The hum of the elevator that the Courier found herself in filled her ears as the rumbling and crumbling of the vault below her. Every so often, the elevator itself seemed to shudder, and the weak light above her would fade in and out. Was it a last safety precaution by Elijah, just in case the collar didn’t work, she wondered, or centuries old technology giving away after trying to be used one last time? As she tried to lean against the wall of the elevator, her eyes falling shut as she let her mind start to wonder once more, she felt the metal collar around her neck clink against the aged metal of the elevator’s wall, forcing herself to remember once more what she’d just been through. What she’d just survived through.

She’d spoken to a Legion slaver, once. He was in NCR captivity, at Camp McCarran if she was remembering right, and he seemed to enjoy his time there, though his first words echoed in her mind now. “I was just thinking about you,” he’d told the female lieutenant she was working with at that time, “just thinking about that pretty neck of yours. I was thinking about how it would look with a Legion slave collar on it.” The lieutenant had said some snark back, but the captive didn’t seem to pay attention to her.

“Do you know what I love about our slave collars, lieutenant? I love how tightly they fit. I train my men to make sure the slaves’ flesh bulges a bit around the top and bottom. Know why? Because if you get the fit just right, their body never gets used to the feeling or wearing it. It cuts in just enough when they swallow or turn their head to remind them who they belong to, and it’s that constant reminder that keeps them docile.”

Maybe it was a small mercy that Elijah hadn’t learned the same lesson, the Courier thought, but that small mercy didn’t mean that the pound of high explosive near her jugular wouldn’t kill her instantly if it went off. As her mind drifted back to Camp McCarran, a small, vengeful smile crept onto her lips as she remembered how much she beat –

The elevator’s shuddering to a stop forced the Courier’s eyes open once more, and as if on instinct her right hand fell to her left hip and onto the pistol holstered there. When the doors opened, however, and she saw just the poster for the Sierra Madre at the end of the hallway she’d went down just minutes before, her hand fell back to her side, and she sighed a breath of relief. Shakily, she took a step off of the elevator, and she looked around. If the destruction down below had affected this level of the Sierra Madre Casino at all, she couldn’t see it beyond the damage that two hundred years had already had on the villa and casino’s shoddy construction. From what she’d learned here, in her brief time in the Sierra Madre, this place was founded through stabbing each other in the back, and those who tried to right what they’d wronged only ended up like the remains she found down in the vault – remains that she could only assume had belonged to Frederick Sinclair.

The Courier paused as she stepped besides the intercom that had unlocked the elevator, clicking her tongue softly as she pondered. She knew Christine was alive – there was no other way that she could’ve heard her voice just a minute before, saving her life from some of the turrets that were backing up Elijah, if she wasn’t. If she could do that, maybe…

“Christine?” the Courier spoke softly into the intercom’s mic, tapping it once for good measure. “I… hope this works,” she mumbled, frowning.

A voice crackled back. “You did it,” came the reply, unastonished as though the conclusion was already forgone, but still warm. “You returned,” Christine added, the softness in her voice distorted by the crackling of the intercom’s speakers.

“I did,” the Courier confirmed. “He’s dead.”

“Good,” Christine curtly replied. “Now is your turn to stay put. I holed up nearby, just out of range of the quickest route to the premier suite, where I was able to find a terminal.” The Courier was still able to hear the strain and the occasional strange pause where Christine still struggled with the pain of her new voice, and part of her winced every time she recognized it.

But she still just said, “Alright.”

As she walked back out into the main room, the Courier stopped as she looked into the bedroom across from where she now stood, staring at the scrawling on the walls. “Let go,” it screamed at her. “Let go.”

The last words of a dead woman. Part of her wondered how the woman this place seemed to be designed to protect died, and the Courier knew in her core that the woman had likely committed suicide, either through an overdose on Med-X, which she’d been addicted to, or… the stains in the carpet made the Courier continually wonder if it was hundred year old blood or just her eyes playing tricks on her.

