

Build:

Wild Card (Free)

NCR (Free)

Hardcore Mode (+300, 1300)

Ranger (100, 1200)

Stealth Suit MK II (200, 1000)

Vault 13 Canteen (50, 950)

Big Iron (Free) [5.56mm pistol (basically a high powered and more high tech revolver, but still a revolver)]

Heavyweight Ordinance (150, 800) [Gobi Campaign Sniper Rifle with a replenishing ammo can filled with specialist ammo (hollow point, explosive, & armor piercing)]

Pip Boy (Free)

Death from Afar (200, 600)

Silent Running (300, 300)

Companion (50, 250): Alexandra, The Cursed Immortal

Vault 13 Canteen (50, 200): A second one for Alexandra

Doc Sawbones (200, 0)

For a few heartbeats I was disoriented. The world kept shifting around me in minute ways that my brain refused to comprehend. Like someone was rapidly shifting the colors of the rainbow around and trying to make me memorize the new order while they were still changing it. Which, honestly, doesn't make much sense. But you try putting the sensation of slipping across the omniverse and landing in a new body into words. There are no words for it.

Then I existed again as if I had always been in this new world. Memories flooded my mind in the space of two heartbeats. A youth spent in Novac being taken care of by an uncle. Spent most of my teen years taking pot shots at any ghouls wandering out of the space center or raiders thinking to get lucky by raiding a trader. I became good enough that an NCR recruiter doing a tour past offered me a sharpshooting enlistment. It seemed like better pay than working for bullets and meals in Novac. My signing bonus went to purchase a Pip-Boy I'd had my eye on at the trading post for most of a year.

On my way to Camp McCarran for basic training, the Pip-Boy picked up a strange signal. It overrode everything else and played an insistent beeping noise that refused to let me ignore it. Annoyed and curious, I followed the sound as it led me into a cave tucked out of sight at the bottom of a gully. There was a dead body inside that was wearing the strangest bodysuit I'd ever seen. Turns out, it was a high tech prototype designed before the war for stealth operatives. How did I know that? Because the suit told me. It has some kind of mind built into it that scared the shit out of me the first time it had spoken. But it was friendly and soon enough I was convinced it wasn't going to hurt me. So I took it. Why not? First rule of the wasteland: The dead don't need anything.

Basic training was hell but it whipped me into shape. Between my stealth suit and my sharpshooting talent I got earmarked for scouting duty. Which was a fancy way of saying I got to sit in the middle of nowhere with no support nearby and hope someone didn't start firing at me. I didn't like it, but there wasn't much I could do. So I packed off with a canister of ammo, a backpack full of supplies, a radio, a revolver, two canteens, and a map with a spot marked on it. My job was supposed to be simple. Sit up there and radio in troop movements coming in and out of Cottonwood Grove. I wasn't supposed to be seen and only in extreme events would I be given orders to fire.

My sniper rifle had been turned into a fancy monocular. Still, I'd done what they asked. For two months I'd been sitting up there, radioing in daily reports and seeing nobody besides Legionnaires and Bobby. That was the kid they tasked with bringing me supplies once a week. Supplies was a really loose term too. Most of it was prewar foodstuffs so well preserved I was using a rad-away pack every week just to keep my hair in. They kept promising to rotate me out, yet every week it was the same old story. "Your exceptional qualities require us to keep you in the position where you'll help out the war effort the most." Which I knew meant that until I was willing to share my stealth suit, they were going to keep sticking me with awful assignments. Almost every officer I'd met had been pissed that I refused to relinquish the thing. They'd learned the hard way not to try to force it off of me. Med-X overdoses are a hell of a thing.

I was myself. I was Jonas, the sharpshooter from Novac. The two struggled for space inside my soul like two men in a crowded subway car. Then, as the third heartbeat began, we settled down together and everything slipped into place. I was myself and Jonas sat in the background. A source of information about the world and quiet suggestions when I needed them. But he had no hands on the steering wheel of my autonomy. It was a strange sensation to have a second voice in my head, quiet and easy to ignore as it was. Almost like what people had described phantom limb sensations to be like.

I would have liked a few days to sort out everything that had just happened to me. Some quiet time in this sniper's nest above Cottonwood Grove would have been everything I needed to settle in. Especially given the fact that this world wasn't one that I would have chosen for my first visit. It was a harsh, brutal place filled with secrets and horrors of an age long past. Still, there were good parts to it too. Kind people, unusual places, and treasures left undisturbed by the passage of years. I could accept all that. Given a little time.

What I got was five minutes before a glint of bronze caught my eye. I carefully eased my rifle around for a better look. My first impression was that of a lioness in bronze armor striding down the road towards the encampment. I blinked and looked again. She was a powerful woman, clad like a Legionnaire from the crest of red fur atop her helmet to the leather sandals laced almost up to her knees. Her breastplate and helmet both gleamed as if they had just been cast. Yet I could see a tracery of scratches and dents in it. Well used but equally well taken care of. A short spear dangled almost negligently from one hand. I wondered how long one had to use a weapon before they could totally ignore it while still maintaining complete control as she was.

