

Chapter 1

Caleb couldn't believe his eyes, but the rumors about this place were true. A treasure trove of old world technology just waiting to be found under the heart of what used to be Boulder City. There wasn't much else around here anymore. Flattened by bombs and picked clean from tribes and raiders for years now, it was truly a wonder nobody ever found the door to this place. As he donned his rebreather and goggles, Caleb felt a heaviness in his chest. This could finally be his big break.

Vault 144. An experimental facility like several other uninhabited by dwellers when the bombs fell. Through a series of delays, advanced scientific research never fully began in this vault and had laid dormant for centuries. Caleb was the first person here in over two hundred years according to the read-out displayed on his pip-boy. The last human to close these doors was a Sommers. A Dr of genetics and a cadre of military brass. Not unusual for a place like this. Caleb had his sidearm, a 10mm heavy pistol at the ready in case the vault door woke up any angry roaches or moles. A cautious man, he methodically and thoroughly inspected the atrium for evidence of tech-savvy scavengers, hostile wildlife, or at worst, automated vault security. Caleb's pistol wouldn't be too useful against a Sentry so he remained careful with every step as he cleared the main floor of the vault entrance before going deeper.

Being an unused vault, most of the facility's life support and power had never been turned on. Only the dim amber glow of Caleb's pip-boy lit his path. He made no attempt to turn on the emergency generators at the atrium level. Silence was preferable. He'd explored a few vaults before. They'd all been gutted by then, but it was useful experience to understand the architecture and general layout and how to move down the metal corridors without making noise. He wasn't a ninja or anything, but Caleb took his work seriously, since nobody was here to watch his back.

A few minutes sneaking down a long stairwell and through a non-functional security checkpoint, Caleb reached what must've been the reactor level. He reasoned this would be normal considering the lack of living quarters and communal space other Vaults were equipped with and that any of the good prospects should be deeper. Caleb's gut was correct and the young, but weathered man smiled as his pip-boy light fell upon a marker showing the direction to F.E.V labs. Caleb was no historian and was only vaguely aware of the acronym, but not it's meaning and so he pushed on. His excitement got the better of him as he nearly tripped over a crushed robotic form. It was completely squished in the center, crumpled inward like a tin can and the robotic guts were strewn about. The damage could have been done long ago, Caleb hoped, as he examined the very thin dust accumulated atop the trashed chassis.

Caleb swallowed hard as he looked at his crumpled reflection in the chrome shell. Whatever did this was **big**. Glancing around the Mr. Handy's corpse, he found a thin bit of membrane-like skin on the cutting edge of its discarded saw attachment along with a small amount of old blood rusting the blade. A glancing blow, whatever it was, he reasoned, unable to see any blood spatter or dripping anywhere else around. With a silent, fluid motion, Caleb reached for his gun and slowly stood, backing against a wall in the darkness and stood still, trying to decide if whatever loot was in here was worth the possibility of facing *that*. He furrowed his brow, feeling the small weight on his hip from the satchel of rice he used to carry his caps so they wouldn't make noise. He didn't have the money for a caravan and too few supplies to go it alone. He *needed* something for his troubles- he could always come back with some trustworthy mercs and clean out the rest of the vault. With a weak sigh, Caleb slowly mustered his courage and followed the corridor down again into the labs to grab whatever could fit in his pack and to maybe find out what F.E.V means...

Inside the labs, Caleb's pip-boy Geiger counter began to chirp. He was no stranger to rads, but knew he could be looking for something worth his time a while and popped a Rad-X just in case. His sweep was slow and as he crept deeper, his pip-boy began to chirp more constantly. Caleb found what he thought was the culprit, a handful of large, yellow barrels stashed against the far wall. The negligence of the old world never ceased to perplex Caleb. The waste, the disregard for safety... how on earth did humans survive so long with such a disrespect for their own fragility?

Caleb avoided that area and instead entered a side-door that seemed to be another clean room. Caleb stepped inside and saw a blue laser light flash against his chest for just a second before he dove inside behind a counter covered in boxes of radiation suits and equipment. He thought the laser was from a turret and cursed aloud as the door sealed closed behind him. He waited a moment for any further security to activate, but only heard a low, deep humming coming from below. He couldn't believe it. A *secondary* power station in the deepest bowels of the vault was providing energy for...something down here, and now Caleb was stuck with his only choice to go deeper to disable the door. He peeked over the boxes and found no turrets or Securitrons waiting, only a single black-lensed mechanical eye on the wall beside the radiation shower-tunnel at the mouth of the gateway.

