fancy computers to decode the Courser Chip. I don't have that here, but someone might."

"Amari's equipment looked pretty fancy," suggested Nick.

"Yeah, maybe," Virgil agreed. "Well, off you go. Start at the old CIT ruins. The Institute is deep underground there, and that's where the signal originates. When someone teleports out, the homing needle on your PipBoy will show you the direction where they teleported to."

"Okay, got it," I acknowledged that part, but I frowned at the blueprints in my hand. "But how are we going to build this thing? I ran into a group of Minutemen awhile back, but--"

"Minutemen? Ha!" rumbled Virgil. "Those idiots don't know a capacitor from a cockroach. Besides, I heard most of them were wiped out at Quincy."

"What about the Brotherhood of Steel," said Nick. "They're supposed to be pretty tech-savvy."

"I dunno. Their arrival announcement didn't exactly seem friendly." The Brotherhood gave me a bad vibe, but I set aside the idea for the time being. "This whole operation rests on getting that Courser Chip. Let's make sure we'll actually be able to build this device, and then we'll see."

Chapter 10 – Hunter/Hunted

A day and a half later, Nick and I found ourselves in the ruins of the Cambridge Institute of Technology. We spent another half day exploring the ruins, getting sick of listening to the classical radio station. Finally, there was a burst of static, and the needle on my PipBoy came alive.

I led Nick through the town for several blocks until the needle settled on the Greentech Genetics Building. We could hear sounds of a gunfight inside. Just as I stepped through the main entry door, a body fell from above. The man had been wearing combat armor similar to my own, but it had a stylized skull logo stenciled on with white paint.

"Woah," I shouted as I jumped back a step.

Nick glanced at the corpse, then surveyed the other fighters on the levels above. There was a fountain in the middle of the lobby, and looking up revealed that the building was hollow in the middle, with catwalks across the open area on every other floor. A rich company indeed if every office was a window office.

"Gunners," Nick said. And to the question on my face: "They're a mercenary outfit with some military discipline and organization. They deal mostly with escorts, fortification, and the occasional kidnap for ransom."

"They sound like raiders."

"Not quite. Raiders just take what they want; they're chaotic and destructive. They also tend to be drug addicts. The Gunners work for a living. They're ruthless, but they do have rules."

"The Courser is on the third floor! Gather at the stairs to the fourth and form a barricade! Don't let him get to the girl!" A voice issued commands over the building's public address system.

Nick and I followed the trail of bodies up stairs and around broken barricades. Through subsequent announcements, we gathered that the Gunners were holding an escaped synth, and the Courser was here to bring her back in. Nick put the pieces together and intuited the scenario.

"Ah, so the Gunners happened across a naive escaped synth. They locked her up here and somehow got a message to the Institute that they wanted to sell her back. They might have guessed that the Institute would send a Courser, but they figured they could hold out."

"Maybe they'll tire him out for us then," I speculated. But I'd been with Nick for days and hadn't seen him recharge. "Wait, do synths get tired?"

"I can go for a week between charges, myself, but Coursers are Gen-IIIs. They're indistinguishable from you, but they must have something extra that gives them an edge. Otherwise this lone synth wouldn't be able to tear through all these well-armed Gunners."

"Good point." I holstered my Magnum pistol and picked up a combat shotgun from a dead Gunner. Even so, I hoped that the Courser would be out of gas by the time we caught up.

One floor from the top, the gunfire ceased, and we could hear talking above us. The monotone Courser was asking for a door code, and a Gunner was being defiant. There was a scream and a snap, then a thud as a body fell to the floor. We crept up the final flight of stairs and picked up the conversation.

"No, I don't know the code!" said a frantic Gunner. "You just killed the last guy who did!"

"Then you are of no use to me."

I saw the Courser snap the man's neck as I came around a corner. The dark-skinned man in the long leather coat and mirrored sunglasses turned toward me and Nick. He was unarmed but seemingly unconcerned that we both were pointing our weapons at him.

"Who are you?"

"I'm here for what's in your head," I sneered.

"What's in my head?" The Courser took only a minute to compute my meaning. "Oh. That is a problem."

He activated a Stealthboy, and I immediately fired off several shotgun rounds. One hit, and blood sprayed out of thin air. I scanned the room, looking for the telltale shimmer of the stealth field. Nick saw it and pointed.

"There!"

We both opened fire, as it rapidly approached me. I emptied the rest of the shotgun's chamber, and a weight fell on me, toppling me to the floor. The Stealthboy clicked off, and I rolled the corpse of the Courser off of me.

"Are you all right?" asked Nick.

"Yeah, I think so." I stood up and patted myself down. "How about you?"

"Not a scratch, but that was a close one. Uh oh." Nick pointed to the Courser. "Looks like we blew a chunk off its head. Hopefully the chip is still in one piece."