Her scars caught my attention next. I'd read stories of people being covered in them. Those who had a history of violence written upon their skin. She could have been the equal for any five of them. Her arms and legs had dozens of scars, some of them so wide and severe that it looked as if the limb had been completely removed and somehow reattached. Her face bore a few thin lines alongside one large burn scar that covered most of the upper right side. I wondered if she even had an eye in that socket anymore. As I watched, she raised her left arm to hail the picket guards of Caesar's forces. Tucked into her armpit was the scar of a stab wound so wide I could not see how it hadn't pierced her ribs and heart.

I watched her for another dozen or so paces, partly because I was entranced by the sheer power she represented, and partly because it had been a long time since either of us had seen a woman looking that good. Scars aside, she was handsome, striking, and confidence was always attractive. It was just too bad she was a commander of some sort for the enemy. Which struck me as odd. I hadn't thought Caesar was a big fan of women in his military. Still, I reached for my radio and began punching in the frequency code I had been given. The back of my mind wondered if Bobby would have a new one for me on his next trip. The NCR liked to switch them out frequently, despite the Legionnaires being about as technologically backward as it was possible to be.

I had just input the last digit when the woman slit the throat of the guard in a casual motion of her arm. A splatter of crimson spread across brown and baked ground. My mind froze as it tried to comprehend the sudden murder I had just seen. Jonas whispered that it was hardly the first. He was in the midst of telling me that it wasn't even the first time he'd seen one of the Legionnaire commanders kill one of their own troops when she struck out again. A second guard, just as stunned as I was, didn't even have time to scream as he lost an arm, then his head. The third shouted a warning that even I could hear clearly before she rammed her spear into his belly.

This wasn't discipline. I didn't know what this was, but nothing about this was normal for Caesar's troops. That's when she turned and I caught sight of the emblem on the back of her breastplate. The oxen that was the symbol of the Legion has been carefully engraved on it in excellent detail. It now stood defaced with a pair of long, jagged lines across it. She was no commander. She was here to wreak some kind of terrifying revenge. And likely die in the process. One woman, no matter how skilled, wasn't going to be able to take down nearly a hundred troops.

Five were down now. The latest two had made the mistake of rushing her with short machete-like swords. Against a spear they were worse than useless. By now the whole encampment was starting to stir. I finally, finally pulled my eye away from the scope of my rifle and realized that my radio had been screaming at me for a few moments now.

“Who the everloving cuss is tying up this line?!”, shouted one of the radio operators. Gus was a short tempered man who, strangely, refused to curse like a real person. I jammed my finger down on the send button.

“Gus? Gus. It’s Aa- I mean, it’s Jonas. Look, you gotta put me through to someone in charge. Something big is going on down here. I’m going to need orders.”

“That’s not how things are done Jonas! You can’t just-”

I cut him off with a sharp whisper that was likely more effective than any shouting would be. “Gus, put me through to someone in command right the fuck now.” Her total was up to six now. I didn’t need my scope to see that she had just about bisected a soldier while gutting him.

To his credit, Gus did have enough common sense to know when someone was being stubborn and when someone was actually in trouble. So after a short fuzz of static a more calm and commanding voice came out from my radio. “Captain Daniels here. What’s going on out there soldier?”

“Recruit Jonas, sir. Stationed out at Cottonwood Grove.” Jonas whispered that I was violating about five dozen regulations about field operatives and radio protocols, but at this point he was lucky that I had even called the man ‘sir’. “I’ve got an unknown individual dressed up in what appears to be Legionnaire commander armor who just strode up to camp and started murdering soldiers.”

That statement earned me a moment of surprised silence. “Are you... Are you sure it’s not some kind of punishment? They’re pretty brutal about even minor lawbreakers.”

“Sir, it’s a woman.” That alone should have been enough. “She strode up to the place like she owned it and just started killing everyone within reach. She’s up to nine now. They haven’t even scratched her yet.” The retort of a hunting rifle rang out in the otherwise still air. “Make that ten.” The gunman fell with a javelin sticking out of his chest. One that had punched clean through the front and back of his hardened leather armor.

“That’s... impossible. She can’t possibly think she can kill them all.” Captain Daniels was all but muttering into the radio. At least I wasn’t the only one who didn’t really know what to do.

“Requesting permission to provide fire support.” Jonas was hissing at me that they would never allow it even as he encouraged me to ask. The NCR didn’t have the manpower to push the Legion out of the area. They’d never condone any kind of escalation. The answer I received was the one I expected so I cut the Captain off. “Sir, respectfully, if you get Ranger Station Echo moving quickly, we can take the camp.”

“But there’s no way we could hold it!” He all but shouted back at me. “No, you’re not to open fire and you’re not to call Ranger Station Echo for aid. Let the idiot die taking out a dozen soldiers if she wants. But we cannot afford to lose the intelligence of your position.”

“She’s pinned down!” I hissed back. It was taking all my willpower not to shout into the radio. “I can help her and you can look like a damned hero if you act.”