Caleb grabbed a radiation suit from the nearest box and gave it a thorough inspection for holes from wear or damage and found each of them were brand new, and only one or two had been removed from the only open box among dozens. Quickly donning the suit, he entered the tunnel and flinched as it hissed to life and showered him in a neutralizing agent similar to RadAway. Clearly something was still working down here and he would soon be facing it. He'd heard the crazy rumors about Vaults running experiments on their own people, but Caleb had never believed them.

As he stepped through the tunnel, he found himself inside a massive, concrete-walled complex. Machines filled the center with cables and metal pipes rising up to the ceiling like a tree trunk, encircled with several massive tanks filled with a glowing green liquid. The room was active with all the humming and clicking of pre-war machinery and the bubbling fluids. Pulling off his rebreather, he found the air was fresh, despite stinking slightly with chemicals. His mouth agape, Caleb could only imagine what mad science VaultTech had been doing down here for 200 years...

The insane wealth of untouched, *working* technology that inhabited this facility had Caleb salivating. He was already imagining his meeting with the wealthy caravan companies, contracting a small army of prospectors to dismantle the place and finally retiring to New Vegas as a wealthy man. All he needed to do was get to the mainframe on this computer cluster and shut down the sealed door to the lab so Caleb could fulfill every dream a prospector could ever have...

The young man hugged the wall and followed it to the main door into the lab complex, noticing a spike in rads the closer he got. His suit and the Rad-X he ingested protecting him relieved some of the tension, but Caleb recalled the crushed robot upstairs and resolved to not be caught by surprise. He swallowed hard and stepped inside. Moving lightly on his feet, he circled one of the massive tanks and froze as he tried to understand what his eyes were seeing. Just a few feet away, laying between the tanks, was a monster.

He was so careful! He'd done everything right! Caleb immediately broke out in a cold sweat as he held his breath and stood as still as he possibly could...

A Death Claw!

And not just that, this thing was the biggest one he'd ever seen! Not that Caleb had a habit of running into them, but the man had seen what was left of a nest from his days running scrap for the Enclave out East... and this thing had to be an Alpha. Its hide was a dusty black, with a huge muscled tail and a crown of horns nearly as long as Caleb's body. It looked like it was sleeping soundly amidst the trickle of radiation from this place and Caleb at least felt a small relief that the little he did know from Deathclaws was that the males lived alone outside of breeding and this was the only one he had to avoid.

Caleb stepped back and carefully opened the flap of his leather satchel. Inside, he thumbed a Stealthboy and grasped it tightly along the trigger. If he heard the beast stir, he would activate it and slink away- he had no other choice than to open the door and leave as quietly and quickly as possible. He slipped off his boots stealthily and set them down silently on the cool concrete floor. Now profusely sweating, Caleb moved like a ghost to the PC display jutting out of the side of the computer cluster and began to hack the terminal. Each key press was slow, careful, silent as the young man arduously cycled through the passwords. Knowing the

beast was just a few feet away on the other side, Caleb felt a sick sensation in his gut as he worked.

A Deathclaw could cut a man in half with a single swipe of its huge claws and rip a fully-armored Paladin into pieces as if it were a tin can. The Mr. Handy was likely its first victim. Finally, Caleb found the correct phrase and entered into the lab mainframe. The computers started to wake up and numerous processes appeared to start back up. Caleb felt a chill as he heard the huge form moving out of sight and a low grumble filled the room.

Caleb reflexively turned on his Stealthboy and stood motionless at the computer as the hulking creature came into view. He stared up into its reptilian eyes and watched in silent horror as it paced completely around him, sniffing the air and looking all over. It suddenly stopped and turned its neck back towards Caleb. It studied the empty space it saw thanks to the Stealthboy and closed in, breathing in deeply before jetting a burst of hot breath from its nostrils back at Caleb. It turned back and continued its hunt, stalking quietly except for its clawtips clicking on the concrete, it appeared quite nimble despite this and weaved between the giant tubes gracefully to the outside of the room. Caleb used this chance and found the power options, scrolling through the different menus until he finally found the door controls. He paled as the display read:

<Remote override unavailable. Manual disengage required>

Caleb felt utterly helpless. Sealed vault doors were pressurized and required special tools to open, tools that would be impossible to find without gaining the attention of the Deathclaw. He figured he had maybe another 45 seconds or so invisible and decided to try out something really stupid: find where the deathclaw came in and try to find the surface through its cave burrow. He didn't see it, but it had to be in this room somewhere...