Brains were spilling out of the skull. "Ugh," I grunted as bile was starting to rise. I swallowed it down and reached in with a gloved hand. "Blegh." I felt around and found something solid, pulled it out and cleaned off the grey matter to find a small lightbulb-shaped metal thing.

"That's gotta be our chip," said Nick. "Now, let's get out of here before more Gunners come looking for their comrades."

I tore off some cloth from a dead Gunner and used it to wrap the chip, then placed it in my bag. "Hello? Can you help me?" There was a young woman locked in a security room, waving at us from behind bullet-proof glass. The door had no handle or lock, but there was a terminal on the wall next to it. Nick stepped up to it. "Not to worry, doll-face, I'll have you out of there in two shakes." A few keystrokes and the door clicked open. "Oh, thank you!" said the young lady. "Well, I guess you figured out that I'm a synth. My Institute designation is K1-98, but I like to go by Jenny. I had no idea it could be so dangerous out here." "Are you hurt? What will you do now?" I asked. "I'm ok. Diamond City is nearby. I think I can get there on my own." "Ah, I don't recommend that, kid," said Nick. "They're not exactly fond of our kind there. Try Goodneighbor, instead." "Oh, okay, thanks," she said, and then looked around at the bodies. "We're actually headed there ourselves, next," I added. "If you'd like an escort." "That'd be great! Yes!" her eyes lit up in gratitude. But first, we had take the stairs all the way back down. Nick and I looted bodies for ammo and caps along the way, but K1-98 kept as much distance from the corpses as she could. The experience was apparently traumatizing for her, and she remained silent the rest of the way across town.

Chapter 11 – The Molecular Level

Upon reaching Goodneighbor, I sold some of my loot, and exchanged my bloody armor and clothes for fresh versions. We entered the Memory Den, and K1-98 slumped down in a chair. Irma greeted us. "Well, if it isn't my two favorite handsome men! Welcome back. How can old Irma help you this time?" I explained the circumstances under which we found 'Jenny,' leaving out the part about her being a synth. "Can you help her?" I asked. "Oh, you poor dear! You're safe now with Irma. Let's get you cleaned up and comfortable, shall we? Come along now, that's a good girl." Irma led Jenny to a back room, while Nick and I went downstairs to find Doctor Amari.

I handed the chip to Amari and she examined the chip for a moment. "You say you got this from a Courser? That must have been some fight. I'm amazed you survived." Amari frowned. "But I'm afraid I can't decode it. I simply don't have the expertise or the equipment." My heart sank, but only for a second. "Heh, I'll bet you know someone who can, right, doc?" suggested Nick. "As a matter of fact, I do: The Railroad." "Who are the they?" I asked, and Nick attempted to explain. "They're a bunch of secretive nut jobs. You might remember similar underground railroad that helped slaves escape a long time ago. These folks help escaped synths find a new life, but they're such bleeding hearts that they'd help a toaster." "Now, now, Mister Valentine," chided Amari. "They're good people, and they do good work. But they deal with synths and engage in espionage against the Institute, so they're bound to be able to decode this chip." "Ok," I sighed. "How do I find them?" "I don't know exactly where they are right now; they have to move their headquarters around a lot to stay ahead of the Institute. The only clue I have is a phrase: 'follow the freedom trail.'" "What the heck does that mean?" Nick sounded discouraged. "That's not much to go on, doc." "Actually, I happen to know that one," I said. "It was the slogan of a self-guided walking tour here in downtown. There's supposedly a marked path that takes people to a bunch of historic sites." I got lost in memory lane for a minute. I had taken Nora on the tour as a date. I remembered more about the fun we had together than anything that was on the tour. "Earth to Nate," Nick was saying. "You still with us?" "Hm? Right, sorry." I shook my head, clearing the memory. "I was just...Anyway, I don't remember where all the tour went, but it starts at Boston Common."

Sure enough, there was an historical marker behind the entrance to Park Street Station. A line of red

bricks was embedded in the pavement, leading away. The "Freedom Trail" wound around the east end of town. At each stop was a metal emblem with embossed letters labeling the site. And someone had sprayed a circle of red paint around a letter on each emblem. Nick assumed it was a code, and at the last stop, he managed to unscramble the anagram.

"It spells 'Railroad,'" he announced.

"I don't know, Nick. Doesn't that seem kind of on the nose?"

"Not really. Most people don't know how to read these days."

The trail ended at the Old North Church. This was the spot where Paul Revere lit two lanterns, thus warning the rebels that the British were approaching from the sea. Inside, our presence awakened a nest of feral ghouls. Their ubiquitous presence was starting to feel normal, and killing them routine. Clues led us to the basement, and at a dead end of a hallway was a large disk with the Freedom Trail logo embossed on it. I punched it in frustration, and the center disc of the emblem depressed. There was a noticeable click during the process.