“That’s insubordination!” Captain Daniel’s voice had gone cold and steely. “No. Your orders are for observation only. Stand down soldier.”

“Respectfully, sir... Fuck your orders.” I didn’t even bother turning the radio off before I tossed it over the cliff’s edge. The first few shots of my sniper rifle drowned out the shattering of the device against the rocks below. Normally I would have bemoaned the lack of a silencer on the gun, but in this case it was a blessing. The noise confused the Legionnaires as they tried to see where the shots were coming from. It was just the kind of distraction the woman needed to spring out from cover and begin striking down more soldiers.

I emptied my first clip into the first half dozen soldiers I could see. While I reloaded, I scanned for more high priority targets. They made it all too easy by giving their squad leaders gruesome helmets. One after the other I struck them down with rounds that exploded on impact. Flying blood blinded and chunks of bone sliced or stabbed soldiers nearby with every shot. A few down below spotted the muzzle flashes and started firing back at me. But at this range and laying down as I was, they hadn’t a snowball’s chance in Nevada of hitting me. The closest they got was a few nearly spent rounds clattering off the stone lip below me.

The woman and I weren’t getting it entirely our own way though. Soldiers were starting to figure out where they could hide from my lines of fire. They used buildings of their camp, their own dead, and a few natural rock formations as cover. The woman, when I spared a moment to find her in my scope, had blood dripping off of her in at least three places. Whether it was hers or that of her victims I couldn’t tell from my position. Still, she was chewing through soldiers as fast as she could find them.

After those first moments of sudden action, everything died down to long stretches of silence punctuated by seconds of dramatic fighting. I took out soldiers when they tried to dash between pieces of cover or when they poked a head out to try and spot me. One clever man made me miss four times before I finally clipped his leg. Between my gunshots I could hear the occasional scream drift up. Always cut short as her spear ended a life. She was still fighting, even if I couldn’t see her anymore.

When my half dozen clips were empty I was forced to stop participating while I refilled them. My fingers were shaking as I tried to pick up the thick .308 bullets. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about how many men I’d just killed. People. Even if I’d only hit someone half the time I’d fired, that was still eighteen men. And I knew my accuracy was better than that. I fumbled a bullet, clenched my fingers into a fist for a moment, and then tried again. Everyone down there was a horrible person. Anyone who could watch a person be enslaved, tortured, and crucified without taking a stand was not the kind of person I should feel bad about killing. Except... How many of them had any choice in the matter? Surrounded by the society that Caesar had cultivated, what choice did they have besides acting the way that they had or be killed? That was what truly disturbed me. How many people had I killed were those who hated what they were forced to do just to survive?

A smattering of bullets pinging off the cliff face below me kicked the moral questions off to the side. Letting myself get killed wouldn’t solve anything. It would just leave one more corpse lying around for whatever the Fallout equivalent of buzzards was. So I threw up into an empty bucket, washed my mouth out with a swig of water from my canteen, and loaded the clips with fingers that no longer shook.

When I peeked over the side again, the scene had changed dramatically. Several of the buildings were on fire. Or, at least, black smoke was pouring out of them. Twenty or so soldiers had regrouped near the pier and seemed to be trying to launch a boat. Or had just landed from one coming downstream. A flash of bronze showed me the woman was still up and moving in the direction of the pier. I had to thin out that crowd before she got there. Superwoman she might be, but even she would fall under twenty to one odds.

My first shot exploded a hole near the water line of the crude boat. My next five wounded or killed six men as they started running for cover. Piers were great for forming up but even the messiest had shit all to hide behind. Most of them ducked inside a smallish building one dock over. A few leapt into the water rather than risk a run. I let them swim. The rivers of this world would kill them nearly as fast as my bullets would. If the mirelurks didn't, then the radiation would.

The woman skidded to a halt near the end of the dock, gutted the few who were too slow or indecisive to make it to the boathouse, then paused for a moment to look up in my direction. The way she stared I could have sworn she could actually see through the end of my scope and into my soul. She had very tired eyes. Yet they were no less determined for that weariness.

Then someone shot her in the shoulder. She spun around and hit the ground hard, awkwardly, in a heap. Her spear skittered away across the rocky soil. I felt my heart wrench hard at the sight. I wanted to run down there and help her up. Which was silly. It would take me a half hour even at a full run to work my way around and down from this nest. All I could do was take aim at the boathouse and start popping heads and hands that poked out from windows or around doorways.

I was through two more clips before she had risen and dove through a window. She left streaks of red on the glass but looked all the more pissed off for the latest injuries from the glances I caught of her face. There were more shots fired in that building. Screams of rage and pain and despair. Then nothing moved. I pulled my eye away from the scope and swept my gaze across the whole encampment. Slowly, deliberately, checking for even the hint of movement. Yet there was nothing. Not even a flicker of bronze.

I kept watching for five minutes. Then ten. Eventually, I decided that either the soldiers that were left were laying low and just hoping to survive or there really were none left. Jonas agreed even as he complained that a spotter would have been nice to be certain. I hushed him. Then I started packing up what I could easily carry from my little encampment. Which was most of it. A few days worth of food, a thin roll of foam that served as bedding, and everything else I had brought. All together it was hardly lightly, especially with my rifle slung over my shoulder, but basic NCR training had given me muscles I had never had in my home world.