Caleb moved along the curved wall of the glowing tank toward the outer wall quietly but took longer strides, desperation setting in as the power on his Stealthboy drained. He found tables with beakers, various chemicals, and a computer sitting in the center near a darkened corridor. Glancing behind him, Caleb felt a flash of panic as he still didn't see or hear anything, begging god or fate to bless him with luck until he reached the mouth of the corridor and realized why it was so dark-

The deathclaw was crouched down inside, blocking it with his body, directly facing Caleb and his bright eyes gleaming in the dim green glow. Caleb froze, it didn't see him yet, he was still invisible and yet...

"What you doing... here?"

The voice chilled his bones. The sound emanated from the corridor and vibrated in his chest. The sound was like night itself cloaked in mist and it spoke again.

"Do you speak? Why have you... come here, human?"

Caleb suddenly realized the voice was coming from the Deathclaw.

"Wh-", as he prepared to speak, the Stealthboy powered down and the creature's eyes met his. Its expression didn't change, as if it had known the whole time he was there the whole time. Caleb expected to be killed in that instant and prayed it would be quick. He waited a moment and the beast didn't move. Caleb's eyes adjusted to the dim light and this time, he saw the lips of the monster move as it spoke.

"Will you speak? I have been... polite."

Caleb snapped out from his stupor and found his mouth dryer than the Mojave. His voice cracked and the young man struggled to think of what to actually say to this thing. He was terrified, but he was out of options and at the creature's mercy. It showed intelligence, he reasoned, surely he could try to talk his way out this...

"I- I'm a prospector-," Caleb said shakily and swallowed hard. "I hunt for salvage in old-world ruins."

The deathclaw only moved its head slightly, turning to focus one of its eyes on him. Caleb felt like it would burn a hole through him.

"What is your name?"

It was surreal, Caleb was having a conversation with an abomination he assumed were just viscous un-thinking killers!

"My name? I- I' Caleb."

The creature was such an intimidating force, Caleb couldn't help but tell the truth. The young man was certain the only reason he wasn't the deathclaw's lunch, was because it wanted something from him.

"Deathclaw... have no names, humans think as... individuals. Make humans happy. You name me?"

Caleb stood in awe. This wasn't possible. No way could this be a normal deathclaw. He had to understand what happened. Whatever did this to it, must be in this facility, the prospector reasoned. The technology that could give sentience- *intelligence* to a wasteland monster was terrifying. And could be worth a fortune by itself...

"I'll have to think of a good one. We've only just met, given names are special."

The deathclaw seemed to accept the answer and lowered its chin to rest on its forearm. Caleb's eyes followed down the lean muscle to its hand. Much like a human's, though certainly lacking in dexterity due to its sword-length claws. Caleb tried to match the politeness of the beast, hoping its chattiness was a byproduct of its solitude and would keep him alive longer to entertain it as long as possible.

"I hope this doesn't come across as rude... but you aren't what I expected."

The creature grunted with a deep chuff that vibrated in Caleb's chest. He saw the tip of its tail slide along the wall of the corridor, its protruding, boney spikes sliding loudly across the painted metal.

"Neither is... Caleb."

It felt strange hearing his name from a creature whose voice sounded like death itself. Let alone what sounded like a compliment. His cautious nature was likely the only reason he wasn't sliced to ribbons the second this thing smelled him at the computer. Caution- and the deathclaw's curiosity. The thought crossed his mind again that he was dreaming all of this. Or he was laying on the ground hallucinating from a lack of oxygen or a toxic gas. In any event, Caleb was on borrowed time and his best bet seemed to be seeing this through. Suddenly, the deathclaw fidgeted and let out a deep grunting sigh.

"You help me with something? Something only human hands can do."

Caleb nodded without even thinking and the creature suddenly stirred from the narrow corridor. With a grace Caleb didn't expect, it pulled itself through the metal doorway and stood up- all the way. Caleb gaped, seeing its body rise up towards the ceiling. It pushed its shoulders forward and the young man heard a series of pops and a satisfied exhale before it lowered itself back down to a hunched over position. It slowly strode along the outside of the tanks towards a station of equipment on a table.

"Syringe for blood sample. Tool... too awkward for claws."

It flashed its long razors and stretched out its arm next to Caleb.

Why does it want to take its own blood sample? Caleb took to syringe and did as he was asked, though confused. The creature barely reacted at all as it quickly filled the small vial with

its dark blood. Caleb ejected the sample and held it out to the deathclaw.

“Next. Must inject sample into... F.E.V. By... autoclave.”