"Wait, it can't be that easy," I said to Nick.

"Give it a shot," he encouraged. "Few people can read, remember?"

I turned the outer disc, lining up each letter in the word "Railroad" and pushing the inner disc in turn. An unhealthy grinding could be heard behind the mechanism, and then a section of the wall slid aside. I was suddenly and rudely blinded by some very bright lights.

"Well, you've found us. Congratulations," came an angry female voice. "Now, who are you and what the hell do you want?"

"You weren't exactly hard to find," I said sarcastically. "I mean, 'Railroad' is your secret password?"

"Look, you've got exactly ten seconds to explain yourselves, or I let Glory here blow you into very small chunks of meat to feed to the ferals."

My eyes adjusted to the lights, and I could make out two women. One was holding a minigun. I decided to cooperate.

"My name is Nate, and this is Nick. I was told you might be able to help me decode a Courser Chip?"

"You? Took down a Courser? Ha! I don't believe you. Now turn around and walk away--"

"Woah, woah, woah, hold on a second there, Dez," a familiar-looking man emerged from the shadows behind the two women. "You're just going to turn away the Courser-Killer? If he really does have a Chip, that could be a huge break for us."

"Deacon? When did you get back? Nevermind. You actually saw him take down a Courser?"

I had seen this Deacon guy in a lounge back at the Memory Den; and I couldn't place my finger on why, but I had the sense that he was the one who was following me after I left Sanctuary.

"Not exactly. I watched enter the building where the Courser was, and only he came out. Ipso facto, he must have killed the Courser."

"Hm, well, If Deacon vouches for you, that's enough for me. My name is Desdemona. Welcome to the Railroad. Glory, at ease. Follow me, stranger."

The second woman lowered the minigun. It was surprising that she could heft the thing in the first place. I looked at Nick. He shrugged, and we followed the group into their lair. It was actually the crypt attached to the church above. Low ceilings and lots of support columns, but plenty of open space. Desdemona reached the center of the area, where a capped well served as their mission planning board.

She turned and addressed me. She asked why I was after the Courser, and I told her my story.

"Interesting," was all she said as she processed. Then she raised her voice. "Listen up everyone!" she called out, and several scruffy-looking people emerged from their nooks. There was even an Assaultron model robot, with the letters P.A.M. stenciled on its chest. Not exactly a synth, but these freedom fighters had apparently liberated it and integrated it into their group.

"We have guests. And they brought a Courser chip!"

The group of rag-tag Railroad agents let out incredulous gasps. One man in coveralls and wearing strange headgear was particularly excited.

"What? Oooh, gimme gimme! Let me have a crack at that baby!"

Desdemona introduced her colleague.

"That's Tinker Tom, our computer expert. He can crack any code," she said that like a proud mother. But then she turned serious. "But first, we need to come to an agreement. We'll help you get into the Institute, but you work for us, now. We need you to get in, gather as much intel as you can, then get out, and report back to us, and to no one else."

Again, I found that I really had no choice. This was the only way to get to my son. Whether or not I would actually return to these people, I wasn't sure, but honesty compelled me to make the promise.

"Deal," I said, and we shook hands.

"Great. And one other thing: we keep the Chip. We know the Institute uses teleportation. That chip is the key, and we need it. We'll give you a copy of the code, but the actual chip stays with us."

"Fine, whatever," I agreed. I pulled Virgil's blueprints out of my pack. "I also have some plans for building a teleporter."

"My, aren't you full of surprises! This is fantastic!"

I handed the Chip to Tinker Tom, and he bounced off to a bank of computers, happy as a kid with fresh candy. I wasn't sure what I'd do with a copy of the decoded information, let alone the physical chip. But it seemed important to them. And these folks seemed capable of building complex machinery, so rather than deal with the unknown Brotherhood of Steel, I handed over the plans to the teleporter.

"This may take a while," said Desdemona. "Make yourselves at home."

Nick and "PAM" exchanged some electronic clicking noises, and then Nick found an outlet to plug into for recharging. I found the pantry and made a meal, then took a nap.

A short time later, I awoke to someone's hand shaking my shoulder. It was Deacon.

"Hey, killer," he said as I sat up and stretched. "Tinker Tom finished decoding that Chip you brought us. Dez is talking with him now. She's asking for you. Come on."

I got up and followed him over to the bank of computers. Nick unplugged and joined us. Desdemona and Tom were deep in conversation, strategizing about their next step.

"Why are these blueprints written in crayon?" Tinker Tom was saying. "Never mind, I can read them. From the looks of it, this machine is going to be big. There isn't enough space in here."

"The Coastal Cottage safehouse has room," offered Desdemona.

"Yeah, yeah. There should be enough materials to build most of it, but we're still missing a couple of key components. Someone will have to go out and scavenge those."