Picking my way down from the cliff wasn't difficult. Just time consuming. Especially with my heavy revolver occupying one hand. I could have stowed it, but I never knew when I would round a corner to find a Legionnaire survivor waiting for me. So I kept it ready as I climbed. I'd made it halfway down before I heard a voice.

"Can I talk now?" An electronic, but distinctly feminine, voice whispered from somewhere in the vicinity of my collarbone. I would have leapt in surprise without Jonas there in the background. It was the stealth suit, of course. The AI built into it wasn't just there to silently run the camouflage systems and know when to inject me with a stimpack. Whoever had made it had given it a personality too. There was probably some sound psychological reasoning behind that. Isolation did make people go a little nutty and any stealth operative would by necessity have to spend long stretches of time alone. I couldn't help but think it was a little weird to know I was wearing something with intelligence, but I did my best to push that aside.

"Yeah, okay. If you keep it down. I'm not sure if there's any of them left." I continued onwards, picking my way around rocks and down the steep incline into the basin where Cottonwood now smoldered.

"Who are you?" The suit asked. There was only innocent curiosity in its tone, despite the cunning perception that question revealed. "You do not move like Jonas. Your vital signs are the same as his. And I do not remember being taken off or my systems going offline. You are not him."

“You don’t miss much.” I muttered, marveling at how instantly she had picked up that something had changed. I realized that I wouldn’t be able to lie to her either. With systems that accurate she would be able to detect any of a dozen subtle tells that a human had when they were lying. So I decided on the bold-faced truth and hoped it wouldn’t result in me getting ten doses of Med-X jabbed into my spine. “I’m still Jonas, but I’m also a dimensional traveler. Jonas is who I would have been in this universe so he was the easiest one for me to slip into when I entered this world. He’s not dead or anything. He... well... I guess you could say he became we.”

“Much of your explanation sounds like a falsehood. Yet your body chemistry shows no elevated heartbeat and you do not appear to be perspiring anymore than would be expected for the ambient heat and humidity. There has been no spike in your adrenaline levels.” The suit voiced its line of reasoning as if it were talking to itself. “I can only conclude that you are not lying despite the impossibility of the statement.”

“Something is impossible only until it has been done for the first time.” I retorted.

“The correct quote from Nelson Mandella is, ‘It always seems impossible until it is done.’” The suit corrected me. There was just a touch of smugness in its tone. Then it turned thoughtful again. “Your meaning is essentially correct.” It paused for a moment, though it made a faint humming noise like the fan of a computer running on low. Then, it continued in an even softer voice. “Do you still like me?” It asked the question earnestly, yet fearfully in a way I would never have expected from an AI.

I couldn’t help it. I smiled. The stealth suit’s AI was adorable. “Of course I still like you. Don’t doubt it for a nanosecond.” I didn’t need Jonas’ influence to say that with complete honesty. The suit cared for me in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time. It might just be the way it was programmed, but it felt good anyways. The suit surprised me again by constricting around my chest. Just for a moment. Then it settled back into that effortlessly comfortable fit it always maintained. The suit had hugged me. “Thanks suit. Now let’s go see if that lady in bronze is still alive.”

“Sneaking mode engaged.”

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She was a long way past dead by the time I discovered her. Her body was slumped against the wall of the boathouse. The picture of a warrior finally finished with their own personal war. Her left hand lay in the dirt nearly a dozen paces away, still clutching a fistful of someone else’s hair. And a bit of scalp. She was splattered with blood, her armor was a mess of holes, fresh scratches, and she had lost one sandal entirely. The cut along her leg that had removed it had sliced up her leg to expose bone. The only part of her still dripping blood was her mouth. She had to have been biting chunks out of people.

I sighed, a sound of regret and sadness, but not surprise. It was honestly a miracle that she had managed to get as far as she had, even with my fire support. Two people against a hundred or so was the stuff legends were written about. I wondered idly about who had killed how many. I counted my bullets and realized she had done much more than half the work herself. I had been a distraction by comparison. I squatted down and gazed at what I could see of her downturned face. It was as ruined and scarred up close as it had appeared through my scope. Yet it was hard to deny a rugged handsomeness to her features. She was striking. She was also older than I had expected, if the lines around her eyes were any indication.

“I wish I knew your name.” The words whispered from my lips before I had done more than think them. It was silly, talking to a dead woman, and thankfully Suit didn’t chime in to point that out.

That's when her left eye opened and swiveled to stare at me. I watched her pupil rapidly contract in the way of hunting cats. On a human, it was terrifying.

I swore, simply and loudly and monosyllabically, as I fell back onto my ass and proceeded to scoot several steps back in the dust. She continued to prove just how not dead she was by raising her head. Her eye followed my progress. The scars around her mouth twitched in a way that either meant she was trying to smile or attempting to snarl. Her stump of a left hand smeared very little blood as she brought it up to rest on her thigh.