He pointed again with his claw and Caleb obeyed. The autoclave was something the prospector had seen before, though always missing a casing, or some parts, or was rusted into worthlessness. Vaults had a small supply of spare parts but were complex and sensitive enough machines that they were often broken by the time the Vaults opened. This one may as well have been just pulled off the shelf. It was pristine save a thin layer of dust. Caleb’s wrist began to chirp as his pipboy warned that the Rad-X was wearing off by now and the noise piqued the deathclaw’s curiosity.

“Prospector tool? Have seen other humans wearing them.”

“Sort of. It’s old world tech with many uses like maps, heath tracking, inventory management. Lots of vault-dwellers have em’.” The beast nodded and sniffed the device before turning and looking up at the catwalk above the green tanks.

“Must wait for synthesis.”

Caleb sat down in the chair next to the table and slid his satchel over onto his thigh. “I need to take medicine for the radiation. So I don’t get sick.” The deathclaw watched with interest as he pulled out the small tablet and popped it in his mouth.

“Don’t get sick from... radiation. Only warm.”

Caleb sat in silence for a moment with the creature, hearing its heavy breathing and deep heart beat over the hum of machines and bubbling liquid. Caleb figured that this creature must be up to something to be wanting to mix its blood with whatever the hell F.E.V. was. *Was the creature actually performing an experiment? Did it understand what it was doing?* “Uhm. I haven’t actually even seen anything like that green stuff in tanks. Do you know what it is?”

The creature fidgeted and swayed its head. ***“F.E.V.”***

Caleb leaned forward. “What is F.E.V.?” This time the Deathclaw didn’t fidget- it straightened out again, towering over the giant tanks and reached into the glowing tank to retrieve a small dribble of it along its claw. It slowly dimmed and evaporated as it ran down the sharp black claw, leaving only a trail of pale, slightly-thickened bone in its wake.

“F.E.V. make deathclaw smarter, stronger. Old world science... Powerful.”

Caleb suddenly understood why the creature made this place home. It probably wasn't even an alpha when it stumbled in here and now it was the biggest fucking deathclaw Caleb could imagine. As big as a bus and covered in spines, wielding hardened bone-swords and carrying a rack of horns that could level a small house in a single swing... Caleb no longer wanted anybody- *anything* else to find this place. He sat stiff in the chair and nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the autoclave **ding** in alarm that it had completed its synthesis.

Caleb retrieved it from the port and with surprising dexterity, watched as the deathclaw plucked it from his hand, took two long strides over to the computer cluster in the center of the tanks and pushed the flat end into another port, draining the synthesized blood into the machine. It leaned down on all fours in front of the computer and watched the loading bar fill as the automated program spat out a large amount of data readout tape. When it stopped, the deathclaw made a deep satisfied chuff, stood up tall and turned to Caleb.

“Blood worked. Now, last step.”

The young man felt utterly diminutive before the beast, its horns nearly reaching the ceiling even as its claws grazed the floor at its feet. Its massive tail slowly swayed behind it like a serpent as the monster gazed down at Caleb, its dark face aglow in the green F.E.V. tanks surrounding it.

“Hey, so uh... I think since I helped you with your uh, experiment. Maybe I should get going.”

“Still need you, Caleb. Human... trial, last step.”

Caleb glanced to his left, in the direction of the empty corridor, and remembered he had a small inhaler of Turbo in his satchel. It felt nearly used up when he “found” it, but he'd only get one shot to escape so it didn't matter. “Human trials” didn't sound like a good idea to Caleb and the giant, super-intelligent abomination probably expected him to make a break for it. Pulling out the Turbo, Caleb watched for it to move in response, not sure if it knew what the chem even was. It was now or never.

Caleb quickly hyperventilated, using a similar technique to diving to trick his body into believing it had more oxygen. With a single motion, Caleb inhaled the drug and lept from the chair, feeling the drug instantly take effect. Slowly exhaling the turbo without breathing in would allow Caleb to feel its effects for a few precious extra seconds. The world slowed down, sound and light dragged as he took the first step of his sprint towards the door. Despite the chem's effects, Caleb could see the deathclaw was insanely fast and had moved to intercept. Caleb tossed the can of turbo towards the wall and instead of heading straight for the door, ran right towards the tanks as soon as the deathclaw passed out of sight within the ring. He heard the heavy footfalls of his foe, but Caleb was still only in his socks and remained fleet-footed and quiet as he reached the tank closest to him. The young man wheeled and ran between the tank and flanked the beast as it strode outside the ring. The can clattered and, not seeing Caleb, caught the beast's attention for a moment that allowed Caleb to pass behind it unnoticed.

Again out of its line-of-sight, Caleb slid and ducked down behind a long table on the opposite wall to where he started, closer to the corridor, but now the deathclaw had lost track of him entirely. The turbo was beginning to fade and Caleb slowly, quietly exhaled the chem's toxic gas as his vision began to blur. He would need a second to recover, but he believed he had the time as long as he remained calm.