"I've got nothing better to do," I volunteered. "What do you need?"

"You need to find a military-grade circuit board, and a biometric scanner. I have no idea where you'll find those."

"Fort Hagen and Medford Memorial Hospital, would be my guess," suggested Nick.

"Great." I turned to Desdemona. "Where's this safehouse of yours?"

"It's east of the old insane asylum, along the coast just north of Salem."

"Okay." I did some figuring on distance, and travelling on foot. "We should be able to meet you there in three or four days."

"We'll get the teleporter built and keep a watch out for you." Desdemona seemed to have another thought.

"Oh, and one last thing: you need a codename. We all use them. What would you like yours to be?"

"I really don't care." I really didn't. This spycraft stuff wasn't my thing.

"Fine. How about... 'Wanderer'?"

"Works for me. See you in a few days."

Fort Hagen was a day's walk, and it had been cleared of synth wreckage. The rest of Kellogg's body had been removed, too. The Institute had removed any evidence that they had ever been there, and thankfully, they hadn't touched any of the pre-war tech. Nick helped me test the equipment to find the circuit board that Tom wanted.

The hospital wasn't quite so easy. It was occupied by a gang of super mutants. Not the friendly kind like Virgil, but the mean kind like I had helped the Diamond City guards deal with. Nick and I used up all of our ammo dealing with them, and I had to consume two stimpaks to seal my wounds. But in the end, we were left with quiet and a powerful stench. The odor came from bags of meat that the super mutants had strung up all over the place. Nick explained that the muties were canibals, and I decided against examining their stashes any closer. We salvaged the scanner from a defunct MRI machine and got out as quickly as we could.

As beaten and bruised as I was, I moved slowly, and it took us two more days to get to the coast. Deacon had been on patrol and it was he who found us and escorted us to the safehouse site. The Coastal Cottage was indeed a cottage. But the teleporter machine was indeed a large contraption. The platform itself was just big enough for one person to stand on. It was surrounded by three large beams, and which joined together, centered about fifteen feet above the platform. Something like a cross between a disco-ball and a

pine cone was suspended below them. Attached via cables were a control console, a large generator, and a satellite dish.

"You just built all this out in the open?" I asked.

"We're not new at this," Deacon reassured me. "As you can see, we're down a ways between these hills, so no one can spy on us. And besides, there's no one around for miles. We'd see them coming, just like I saw you."

Tinker Tom emerged from the teleporter machinery.

"Hey, you're back! Did you get the components I asked for?"

I pulled the circuit board and the scanner from my pack and handed them over.

"Got 'em right here."

"Great, great. These look good. I'll just go get these installed. In the mean time, Desdemona wanted to speak with you. Something about a last-minute briefing. She should be over in the cottage."

The cottage was empty, and Deacon suggested Desdemona was probably out on patrol. Nick took an interest in the teleporter and stayed to assist Tom. I took a seat to try and mentally prepare myself for being teleported. It was the stuff of science fiction. Pure fantasy in my book. But it was real. I had seen it. Even so, I didn't relish the thought of being turned into energy and then beamed across the Commonwealth to be rematerialized underground.

"Wanderer, you made it." Desdemona seated herself in a chair opposite mine. "Good. It looks like Tinker Tom is just about ready to power up the teleporter. Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

"Glad to hear it. Take this." She handed me a holotape. "When you get the chance, plug this in to any networked computer in the Institute. On this tape is a program that will scan their network and copy as much data as it can find. We need that information to analyze and hopefully find a weakness in their defenses."

"Find a weakness? What exactly are you planning?"

"You don't need to know the details. But our goal is to get a team in to infiltrate the Institute, rescue as many synthns as we can, and then blow the place up."

The Railroad wanted to destroy the Institute? The source of the synthns? The beings that the Railroad was working so hard to rescue?

"Desdemona, that makes no - "

I was drowned out by the sound of the generator starting and the teleporter powering up. It was deafeningly loud. Tinker Tom's exultant hollering could barely be heard.

"Looks like it's ready!" Desdemona yelled in my ear. "Let's go!"

She grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the machine. Tom broke away from his console and gave me his version of a pep talk.

"Ok! It's working, and I've tapped into the Institute's signal! I don't know how long the generator will keep this thing powered, so you have to go now!"

I looked around at the expectant faces around me. Not for the first time, I was surprised that no one else had volunteered or insisted on going themselves. I stepped on to the platform, and Tom started flipping switches on the console. A hose broke loose from one of the support beams and started spewing steam.

"Don't worry about that!" Yelled Tom. "It's fine! Probably. Ok, here goes!"

The world disappeared in a bright flash.