“What a shame,” she softly muttered as she walked across the room to shut the doors. She’d only opened them in the first place to fully check the floor, and there was an old prospector superstition bouncing around the back of her mind about staying around a corpse. There wasn’t much that she could do to escape all of the death that this place – this casino, particularly – had wrought, not as exhausted as she was.

She couldn’t help but to sneak a glance through the main doors to the suite as she walked back across the room once more to the bar counter that had been set up here. There was still no sign of Christine. With a weak, tired sigh, the Courier unclipped the holster for her pistol and set it on the counter, before sitting on one of the stools there. Sliding out her pistol – it wasn’t her usual .45 automatic that was a gift as she’d left Zion but instead the scavenged remains of what working bits she found from the standard 9mm pistol that were common in the Mojave – she unloaded it and stared at it, her muscle memory wanting her to start disassembling and cleaning it but her bones too tired to actually do so. She felt the armor she’d found in that same clinic she’d found Christine in digging into her skin in the spots where it was ever-so-slightly too small for her, even if it was supposed to be light-weight gear, and the shotgun on her back felt like it was dragging her down to hell.

Stumbling as she stood up, the Courier shrugged off the sling to the shotgun and set it leaning against the counter, before turning back into the hallway that lead down to the Vault. Though she hesitated as she stared at the elevator with its door now closed, she turned to the one of the two dressers in it and began to rummage. A lot of the clothes in here had decayed to time, but there were a pair of pants that still existed, likely made out of some sense of synthetic fibers that simply refused to go away like cotton would have. Without hesitation, the Courier began to remove the bodysuit of armor that she wore and shrugged it to the ground, leaving her in just the camisole she’d graciously been left in after whoever had shoved her into that jump suit upon her arrival to the Sierra Madre had left her with. The scavenged pants went on not a moment later.

Then, the Courier simply turned around and staggered back to one of the two couches the main room had to offer and flopped onto it. She was unconscious within seconds of landing on the firm cushions, her mind only noting how cold the room seemed to be as she passed out.

When her consciousness started to return, she was a bit less cold, the Courier noticed, and her left hand seemed even warmer than usual. The weight on her neck was gone, too. With a small groan, she began to stir, stretching a little bit with her eyes still closed before they slowly blinked open; when they did, the Courier was quick to notice Christine Royce was right besides her, holding her hand, sitting on the ground, and resting against the couch.

“You returned,” Christine just softly mumbled as she realized the Courier was waking up. “We… you… did it. He’s dead.”

“He’s dead,” the Courier echoed back at her, agreeingly. Slowly, she shifted on the couch, careful not to let go of Christine’s hand as she sat more upright, before patting the empty space on the couch besides her. Without a word, Christine sat on the couch besides her, and silence came down on the room, the only noise being the creaking of the aged Sierra Madre Casino, and the occasional noise from the villa. For a split second, the Courier was aware of the fact that Christine had just let go of her hand before she felt Christine’s arms wrap around her in a hug, which the Courier was quick to return.

Christine wasn’t sobbing, but the Courier felt Christine’s tears fall down onto her shoulder as they held each other tight. These kinds of moments were rare for the Courier; in the Mojave, she preferred to walk alone. She wasn’t sure what to do, all the smooth talking words she could say felt pointless now, so she just closed her eyes and softly ran her hand up and down Christine’s back, just trying to be as comforting as possible. Slowly, Christine’s tears seemed to begin to slow, but the Courier felt Christine shudder once or twice as she seemed to try to bury her head further into the Courier’s shoulder.

Part of the Courier’s mind felt guilty about how she was reacting to this; she’d not expected a simple hand squeeze and a reassurance that she’d be back to end this way and now she just didn’t know how to respond to it all. At the same time, part of her was simply glad for the human contact.

“Five years,” Christine mumbled into the Courier. “I’ve been assigned to this for five years.”

“To killing Elijah,” the Courier mumbled back, attempting to clarify.

“To kill Elijah. Ever since his disappearance caused us to lose HELIOS One. He’s… the reason I’m like this. He may not be responsible for my voice –” by now, both her and the Courier were aware that the recently-deceased Dean Domino had been the one to trap Christine in the Medical Clinic, “—but he was responsible for… everything else. For my mind. For… me losing Veronica.” Christine was straining her voice, even as quiet as she was, and so she fell silent after that.