“Ελα εδώ μικρό αγόρι.” The words she spoke in an unfamiliar language were ragged, hoarse, and broken. They conveyed a weariness that seemed far older than she could ever be capable of being. I stared at her in stunned disbelief for longer than was probably healthy. This was a step too far. I hadn't been given any time to deal with any of the nonsense that had happened to me so far. Not the sudden transition into a new world. Not the influx of new memories. Not even the fact I had killed roughly thirty people. And now this?

My brain just shut off. I felt it, like a switch flicking, and suddenly everything that had happened before this moment ceased to exist. Everything, absolutely everything, that existed in my whole world was what was going on just in this moment. So I did the only thing that seemed rational. I picked up her severed hand and pulled a handful of stimpacks out of my belt pouch. She made no move to pull away from me as I eased closer. Or reach for the spear at her side. She simply held up her left arm as if reattaching the hand was something she had done a dozen times before.

Jonas whispered me through the motions of how to make sure the hand was lined up well enough for the stimpacks to do most of the work. Even in the apocalypse, gone were the days of stitching veins and nerves together on the off-chance of getting a limb to attach again. Stimpacks were highly scientific healing goo in a handy injectable format. It took three of them and left her with another nasty looking scar for her collection, but I was able to get her hand reattached. Her leg closed up with the additional help of one more injection.

“Do you speak English?” I asked her as I stuck the needle into her leg and pushed the stimpack's button. She hissed gently then sighed in relief. I watched her skin grow tendrils that reached for the other side of the cut, then pull the whole wound closed in a matter of moments. My eyes were already searching for more injuries that needed tending. Minor cuts and scrapes that weren't worth a stimpack. It took my brain a few moments longer than it should have to realize that she had actually answered me. By then my eyes had worked their way up to her face.

“Yes, νεαρός στρατιώτης.” Her smile was faint and as tired as her words. But her eye, her good one, exuded a sense of power tightly controlled. A willpower great enough to drown other men in. It was also a brilliant and lovely shade of purest gold.

“Good. Are you hurt anywhere else? Do you need a blood transfusion? What's your blood type?” My questions came in short, quick bursts with pauses a touch too long between them. Not enough time for her to respond but just enough that I would have been interrupting her first few words. If she had answered any of them. Instead she simply nodded. Her body shifted forward and hunched, her hands tugging at the bronze breastplate she wore. Dented metal and sharp protrusions from impacts had been tearing at her skin with every movement. Yet that didn't stop her from pulling the armor off and tossing it to the side.

She wore only a sleeveless shirt underneath it. Only barely thick enough to keep the skin of her chest from touching the armor. It was soaked with blood. She looked down at it, clicked her tongue, and discarded it with a



toss and the thick, wet sound of discarded bandages. Jonas knew that sound, even if I didn't. The woman made no effort to hide herself from my gaze. She was laid bare for my inspection.

“Μην κοιτάς τόσο σκληρά αυτήν την ηλικιωμένη κυρία.” I wondered why she kept speaking in her foreign tongue after saying she could speak English. Probably blood loss. Maybe brain damage considering she should be dead at this moment. No. No. That wasn't a problem for the present. Inspect. Heal. The bullet wound in her shoulder was mostly healed with the leftover healing goo from the previous injections. An area around her ribs, just under her left breast, was starting to turn purple. I pressed a finger against it and gently applied pressure. She hissed and hunched over. Rounded softness pressed down onto my finger. I carefully held it up and out of the way as I pressed another needle into her skin. The broken rib slid back into place and the bruise turned yellow as if it were a week old in seconds.

Once that was done, I reached up and began running my empty hands through her hair. It was matted with blood and sweat and days of grime. I ignored all of that as I quested for painful spots or open cuts. I had no idea where her helmet was. She let me without complaint. Just a steady, careful, appraising look in her golden eye. I found a bruise near the back of her head but it wasn't bad enough to warrant more meds.

“Anything on your back?” I asked her. She shook her head, the energy in her eyes slowly dying away an inch at a time for reasons I couldn't guess at. She was withdrawing into herself again. Her eyes were becoming the cool and detached ones I had first seen peering out of her helmet. My eyes glanced at her shoulder again. The bullet wound was not just a puckered scar. “What's wrong?” My mind was trying to come back to life. Trying to consider her as more than meat needing to be glued back together.

“Nothing you can fix with your talented hands, νεαρός στρατιώτης.” She answered with a sigh. Her hand came up, rested on my chest, and eased me aside so she could stand up. Without a single stagger or hint that she had been so grievously injured only moments before she gazed around the encampment. I followed her eyes and found her looking at the single long building that was not currently smoldering. It was likely a barracks. Clothes, my malfunctioning brain finally realized, she was looking for a new shirt to wear.

I started to move in that direction. Whether to go get her a shirt or just to follow after her, I had no idea. But her hand found my chest again before I had barely started the movement. I stopped, rocking slightly on the balls of my feet from the arrested motion. She golden eye found my blue ones. “What is your name, haunted ελάφι?”