Chapter 12 – Institutionalized

The light cleared, and I found myself in a small, round room. There were metal fins sticking out from the walls, bolts of blue electricity arcing between them. A door opened, revealing a bank of control consoles, and a hallway beyond. I stepped out of the teleportation room and approached the consoles. No one was around. I took the opportunity to insert Desdemona's holotape while I remembered it, and it began to click and whirl. I looked around the room and was struck by how clean everything was. The lack of a welcoming committee was worrisome. This felt like a trap, but I doubted I could operate the teleporter myself. A speaker in the ceiling crackled to life and a male voice spoke.

"Hello. Welcome to the Institute. I...am Father."

Were there hidden cameras around? The holotape finished its task and ejected itself. I grabbed it quickly and stuck it in a pocket.

"Please, enter the elevator at the end of the hall." The voice continued. "I have been awaiting your arrival. A path has been laid out to bring you to me."

A chill ran down my spine, but I had nowhere else to go. I walked down the hallway to find a large glass cylinder. It was strange-looking, but it was clearly an elevator. The voice provided no other instructions, so I entered and pressed the only button. A glass door slid closed, and the elevator descended into the floor. In a moment, I passed into an open atrium, a hundred feet tall and three hundred wide. The elevator descended in a glass tube in the center of the cavernous room. There were trees and shrubs around a central walkway. Glass sidewalks were suspended over open water. The pathways led to doorways with signs above them, indicating different departments. People in color-coded lab coats went about their business. The elevator descended below the atrium and stopped in a dimly-lit hallway.

"Please, exit the elevator and follow the lights," said the voice on the speaker. "Wait for me in the room at the end, and I will meet you there shortly."

Having nowhere else to go, I did as instructed. At the end of the hall was a large room with a glass enclosure at the far end. Inside was a boy playing with some toys, his back to me.

"Shaun? Is that you?"

I rushed up to the glass and the boy turned to look at me. He seemed confused.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Son, is that you? Are you Shaun?" I felt tears on my cheek. I choked a bit. "I'm...I'm your father."

"I don't know you!" The boy shouted. "Father! There's a strange man here!"

"No, Shaun, listen." I slapped my hand on the glass, looked for a way in. "I'm your father. They took you from me when you were still a baby, but I'm here, now."

"Father, I'm scared. Where are you?" The boy was becoming frantic. He looked to a door next to the enclosure, as if searching for help.

"Shhh, shh. I'm here now. Everything's going to be ok. Shaun? Look at me, son."

The door opened up and out stepped a grey-haired man with a beard. He was wearing a white lab coat over some pale green clothing, and had an authoritative air about him.

"Shaun, shutdown. Code alpha omega three," the man said.

The boy dropped like a rag doll. I was at a loss as to what just happened.

"What did you do?!" I leaped toward the strange man. "Give me Shaun! Give me my son!" I screamed in his face.

"Please, remain calm," he raised his hands in a placating gesture. "If you let me, I will explain. But I urge you to calm down."

"You better have answers, you bastard." I balled my fists at my side.

"Of course. The boy here is the culmination of decades of research. He is a synth, and he is... perfect. Your son was instrumental in his creation."

"Where is my son?"

"Until recently, you were frozen in cryogenic suspension. You woke up once, and you witnessed a tragedy. A regrettable occurrence, but necessary, I'm afraid."

"A 'regrettable occurrence?' I'll show you a 'regrettable occurrence' unless you give me my son."

"Please, let me finish. You were frozen again, and when you finally escaped the Vault, you learned that two hundred years had passed. In pursuit of your son, you learned about a boy approximately ten years of age. You had no real knowledge of how much time had passed while you were frozen. Is it conceivable to you, then, that the time between the kidnapping of your son, and the time you were finally released, that not ten years had passed, but sixty?"

The old man paused for a moment while I processed. What he said made sense. I didn't know how much time had passed.

"Yes, I can see you understand. That's right, father. I...am your son. I...am Shaun."

"Shaun, is it really you?" I looked the man in the eyes, and they looked familiar. "It is, isn't it. You have your mother's eyes. I've missed so much. I wanted to teach you to ride a bike, how to play baseball. I've missed your whole life."

I staggered and leaned against the glass. The child synth within appeared to be sleeping.

"This child is indeed the boy you saw in Kellog's memories," the man continued. "In a way, he is my son. My genetic material was used in his creation. In fact, all synths are, in a way, my children. It is why they call me Father. You see, to create the synths, the Institute needed human DNA, untainted by the radiation from the bombs. Their own was too degraded, too mutated to be of much use. And then one of their agents stumbled across records of the Vaults, in which was an item about a cryogenically frozen infant from before the war: me. So they took me and raised me here. Underground in the Institute, safe from the wasteland,

from what the Commonwealth had become. As I grew up, I became convinced that their way would be the salvation of humanity, and eventually they made me their leader."

"You're in charge of the Institute? Of all this? What about Kellog? He worked for you."