“I… could tell Veronica,” the Courier muttered. “I ran into her a while back, helped her… decide what to do with her life.”

Softly, Christine shook her head. “I think it’s… for the best if… she thinks I’m dead. Or gone,” she explained weakly. “No one should know of the existence of this place. Of… what remains here.”

“Like the dangers within Big Mountain or the Divide,” the Courier mumbled for her own sake.

“You’ve already met the other courier, then. Or… should I say that he met you,” Christine mumbled. “Knew what you would find here.”

With a small amount of nervousness, the Courier let out a small laugh. “Yeah. Third time saving the world, I suppose.”

Christine fell silent again, sitting a bit more upright, but still holding the Courier tight – though, a bit looser now. “I’m not sure how the Circle would react to an… outsider accomplishing my task for me,” she explained, avoiding the Courier’s gaze. “Would I be… considered too dangerous, too, with what I know of this place?”

“I don’t know, Christine,” the Courier truthfully answered, her own voice now small within her chest.

A sigh came from the scarred woman sitting across from her. “Five years, and this is how it ends. Almost one-fifth of my life.”

“I’m sorry,” the Courier simply mumbled.

“Don’t be,” Christine replied with another, weaker sigh, letting go of the Courier at last, who let her go as well. “Maybe I should have given up after… what happened in the Big Empty.”

“I would be dead if you didn’t,” the Courier replied. “And Elijah would still be alive. An old man, as psychotic as him, was as good as dead as soon as he stepped down into the Vault without those turrets. But with them…”

“I see your point, courier,” Christine flatly said.

Softly, the Courier reached out and took Christine’s hand, giving it a soft squeeze, much like Christine had given her own hand before the Gala. Christine looked back up at the Courier and gave a weak, small smile, trying to cover up her own fears. Gently, the Courier spoke. “I can’t promise what the future will hold, but for right now, let’s just survive one more night, together, and hopefully in peace. Find some food and something to drink, and lets just… try to enjoy it, and ignore the past. For now.”

The smile on Christine’s face was a little bit more secure now as it rested there, and she just nodded. Taking in a deep breath, she embraced the Courier once more in a tight, but brief, hug, before she stood up herself from the couch. “I’ll handle the food; do you think you can handle the drinks?” When the Courier nodded, Christine’s smile seemed to grow, which the Courier felt mirrored on her own face. “Wonderful,” Christine said, before trying to clear her throat and wincing in the process. As if it didn’t happen, however, she quickly leaned in and gave the Courier a kiss, first on her forehead, and then on her cheek.

Then, Christine walked off, leaving the Courier with the easier of the two tasks, even if she was still sitting on the couch with a mildly astonished look upon her face.

The replicated food the vending machines offered, even with the best cooks in the Mojave and all of the liquor to try and enhance it, couldn’t hold even the vaguest candle to “real” food, but after all that the Courier had been through, she was happy enough for just the moment of calm. Neither of them had realized how hungry they had gotten as the greatest heist the Sierra Madre would ever see had progressed, the team maneuvering through the villa and through the casino in rapid pace with the Courier’s skill. Neither had felt the pangs of hunger until they’d finally actually eaten and started to drink, but the most obvious reminder of the Courier’s empty stomach perhaps came in how quickly – and how obviously – she got drunk.

Christine had been smart enough to avoid the liquor, with her throat still full of nails, and even smarter to move the Courier’s weapons away for just the moment. Not that she’d needed to, Christine would soon realize, as the drunken Courier had dragged her down onto the couch, holding her tight. Right now, the Courier was like a radiator, her face bright red and entire body seemingly aflame, but Christine didn’t mind. Rather guiltily, in fact, she enjoyed it.

The doors to the room were shut now, and the smell of decay that permeated the Sierra Madre was at least temporarily covered up by the smell of the meal that the two had just had – and the Courier’s booze. Apparently, Christine had learned, the Courier was a whiskey fiend. Normally, Christine would find the smell abhorrent, but right now, as it slowly enveloped them both with every breath that the Courier took, she found it… surprisingly pleasant.