He heard a crash as the deathclaw overturned a table near where he had been sitting and a low chuff echoed in the large room. He was being hunted. He needed to escape but was sure the monster was watching his only exit. He tried to think of something that would distract the creature again, something it was certain to react to. He cautiously peeked past the table and shot backwards into the center computer cluster, sending a loud echoing ricochet through the room. He flinched back as he heard the monster's bellow booming in his very bones and the deathclaw ran into the center ring. Caleb took his chance and bolted towards the corridor, running as fast as he could, adrenaline and chems fueling him. He could hear it on his heels, the loud scrape of its claws and tail on the concrete and metal just behind him. He pushed his muscles further, felt the burning in his thighs and suddenly, his foot touched nothing but air and he found himself plucked right off the ground by his jacket. Caleb tried to squirm free from his clothing, but he couldn't wriggle out from the zipped up clothing quickly enough and found himself 20 feet in the air, the deathclaw having climbed up the side of the room and held him in his giant, razored grasp.

"Got you... Caleb is clever...worthy, but legs are too short."

The monster had toyed with him the whole time. It was like a giant cat had been baiting him into trying to escape for its own amusement. Caleb cursed and gazed down at the vat of bubbling green sludge. Any words he could say stuck in his throat, he had nothing, no more tricks. The stinging chemicals hit Caleb's nose and they made him want to retch. He felt weightless for a second and watched the green rush towards him. The bastard monster had tossed him!

Caleb could only awkwardly shout *"Fuck!"* as he splashed into the F.E.V. All he could see was the brightly glowing green, even when he clenched his eyes shut. He sank like a stone and the intense heat shocked his body, causing him to gulp in a mouthful. He could hear the muffled, but booming voice of the deathclaw above the tank as he felt the strange mutagenic virus flooding his body...

Don't worry, Caleb. Blood is strong. Make you strong too.

Chapter 2

The old man's wrinkled face was dark like tanned leather. He rocked gently in his chair, watching the merchant caravaneers and their pack-brahmins slowly trudge down sun-baked Route 161 towards I-15. Whittling a stick, he paid little mind to the young man stepping out of the bar and onto the porch. All the youngsters wanted nothing more than to escape Goodsprings the first chance they got. Pete tried to talk sense into his nephew as a boy. Tried explaining that the prospecting life was hard and not at all glamorous.

You could go a decade digging through rusted out muck and find nothing worth risking your neck...

But he never did sway young Caleb. He left with a wave and never looked back. Most prospectors who weren't just chem junkies rummaging through junk piles were older. Younger folks moved to New Vegas and got work with NCR as sharecroppers or troopers. While three square meals a day was heaven for some, Caleb never liked the idea of joining an organization modeled from the Old World. The radiated evidence all around was enough for him to know that the old ways should stay in ruins. The bombs were a reset, not a setback. In just a few years, Caleb had become an excellent prospector, but still hadn't found that 'big score to slow down. He often reflected on his retired uncle Pete's wisdom and experience.

"Don't bite off more than you can chew and don't be killin' folk over some rusty junk. Your soul's more important than money."

Like giant tweezers, long claws plucked the steaming remains of Caleb's jacket and carefully pulled the prospector out of the F.E.V. and laid him down on the catwalk. The man didn't move for several long seconds and the Deathclaw looming overhead chuffed a sigh. Caleb's body suddenly jerked and he flipped over to vomit through the metal grating. Caleb emptied his guts of the viral green sludge, coughing and sputtering as he slowly regained consciousness. Weakly, he tried to crawl away. Somewhere. *Anywhere* else than here and felt his bones creaking like they were made of glass. He collapsed and fought to stay awake,

pushing with his remaining strength over onto his side. His blurry, stinging eyes fell upon the deathclaw, hanging above from the rafters like a shadow from hell itself.

"Look like shit."

Caleb rolled his eyes and flopped over onto his back, his ragged breathing burned in his chest which he assumed was a symptom of acute radiation sickness. He fumbled with shaky, weak fingers into his pack for a pouch of RadAway, hoping he could stave off the worst of it, but could only groan with a raspy wheeze when he pulled out the destroyed remains of the medicine.

"What... did you do... to me...?"