"Yes. I am. And when I became Director, I learned what had happened to my parents. How Kellog had murdered my mother. I let him go, and I ordered that you be released."

"Why release me at all? You could have left me in there. Kellog referred to me as 'the backup.' I'm guessing you needed my DNA."

"Once our Gen-III synth program proved a success, we didn't need you any more. My genetic material proved sufficient, and I felt some responsibility for you."

"So, what. I'm just another one of your experiments?"

"Not at all. Honestly, I didn't know what you would do, but I can't say that I'm not pleased with the results."

"So what now? Where does that leave us?"

"I'd like you to join us, father. To that end, I've given you free access to the entire facility. I've arranged for you to meet with the department heads, to learn about what it is we do here. About our plans for the Commonwealth."

"Join you? I don't know. Your Institute has done some pretty horrible things up there."

"We've also done some pretty amazing things. All in the name of saving humanity. Won't you give us a chance?"

"I don't know. Maybe. This is all so much to take in."

"Of course. Thank you. There's a room here where you can freshen up. When you're ready, give yourself a tour. I'll upload the locations of the department heads to your PipBoy. Please meet with them. I think you'll like what you learn."

My head was spinning, but I did as he suggested, if only because I was at a loss for anything else to do. I found a fresh set of clothes, but put my armor back on after changing. I also noticed that no one had taken my weapons or other gear from me. It was either an incredible amount of trust, or the place had defenses the nature of which I couldn't guess at.

I left the room the way my son, or "Father" had, and began my explorations. The Institute was as clean as one would expect a high-tech science lab would be. The entire facility was arranged in a circle, with the large atrium area in the middle, and the various departments lining the outer edges. As I marveled at the construction, I noticed that the shape of the place resembled a chemistry beaker: wide at the bottom, tapering at the top.

I passed a cafeteria at one of the spokes, where a man was complaining to the Gen-II synth server about some food formula that had been discontinued. He liked it a lot and wanted it. I hoped that the rest of the scientists weren't going to be so whiny.

The map on my PipBoy indicated that one of the department heads was at the next spoke. A woman in a yellow-striped lab coat was giving instructions to a subordinate. The conversation finished as I approached.

"Oh, you must be him," she greeted me. "Father's....um, father. I'm Allie Filmore, head of Facilities."

She extended a hand, which I shook.

"It's nice to meet you. So, I'm supposed to learn what it is you all do around here."

"Yes, of course, I was told you might be joining us. Well, as you might have guessed from my title, I keep the lights on and the water flowing. I'm also working on a special project that involves expanding the facility – Oh! But I'm not supposed to talk about that."

"It's ok, I'm sure you can tell me. Father is my son, after all."

"Ah, you're right of course." Allie leaned in conspiratorally. "Ok, the thing is, we're always running short on power, what with all the experiments going on here all the time. So we've tunneled out a new section where we're building a new uranium reactor. I'm so excited! No more scientists constantly begging me for power for their silly experiments, all of them insisting that theirs is the most important."

"Nuclear power?" I scoffed. "What could possibly go wrong?"

She didn't take my meaning, or she ignored it.

"Well, I've got some toilets to unclog, and I'm sure you've got plenty more to see. See you around!"

I continued my tour around the outer ring. Next stop was Synth Retention. I waltzed through the door to find angry bald man in a black-striped lab coat berating a Gen-II synth.

"You stupid machine, I told you to clean up this mess hours ago! Now go and grab a broom. Now!"

This was quite the contrast in attitude compared to the folks I'd met at the Railroad. No wonder they

wanted to free the synths. The man shoed his mechanical servant away before he noticed my approach. "Ah, hello there. You must be Nathan. Father told me to expect your visit. I'm Justin Ayo, acting director of the Synth Retention Beaureau. I'm a very busy man, so let's make this quick. What do you want to know?" "Acting director? What happened to the director?"

"He's gone missing. Went out to retrieve a particularly stubborn synth and hasn't been heard from since. Now I'm stuck doing his job."

"How do synths go missing? I thought the only way in here was the teleporter."

"You are correct about that. We sometimes send out our synths on missions – reconnosance or to retrieve samples or some such. Some of the Gen-III's seem to like it up there for some reason, and they decide they don't want to come back. I can't imagine why; conditions in the wasteland are deplorable. You've been out there, you know what it's like. Anyway, so we send a Courser out to retrieve them. By the way, I heard you killed a Courser. I'd love to know how you did that."

"I was in the military. It really wasn't that tough." I lied. If it hadn't been softened up by the dozen or so Gunners it had killed before I got to it, I don't know that I would have stood a chance. But this Ayo guy was a bit of a prick, so I let him worry.

"Really? Hm, maybe there's a glitch in the programming. I'll have to look into it. Now, was there anything else, or can I get back to work now?"

"No, that was it. Thanks for your time."