She could get used to this.

But Christine knew, deep in the back of her mind, that she likely shouldn’t. Even the strongest of minds, however, couldn’t resist the momentary comfort.

As her own eyes fell closed, Christine’s own breathing started to slow, until she felt something atop her head: the Courier, in some state of drunken consciousness – or maybe unconsciousness – had given her a kiss back, gentle atop her head.

Christine was pretty sure that they both, at this point, knew that their companionship would be temporary. She hadn’t admitted it to the Courier yet, but she was slowly resolving herself on becoming the Sierra Madre’s protector, at least until something could do away with the horrors here. The Courier’s offer of trying to help her reunite with Veronica held allure to her, but it was in the same way that she sometimes wanted to stick her hand over a lit candle to see just how warm it actually was, in that it was a bad, bad idea.

She’d changed a lot over the years, as she was sure Veronica had herself; Christine wasn’t sure if they’d even be compatible in the same way. The Courier had made it sound like she was still with the Brotherhood, though, and so she wondered if she was still as questioning of their ways as she always was. Slowly, Christine opened her eyes and looked at the woman who she was laying atop of, and she wondered a similar thought: how much had this courier changed over her life? From what the man who’d rescued her from the autodoc in the Big Empty had told her as she recovered, those two had some sort of history – some sort of history that, it seemed, this Courier had already went out and resolved before embarking on her own journey to face Elijah.

Did she kill Ulysses, Christine wondered, or did the Courier let him live?

Laying back down, she got as comfortable as she could atop the Courier’s chest and closed her eyes once more. It wasn’t a mystery she wanted to know about; she just hoped that both of the couriers who had saved her life had their own chance to begin again, to begin again as she was about to as the Sierra Madre’s protector.

The Sierra Madre’s protector. It was such a weird title for Christine that she wasn’t sure if she deserved it. Surely, if anyone here deserved that role, it would be the Courier under her; though Christine was already pretty sure that the Courier under her didn’t intend on staying for much longer.

Before she’d set off to the Sierra Madre, she’d heard the rumors of a coming second battle at Hoover Dam. As she finally slipped through the veil and into sleep, she acknowledged that the Courier would likely have her own struggles to face and her own chance to truly begin again at that fight.

She only wished that she would be able to see it herself.

“Wait a moment, before you go. I... we... hope you've enjoyed your stay. Farewells can be a time of sadness. Letting go... difficult. As a guest of the Sierra Madre, you know that truth more than anyone. Frederick Sinclair believed one's life could be made anew every day, that fortunes were more than the wealth in your hands. Love. Life... family, those to care for, and those who will care for you. To those who know these joys, the Sierra Madre holds little they don't already have. Out in the world, beyond these walls, that is your chance to begin again. I hope you'll return, in happier times. Until then, the Sierra Madre... and I... will hold you in our hearts.” The message repeated over the signal that once had allured countless prospectors to the Sierra Madre – and to their deaths. Now, it sounded like insane rambling to most that tuned into its signal. Most, except the Courier, who listened to it exactly once over her Pip-Boy, and then turned it back off.

The Divide wasn’t the last road the Courier had to face before the second battle for Hoover Dam. The Sierra Madre, however, was. The mountain range behind her took several days for her to trek back down, all by herself. Part of her yearned for another moment with Christine as she looked back up to the mountains behind her, but as she looked back towards New Vegas in front of her, she let out a resolute sigh as she began to move once more. She knew the cause of all of the horrors in the Sierra Madre, of the Big Empty, of the Divide, of Zion, and of the Mojave; she was the only person that she trusted to make a satisfactory conclusion for all of them. In her time, patrolling the Mojave and delivering messages, the Courier had long since learned that, sometimes, dying was a greater curse than living; sometimes, it was better to make sure someone died than to let them wander elsewhere with their sins. The Courier’s mind was burdened with her own thoughts, which she shook off with a shake of her head as she continued her march back to New Vegas.

“In happier times, Christine,” the Courier muttered to herself. “I’ll be sure of it.”