The Deathclaw dropped from its perch on the vaulted overhang and walked away towards the table with the autoclave. Caleb groaned and tried to pull himself up, feeling the stinging in his muscles as his flesh seemed to itch and crack. *I'm becoming a ghoul*, he thought as his weakened body trembled, sitting up, his head hung low. The deathclaw returned with a document. A VaultTech memo regarding the F.E.V. his captor had been experimenting with. His vision was blurry, but he got the jist of what this facility was designed to do: research and development of a Forced Evolution Virus that the old-world government was, no doubt, trying to weaponize.

Caleb took a few moments longer to let sink in just what was done to him. He was infected with a virus that was, at this moment, transforming his DNA into... something. He glanced down at the emptied vial of the synthesized blood still plugged into the central cluster and the young man's eyes grew wide as he put it all together.

"You wanted to turn me into a fucking deathclaw?!" Caleb spat in pain, wishing he could vomit again, if he hadn't already emptied everything he had. He buried his face in his hands as he felt the ache and sting across his body. He was going to either become a giant monster- or the experiment would fail and he'd probably mutate into something like one of those horrifying centaur abominations he'd seen pictures of... Caleb would have cried out in rage if his throat wasn't in such pain.

"Do not fear. We... make family. You become Queen of smart deathclaw."

Caleb looked over into the glinting red eyes of the alpha. *Queen...*? "D-do you think I'm female?"

The deathclaw scratched it's cheek slowly, glancing away, in the most human expression Caleb had seen it do: embarrassment.

"Did not know. Saw face. Made... guess."

Caleb laid back down on the grated metal catwalk and let out a labored sigh, feeling pins and needles in his hands and feet as he contemplated his day leading up to this.

"Great! I could've gotten the biggest score of my life and instead, I'm getting turned into a monster's broodmare because I have a baby-face."

The deathclaw chuffed and walked off for a few moments, giving Caleb a chance to take off his pip-boy. He was sure it would be broken after the tank, but found it still in working order. Loosening it, he wondered if maybe he could still use the helpful device once his claws came in. Trying to keep calm, he joked aloud about his trouble with women and the general lack of them out in the middle of the wasteland... Now he would have pussy wherever he went.

He glanced down at himself, clothes half-melted and still steaming with hot sludge... and saw the skin on his chest begin to move. The claws of his captor rose up over the catwalk and gently set a couple of syringes, Medex, on down next to him. He wordlessly and begrudgingly thanked the creature with a nod who moved back to observe from a distance. Injecting one in the arm, Caleb felt the nerves jolt and then mild relief.

He rested his head back and felt a powerful tension beginning to seize across his whole body. His knees burned and his chest ached. He felt the cracking, dried skin flake and he scratched at his side and on his thigh. He kicked his legs as his shoes strained, audibly creaking as his toes pressed tightly against the inside. His fingers curled around the metal grate below him, thrusting his hips up to relieve the burning in his spine. Caleb clenched his teeth and groaned a dire, painful curse as his muscles and bones popped and twisted, the intensity building until it felt like every cell in his body was transforming all at once!

It took everything in him to keep breathing. His muscles felt so tight he gasped for air in the small window when they relaxed. He looked at his hand shakily, feeling every bone and tendon twitching madly. It suddenly hurt much worse and he could only look on in horror as each finger began to stretch, his palm growing leathery and long, Caleb groaned as his nails thickened and grew sharp. His bicep bulged oddly as the bones stretched and pulled the meat along with them, growing his arm to double the length to its twin and significantly more muscles. His new arm was heavy and awkward as he let it fall to his side, too heavy and numb to do anything right now.

Caleb tried to control his breathing, still hyperventilating, and grit his teeth as his chest made a loud, painful series of cracks. His skin stretched and was red with inflammation. He wanted to rake his nails across the itching flesh but only stopped due to the intense pain down

his spine pushing apart at each vertebrae as they grew harder and larger, stretching the poor man's torso taller as his neck strained and gained new length as well.

He clenched his eyes shut, feeling like if he saw himself, it would drive him completely mad. His guts throbbed with heat and lurched as his bones were forced to make more room, throbbing with deep sickening crunches as the ribcage grew and barreled out his chest. He felt the bars of the handrail pushing against his arm. *He was getting too big for the catwalk*, he thought and felt delirious as he tried to move his awkward, heavy arms.

The pain down his spine pushed into his hips as new bones began to form and struggle against the thin flesh above his ass. He tried to lift his hips to relieve the pain and felt a fleshy, warm wetness run down his back. A tail had burst through his flesh and was rapidly growing, weighing down his trembling human legs and swaying all over as it clumsily stretched longer than his old body was tall below him.