Next stop, BioScience. This was where Virgil said he'd left the FEV cure. But before I could search around, a young man in a green-striped lab coat caught my eye. He was patiently listening to one of his colleagues griping, but motioned me over anyway. This was a large, open, circular room. Walls of plants decorated the center areas, and the outer walls had glass enclosures. In one of the enclosures were several gorillas. The conversation ended as I reached the department head.

"Hello, you must be Nathaniel, the Director's special guest. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm doctor Clayton Holdren, head of the BioScience department." This guy was friendly, so I decided to be polite.

"Call me Nate. It's nice to meet you, doctor."

"I saw you checking out my gorillas on your way in. What do you think? They're synths, you know."

"They're...very realistic." I had a sudden memory of visiting the Boston Zoo with Nora and Shaun. God, I missed my wife. I shoved aside the memory, promising to mourn properly, later.

"Thanks! I've never seen a real one, of course. We harvested some DNA from a zoo on the surface. My colleague here was just sharing his disapproval at what he thinks was a waste of resourses, but I think they show great promise. Anyway, do you have any questions?"

"Well, why don't you tell me what you're working on, here. I mean, asside from the gorillas." I honestly couldn't think of a good use for the great apes myself, but I kept that to myself.

"Ah, yes. See these plants here?" He made a sweeping gesture towards the middle of the room, indicating the walls and walls of plants. "Those are genetically engineered crop strains. We've been trying to grow food on the surface. The latest batch shows great promise. We're secretly working with the Warwick Homestead out there – we replaced one of the farmers with a synth, and we've been supplying them with seeds. In fact, this latest strain is due to be shipped out soon. You should accompany the mission to see how things are going."

"Sounds interesting, I might take you up on that."

Doctor Holdren was unapologetic about replacing a real human with a synth. These people seriously lacked a moral compass. Just then, there was a commotion at the gorilla pen. One of the apes was ponding on the glass, causing it to crack.

"Uh, oh," said the doctor. "That's not supposed to be possible. I'd better go deal with this. If you'll excuse me."

I excused him, and used the distraction to go snooping around. I found a side door, and slipped through without being noticed. Through the door was a hallway leading to several storage closets. One room was larger than the others, and the boxes piled up were in a surprising disarray. There was also another door leading out of this room, which was locked. During our time together, Nick had taught me how to bypass an electronically locked door. So I decided to test my new ability by opening a panel and crossing some wires.

The door slid open, revealing a dark passegeway. I went in. The corridors and rooms in this wing were dirty and musty. There was a cart full off rotting corpses of cats. Come to think of it, I didn't remember seeing any cats on the surface. I assumed they'd all been eaten by starving survivors of the war. What were they doing down here? I tried not to think about what kind of depraved experiments the Institute might have

been performing.

There were holding cells off the hallway, all of them empty. I came around the corner, and two autoturrets in the ceiling came alive and opened fire on me. I dove into one of the holding cells and came face to face with the body of a super mutant. I was startled, and only barely managed not to jump backwards into the line of fire of the turrets. I gathered myself, then drew my pistol. Leaning around the corner, I took careful aim and blasted both turrets into shrapnel.

Someone didn't want this place's secrets exposed. Continuing on, I kept my gun out and cautiously continued my exploration. I came across an office with an active terminal. Someone had left it logged in, and I found the command to shut down the turrets. I hadn't seen any beyond the two I had destroyed, but I preferred not to run in to any more.

In a couple more minutes, I came to a large storage room. Shelf after shelf of miscellaneous equipment, tools, and buckets of paint. As I was pondering the paint, I heard the unmistakable feminine voice of an assaultron robot.

"Intruder detected. Initiating combat maneuvers."

Red lasers shot from the door at the far end of the room. Splinters flew from the shelves and paint buckets exploded. I retreated before any of the paint could get on me, and fired wildly as I ran. I knocked over a cart full of junk to slow the attacking robot, and made it all the way back to the security terminal in time to turn the turrets back on. I heard them open fire on the assaultron, but I knew they would prove no more than a distraction for the death machine. Using that distraction, I added my own bullets to the firestorm from the turrets, and took it down.

From my experience in the military, I knew that war bots tended to explode when defeated, to ensure that the enemy doesn't get their hand on the technology. So when this assaultron began to spark and flail, I took cover in a holding cell against the blast. When the smoke cleared, I saw that the turrets had been destroyed as well, so there was no need to deactivate them again.

Past the large storage room, I finally came to a lab. There were several large tanks in the center of the room, all full of green fluid. There was even a dead super mutant in one of them. At least I hoped it was dead. On the outer walls were chemistry stations and computers. On one of the terminals was a list of log entries. All of them were by one Doctor Brian Virgil, detailing his frustrations with being assigned to the project.