“It's...” I trailed off as I tried to find that memory only to run into the brick wall of shock surrounding them. Jonas called it battle fatigue. I just looked at the warrior as I struggled to come up with the answer.

She nodded after a long and silent moment. “It has been a day of days for you. Stay. συλλέξτε τον εαυτό σας. I will return in a moment.” She turned and strode towards the building without waiting for a reply. Possibly because she understood I wouldn't be able to give one for a while. I looked down from her scarred back, strangely the part of her with the fewest number of marks, and saw that she had left her spear on the ground by where she had been sitting. That was strangely comforting. My battered mind seemed to think she wouldn't leave without her weapon. It was a silly thought. After all, it was just a spear. She could find a dozen new ones anywhere in this camp. Caesar was big on traditional weaponry over guns.

I sat down and leaned back against the boathouse, doing my best to pull myself together. Jonas was already waiting and eager to lend a hand. He had helped more than a few recruits through something similar during basic training. Of course, the military version of that kind of talk was filled with appeals to duty and how they were very bad people who stood for all the things you didn't want in life. It wasn't very helpful.

I almost didn't notice the small hissing noise at first. It was like the sound of a balloon with a very, very slow leak in it. But then my head began to clear in a way that confused Jonas to no end. It was like something was rebooting my brain a section at a time. I knew my name. I knew where I was and what I was doing in the larger scheme of things. Existence stopped being a single moment in time. That's when I realized the smell of lemons and salt coming from inside my suit's collar.

"Calmex antidote administered." Chimed the proud voice of the stealth suit. "Your vitals indicated a panic attack was imminent. So I helped. I hope you feel better now."

"You... drugged me?" I asked, traces of horror and disbelief mingling into my voice beneath the fading calm. I'd never been one for messing around with drugs of any kind. Partly because I didn't want to get hooked on anything and partly because I felt like it was a waste of money. Being suddenly assaulted by something that so radically altered the way I viewed the world was more than a little disconcerting.

"Panic in stressful situations is natural but unhelpful." The suit responded, sounding a little less sure of itself. "You would not have been able to save her if you had panicked. It's part of my job."

"You're right. You're right." I reassured it as more of my mind began coming out from the haze. Responses like that were half the reason covert soldiers were going to be issued the suits. To keep them from making stupid mistakes that could get themselves or other people killed. The whole point of having an AI in charge of those systems was to make decisions like that when the user might not be able to do so fast enough. "Just warn me next time you do that, okay?"

"Can do!" The suit responded, much more chipper now that it knew I approved of its decision. I didn't make any move to stand up just yet though. The soldier was right. I really did need to sort out my brain before I kept plunging from one situation to another. Of course, thoughts of her brought back the memory of how casually she had stripped off her shirt. As well as how I had touched her so intimately without even asking permission. That set my face on fire and distracted me for a whole different variety of reasons.

"Μιλάς στον εαυτό σου;" The woman asked as she walked back towards me. She had on one of the vividly red and coarse-looking shirts most Legionnaires were issued. I wondered how she could wear it after everything. Then again, she had been striding around looking like Caesar's poster child. It was a great way to get close enough to stick a spear in a soldier. When I didn't answer her, she asked again in English. Mostly. "Are you talking to yourself. νεαρός στρατιώτης?"

"Oh. No. My suit can talk. But she doesn't like strangers." She gave me a look that I couldn't decipher but I imagined it was disbelief. Still, she didn't argue the point.

"Did it tell you your name?" The question was casual, pointedly ignoring the miniature brain meltdown I had experienced the first time she asked it. I didn't doubt she thought I was a little touched in the head. Or on something. Half the people in the wasteland indulged in some chem or another. She picked up her breastplate and started inspecting the damage. Her gold eye flicked towards me almost as often as it looked at her armor.

"I remembered it myself." I paused, on the verge of telling her my real name, then wondered why I hesitated. Most people would have chimed in and asked the obvious question. Or make some kind of sarcastic remark about them not being allowed to know it. Instead, she just kept looking between her armor and my face and waited. Like she had all the time in the world for long pauses. "It's Jason."

Her eye lit up with the faint flickers of amusement. "So where are your Argonauts?" My head snapped around at the question after a few heartbeats of confusion. Her face revealed nothing beyond those hints of amusement and a touch of surprise at my reaction. How the fuck did she know about Greek mythology? Who in the wide world of Fallout even had access to books legible enough to read on the subject, let alone the time and inclination? And then, just as suddenly, I realized that my reaction had given away the fact that I knew about those myths. And I had even less of a reason to know them than she did in this world.

"Well..." She said just the one word and laced it so full of implications that it was bursting. Another beat of silence just a bit too long to be entirely comfortable for most conversations. "I'm Alexandra." Her golden orb fixed on me with steel inside it. "Not Alex. Nor Sandra, Ally, or Alexa."

"Yes ma'am." I didn't quite squeak my response, but my voice definitely tipped up an octave. I swallowed to bring it back down to where it should be. Alexandra certainly had a presence. My initial impression of a lioness was all the more apt up close. "So... what now?"