He had to get up off his back. Caleb painfully rolled to his belly and crawled upright, using his mutated arm to pull himself forward along the catwalk. His tail, still growing longer, swayed so hard it threw him off balance and the young man nearly sliced through the metal railing with his new nails trying to stay upright. Breathing heavily and totally exhausted, Caleb just focused on moving. He stumbled towards the metal stairs, feeling the incredible weight of his new torso and arms pulling him down and knew if he stopped walking, he'd not be able to push himself back up. He used what little strength he had left to kick one foot out in front of him and then the other, pulling himself forward with his one freakishly long arm, his black claw-like nails growing by the second.

With every passing moment that Caleb closed in on the stairs down to the mail floor, he felt the tail swaying behind him growing more powerful as hot blood and muscle throbbed within. Scale and keratin spread down its length, turning it from a fleshy, inflamed pale pink to a darker, mottled red hide with grey scales. The scales peeking beneath his flaking chest skin looked like smoldering coals and the young man felt an odd sensation of pride in the flaring color spreading down his torso. Finally, Caleb reached the steps, legs shaking as he held himself up with his more transformed right arm.

Suddenly, the toe of his shoes erupted as black talons pierced the leather and Caleb cried out as his legs gave out, violently seizing as the muscles in his thighs and calves bulged and swelled bigger. His soles arched and painfully grew longer, pulling his leather boots apart along the heel and then bursting around his growing ankles. His knees felt like grit and sand were grinding on bone as his legs grew longer, pushing him several feet taller over the catwalk, nearly as tall as the looming deathclaw that watched just out of reach in the shadows.

As he strained and cried out, he felt his neck tensing along with his shoulders and jaw. Caleb wept salty tears uncontrollably as he desperately wobbled down the stairs, his mind trying to stay focused on that single goal. The young man felt the tattered, soaked remnants of his

pants fell from his swollen muscular flanks and an odd stench filled his nostrils. With a ragged, deep breath he looked down at what was happening between his legs and let out a groaning, trembling sigh at what he saw. With a sad spurt of cum, Caleb watched as his shriveled cock rose and was enveloped by dark, leather folds. His new womanhood bloomed and turned a dark orange, surrounded by the dark grey scales and reddish hide on his thighs and tail. It ached immediately with sensations foreign to the former man. He translated his body's new urges and blushed. He was certainly turned into something created to breed. Infertility was common among mutants, but with the F.E.V being tested here, it seemed, at least internally, his body knew what it wanted...

Caleb felt the flesh bubbling with heat just above his new cunt and a pair of dark udders formed with two small teats on each. His breathing quickened as his spine popped down along the tail and hips and he felt his back muscles tightening him down from a human gait to a hunched form akin to other deathclaws.

He stood still a moment, feeling the awkwardness fade from his new position as the bones and muscles acclimated. This is how deathclaws stood. They could stand up taller, but not comfortably for very long. He was forever cursed to walk like a beast. Caleb descended the remaining stairs solemnly, feeling the last of his humanity fade from the neck down as he stood just like the abomination over in the corner. He smelled an odd, oily saltiness in the air and his loins tingled with a strange warmth as he tried to glare at the monster, feeling his chest and loins flood with heat and actually change to a brighter reddish color.

His body was incapable of deception. He felt it building in his loins the moment he smelled the scent. It was *him, that fucking beast*. Caleb cursed and without thinking, scraped at his chest, feeling the little bit of human flesh clinging to his new scales fall away. He looked down- and then back at himself, feeling the vertebrae in his neck popping quietly as they slowly grew form and mass, then started stretching his neck longer. He could feel his bones, now as long and large as they would get, begin to harden and gain weight, turning almost stone-like and his muscles continued to fill out his lanky frame.

"You- you ugly fuck... you think I'm gonna... just- just lift this tail and let you... fuck me full of eggs?" Caleb felt his rage burn in his chest like a flame growing brighter. The crest across his scales seemed to glow brighter, turning a magenta glow as his loins ached. The former man felt like meat before the alpha, the way it's expression changed as it looked at Caleb... confused him in ways he couldn't describe. The monster didn't respond, fixating on something Caleb couldn't yet detect. As he felt the muscles in his extremities slowly build and swell, Caleb strained his neck as his small, human face increasingly looked bizarre on the rest of his gigantic deathclaw body.

Caleb hyperventilated as he tried to catch his breath, his now huge lungs never quite getting enough air through his small nose and mouth. He felt like his lungs would collapse if he

didn't get more air before a strong pop in his jaw thrust forward suddenly and grunted as his teeth creaked loudly. His moans turned raspy as his long neck began to fill out like the rest of him, the hide on his throat sagging slightly at first. He loudly growled in pain as his mouth started to change quicker, flicking his tongue as it stretched to fill his wider, longer maw as his teeth lengthened into razors. Like an iron trap, his jaw clamped shut, clenching as his face broke and pushed out into the square, bestial muzzle. Caleb saw his reflection in the tank, watching it in horror as his human face crunched and snapped beneath the skin as his cheeks sharpened and his eyes stung as they turned into darkened slits.