After I searched the rest of the lab, I finally found a chemical synthesizer. And sitting in the output slot was a vial of white serum. This was the only vial of anything in tact that I had seen, so I assumed it was the cure that Virgil was looking for. I found a protective metal sleeve for the vial on a shelf nearby, and pocketed the serum. I felt like I had been gone long enough to be missed, so I hurried back to the Bioscience department. Doctor Holdren and his staff had gotten things under control, but rather than try to explain my absence, I snuck back out to the atrium to finish my tour.

The last stop on my list was Research and Development. Inside to the left was a firing range. A woman was firing a laser pistol at some targets. Safely outside were two scientists.

"I thought that weapon was finished. Why is she still in there shooting it?" asked one.

"I think she just needs to blow off some steam," answered the other.

They noticed me approaching them, and I asked where I might find their boss. They told me to check the room to the right from where I entered. The room I found myself in made me feel like I was inside a giant computer. The walls and ceiling were covered in dials, screens, flashing lights, and circuit boards. A woman in a blue-stiped lab coat looked up from the test bench where she had been soldering.

"Ah, there you are, finally. I'm Doctor Madison Li, head of R&D." She noticed the bewildered look on my face. "I really don't have time to explain what all this is, but the Director ordered me to install an upgrade to your PipBoy. Hand it over."

I switched off my wrist computer and undid the straps, passing it off to her.

"What's the upgrade? I asked.

"I'm installing a Courser Chip, so you can freely teleport yourself to the surface and back, whenever you like. Personally, I'm against this, but orders are orders. Just so you know, you'll be the only one here with that ability." She opened up a small panel in the PipBoy, casually snapped in a shiny Courser Chip, and shoved the device back at me. "There. Take it. It's done. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm in the middle of something here, and I don't want to lose my train of thought."

Just like that, I was dismissed. My tour complete, I found a bench in the atrium to sit and think. I was supposed to check back in with Shaun, but I wasn't sure I could face him. After all I had gone through to find

him, it was strange to not want to see him. There was too much to sort through. The recycled underground air was stifling. The trees in the atrium didn't seem to help. Probably engineered to not smell like trees, to not give off allergens to the people who had lived under ground for generations.

I needed time to think, and I couldn't do that here. It was all just so overwhelming. I needed space, and fresh air. I turned on my PipBoy and pulled up the map. I tapped a location, and a new menu popped up. The prompt read "Teleport to selected location?" I tapped yes.

Zap!

I found myself at the entrance to Virgil's cave.

"Doctor Virgil? Are you here?" I called out.

"What?" came the booming voice. "Who's there? Oh, it's you. You're back so soon? I expected you to be gone at least a month. What are you doing here?"

"I've been to the Institute. I.. found my son."

"That's good news! And what about my cure? Do you have it?"

I pulled the vial out of my pocket and handed it over.

"Yep, here you go."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! I really expected you to forget about our deal. A million times, thank you!"

The big man turned around into his cave. I followed to find him loading the serum into an injector. Without hesitating, he plunged the needle into this arm.

"Woah, you're not even going to test it first?" I was incredulous.

"No need. I recognize my own work, and I trust you. But I can't live like this any more. Either this works, or it kills me. I don't care which at this point. The serum will take time to do anything. If you want to see the results come back in a few days. Maybe a week."

"Wow, ok. Good luck."

Scratching my head and chukcling, I left the cave. There was only one place I wanted to go. Where I *had* to go. I tapped the map on the PipBoy.

Zap!

Vault 111. I was outside, standing on the elevator platform. I looked for a way to activate it, but there was nothing attached to the elevator itself. A nearby guard shack showed promise. Inside were some levers and buttons. I tested them at random until I heard a loud creak outside, and the platform began to descend. I rushed over and hopped on just as the silo doors were closing over the hole.

Inside, I made my way to the room where my cryo pod was. Where my family's pods were. I opened the pod that held my wife. As she thawed, I confirmed that she was indeed dead. I had hoped that the freezing process might have preserved some spark of life; that she could be revived somehow. But no: she was gone. I spoke to her.

"Well, my love," I began. "I found our son. He's all grown up. Our boy is older than we are now." I let out a long sigh. "He's alive, but he might as well still be lost to us. I'm so sorry! I wanted to protect you, and I couldn't! I couldn't save you! I couldn't save our son!"

I fell to my knees, sobbing.

"I love you so much!"

And I cried. For a long time, I cried. I continued to sob after I had no more tears to shed.

After a while, I stood up, and gathered my wife's body in my arms. I carried her out to our house in Sanctuary Hills, and buried her in our back yard. I was dimly aware of Preston Garvey and his company. Codsworth was hovering around, too. But they all maintained a respectful distance and left me to my grief. In time, I might join them. The Commonwealth was going to change, and I would need their help. Because I knew.

I knew that war...War never changes.

THE END

probably