"What now?" She repeated my question as if I was the one speaking a foreign language. "Ελαφάκι, I appreciate the help, but do not seek more. Ο κάπρος θυμώνει μόνο αφού τον πληγώσει μια γυναίκα. And I do not intend to dig your grave." Her words were delivered harshly, almost coldly, but tears were prickling at the corners of her good eye. Her ruined eye remained closed and motionless. "Be off with you. Βρείτε τη δική σας ιστορία."

I was stung by the flat dismissal, even with so much of it in her harshly fluid language. But, Jonah silently reminded me that the world was not as soft and friendly as the one I was used to. I had saved her life, sure, but she hadn't asked for help. Even if she'd needed it I couldn't just assume we were friends now. Or that she even owed me anything. I told Jonah he was a pessimist. He just shrugged and retorted that most people who survived out here were. Expect the worst and you'd only be surprised by the good stuff.

"All right then. If that's how you want to be. Try not to get any more limbs cut off Alexandra." My words had a little bite to them as I brushed myself off. She had no retort for me, her eye fixed firmly on her battered armor as I walked away from her. I headed deeper into the encampment. There was a pair of cages fenced in by chain link near one of the few unburned buildings that I knew housed slaves. Jonah had spotted them on the first day of his observation. He had seen new slaves getting fitted with one of Caesar's explosive collars and dead ones have theirs removed with a small electronic device.

So I set the slaves free after a little rooting around what turned out to be the command center of the encampment. I turned them loose to take whatever they could find while I took a better look around the place. There was a book of code phrases, which seemed odd considering they had no radio until I realized they were for identifying Legion spies. I tucked that away into my pack along with a few boxes of 5.56 bullets I'd uncovered. There was also a bag of Denarius' hidden at the bottom of a footlocker. It would have been a goodly sum considering the amount of silver in it. I distributed it among the freed slaves instead. The idea of walking around with Legion coinage while the NCR had a bug up its ass about me seemed like a bad one.

When everyone who could walk more than a mile without dying had taken everything they could conveniently carry off the many corpses of their former captors, I got them organized. Roughly twenty individuals, men and women with two children, who were in relatively good condition all things considered. Five more were barely tottering along but were family members who couldn't be left behind. Three were so weak or badly beaten that no amount of medical skill could save them. I gave them a quiet, dignified death from Med-X overdose. That disturbed me far more than any of the killing I had done. I saw their relieved faces in my dreams for weeks afterward. They thanked me even as I helped them die.

The rest I led northward towards Ranger Station Echo. It was the closest place that could be considered friendly territory, even though I ran the risk of getting shot for treason. I'd have to talk fast and hope someone would see sense. Though I had a feeling the upper echelons of command would be pissed that I had given them yet another beachhead to hold against the Legion. One they likely didn't have the manpower to maintain.

It took the rest of the day and another hour of dusk to corral my refugees the three hour walk to Echo. We barely made it before the stars started coming out. Bobby was the one on guard duty that night, so I was saved the hassle of giving the passwords. His gun drifted off to one side, but never left his shoulder, as I walked up with my Pip-Boy's light illuminating everything around me. I couldn't blame him. There were a lot of armed people behind me.

"Hey Bobby. I brought a few former slaves back with me." I tried to sound casual. I'd lay money down that I just sounded tired.

"S-s-so that's-s-s who they are?" The poor kid had a bit of a lisp. The others teased him about that. Thankfully, Jonas never had. "What happened out there? Everyone's-s-s s-s-saying you turned traitor."

"Some lunatic charged headfirst into Cottonwood. Just started murdering everyone. So I gave them a hand. Despite what some captain seemed to think." I waved one hand back in the direction of the Legion's encampment. "There's nobody left down there now."

"What? Jus-s-st the two of you? Killed everyone?" Bobby wasn't just stunned. He was floored. So shocked that he jumped when a throat cleared itself behind him. Ranger Erasmus stepped out from the shadows. He was a fairly unassuming man to look at. Short black hair, brown eyes, a mustache that was trying to add sophistication to his face but could only manage scruffy. He was in charge of Ranger Station Echo and the dozen or so soldiers who kept it from being overrun. A solid, practical man. One who looked more than a little pissed off at me.

"Private Jonas. Report." He snapped the three words at me with the tone of a man just this side of ordering me shot. I couldn't entirely blame him. I'd just dumped a major mess in his lap. That didn't mean I was ready to be killed for it. So I told him exactly what had happened. Including the bit about disobeying orders from a Captain. None of it made him any happier. But in the end he wasn't reaching for his sidearm at least. "You really stirred up a hornet's nest, you know that?"

I shrugged and nodded in response to his question. "Couldn't be helped, sir. The woman had already caused the mess. We can either take advantage of it or watch the Legion set up camp all over again. And if we give them the chance to do that, they're going to come out swinging for revenge." I watched Erasmus' eyes narrow as he chewed on that. He was clever enough to know I was right. I worried he might be clever enough to know that Jonas never would have thought of that on his own.

"I can't let your dishonorable conduct and insubordination stand. No matter how good the result. Some might even call it desertion of duty." He took off his helmet and ran a hand through his greasy hair. That was something I'd have to get used to. New Vegas didn't have enough potable water to make bathing common. "I don't even know how I'm supposed to hold Cottonwood without more troops."

I smiled as he voiced the concern I'd been thinking about on the trek up here. When I looked back over my shoulder I could already see some of the slaves shifting their grip on their guns. "Any of you want to shoot some Legionnaires?" A full three-quarters of them muttered something dark and anatomically impossible they would do to their former owners if given a chance. Even one of the guys barely standing demanded a gun and

a wall to lean against. None of the women refused the offer. So I looked back at Erasmus. "That's a good start, isn't it?"

The Ranger just sighed and looked at the ragtag group I'd just dropped into his lap. Another problem to add to the list. Sure, they could probably point a gun in the right direction. They might even hit something once in a while. But I'd just volunteered him to train a bunch of civilians into a militia at the same time he'd have to organize rebuilding an encampment full of dead bodies. He'd also have to explain to command and convince them to send far more support than they were likely capable of delivering. Hell, I'd just given them a massive windfall and a way to stop a lot of raids into New Vegas territory. They could haul some of the drunks off The Strip and put them back to work. It was the least the NCR could do.

After a moment, Erasmus reached into a pouch and pulled out a roll of NCR dollars. I saw a hundred on the outside of it. He tossed it to me. I even managed to catch it. I didn't do anything as crass as count it on the spot. I just tucked it away in an inner pocket.

"Private Jonas will be reported dead as part of the slave revolt that destroyed Cottonwood Grove. He will have died bravely in the line of duty even though he disobeyed direct orders of noninterference. Get a new name and stay away from the NCR for a while." He told me, his eyes turning sharp and hard as they swept to everyone nearby. Then up to the guard in the post overhead. Finally they rested on me again. "For the record, I'm glad there's a pile of dead Legion bitches on my doorstep. But you're an asshole for dumping all this into my lap. Even if you are a clever asshole."

"Happy to help, sir." I tried to keep my voice level. There was a trace of smugness in it anyways. Good Karma points for me. Ranger Erasmus and the NCR did not like that. I set down my pack long enough to cut the insignias off my overcoat before tossing them to Bobby. He fumbled them and I gave him an apologetic shrug. Then I turned around and headed off into the night.

I made it over a few rises and back to the road before the weariness started sinking claws into my bones. It had been a long, long day. My body had gotten too little sleep the night before. Stress and worry and the images of men dying or coming apart in pieces was starting to mingle together into a slurry in my mind. I felt the muscles of my hands tensing and releasing slowly. The light of the Pip-Boy danced as they started to shake.

"Your body is beginning to show signs of distress." My stealth suit told me as if I had somehow managed not to notice. "I recommend a light sedative. I can administer it now."

"No. Thank you." I said, my teeth chattering faintly across every word. I spotted an ancient gas station that looked to have its windows boarded up to create a shelter. There were lights on inside, but Jonas assured me that wasn't unusual. The Hoover Dam provided the whole area with electricity. Anywhere that still had a line and bulbs still lit up at night. The gas station I had found had been a pretty common waystation for caravans heading to Camp Searchlight to the south. Before the NCR base had been turned into a radiation hotspot by some suicidal Legionnaires.

The suit had continued chattering while I'd had my internal conversation. I hadn't missed more than a few sentences. I gathered from context that the gist was I really should accept the advancement of modern medicine rather than try to tough it out through battle shock. Instead I extinguished the light on my PipBoy, shushed the suit, and asked it to turn on stealth mode.

I made way too much noise as I scouted the gas station, but at least I knew nobody could see me. Nobody poked their head out the front door or fired a few pot shots from it. Either there was nobody inside, they were smart enough to wait for me to poke my head in, or just too stoned out of their mind to care. So I stuck my head in. Nobody murdered me. Nobody was foaming from the mouth in a corner from too much Jet. Most shocking of all, the mattress near the back looked halfway clean. I used the last of my energy to drag one of the rusted set of shelves in front of the doorway. It wouldn't stop someone from tipping it over and coming in, but they'd make enough noise to wake the dead doing it. And the suit could wake me up if it had to.

Of course, if someone chucked a grenade in the window I'd be dead before I ever knew it. Which was not a cheerful thought to fall asleep to, but I was too tired to care.

Nightmares plagued my sleep. I'd expected that, but when you're in the middle of such dreams it's all but impossible to think rationally. I relived the moment when I blew apart a man with an explosive round. Then there was the old woman who begged me to end her suffering rather than leave her behind. That final sigh she gave as the meds stopped her heart played over and over again. Even when I was helping the rest of the slaves along the path to freedom, she kept sighing in my ear.

At some point in the early hours before dawn, I woke up enough to feel a needle prick at my side. The stealth suit made several soft, soothing sounds as a warm, fuzzy sensation closed in around my brain. I wanted to curse it for drugging me again. But the dreamlessness of the sleep that followed was so blissfully comfortable that I woke up unable to be mad at it.

I also didn't wake up alone.

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