Caleb felt one last powerful tightness behind his nose and a series of quickened crunches pushed his face out fully into its new shape. He groaned as he flared his nostrils and felt the cool air rush through the longer sinus cavity. He drew in a deeper breath than he'd ever done before and smelled *everything*. His own new skin, his shed blood, the soft spice of his own cunt... Caleb's brain, foggy from the ordeal, attempted to categorize every stench and odor until it was overridden by *him*. The oily stink of the deathclaw from before had so much more depth and complexity now. Caleb smelled the beast's flesh so well he could practically taste the saltiness. His horns had their own scent, as did his...

Caleb's eyes fell to the deathclaw's sheath and he shook the intrusive instinctual through from his mind. He would resist the bestial urges for as long as he could. His body might be a monster, but he was still Caleb, his intelligence was intact, like the deathclaw wanted, and it would be his undoing... somehow.

"Your color. Never seen before. Like fire. Sunset."

Caleb resisted the way that deep, hellish voice affected his body, but he couldn't get the smell out of his head. It was ever present, the entire room was this beast's lair and reeked of it. Caleb stumbled away to the other side of the room, groaning as his brow cracked and two protrusions stabbed out from within. He had to be careful with his new fingers, the sword-like nails would slice even his new hide to ribbons if he reacted carelessly and gingerly found the boney spikes not yet piercing the skin of his forehead. He looked at his reflection again, seeing the twisted visage of a deathclaw pushing its way out of a human's face. His monstrous teeth jutting up past his lower lips and his sunken, dark eyes looked like that of a nightmare's. He watched in pain as the horns slowly grew, splitting the last of his human flesh as it cracked into scales and thickened into hide. They curled backwards, dark like his claws and spikes, and grew like a long crown to protect the back of his neck. His face, now totally succumbed to the F.E.V., was that of a hellish abomination, made from the old world's hubris.

Caleb was a deathclaw.

His throat hurt. It felt wrong, too big. With a pop in his jaw, he stretched his new mandibles and attempted to utter a curse at the deathclaw peeking at him between the tanks from across the room.

"Well? You big fuck... Are you happy? Am I your goddamn dream-girl now?"

It was surreal to hear how deep his voice had become, with an odd kind of reverberation that still kept a similar tone to how his human voice sounded. It was familiar... but broken.

"You are... desirable. Yes."

Caleb hated how much it's voice affected him and kicked himself internally for goading the monster into speaking. He wanted these new feelings to stop. Caleb couldn't feel anymore of the pulsing heat that propelled his transformation and hoped that meant he was finished. He couldn't be certain, but realizing his vocabulary hadn't been simplified, his thoughts seemingly equally lucid... despite the invasive instincts, had he become a deathclaw but with his human intelligence intact? He was at least thankful for that. Maybe he could discover a cure, or manage to convince some traders he wasn't a threat...

He needed to escape this other deathclaw first. Caleb glanced over to it and prepared a plan. He was tired and not as coordinated to being this shape, but from this angle... actually looked a bit bigger than his adversary. Were females bigger normally? He didn't have the answer, but with each passing second, the sensations in his loins ate away at him. Caleb had to kick this thing's ass quick before he found himself presenting- just the thought of it flooded his nether with warmth.

"What's your plan, then? Hoping I succumb to your pheromones and just... give up?"

The beast was silent as it rounded the nearest tank, so close! Caleb recoiled and made his body smaller, hoping to trick it into thinking he would be an easy fight. His tail awkwardly curled round as if to guard himself, not easy to control yet on command. Caleb waited, the beast's scent threatening to overwhelm him.

"Deathclaw females submit to... Alpha."

As the male looked down on him, Caleb felt his chest bloom magenta along with his nethers. He instinctively flicked the tip of his tail, and felt the intense flood of hormones into his mind. Just being near this monster was like being hypnotized! Caleb felt something tight clinging onto his wrist and realized he was still wearing the loosened pip-boy. Before the monster was upon him, flashed the light on a strobe pattern in his face, blinding him for just a second as Caleb curved his tail behind the beast's legs. With a lunge, Caleb roared and shoved the Alpha into the tank, tripping him on the tail and sent him flying into the tank's metal hull. Crunching the side in and puncturing the metal with one of the Alpha's horns, F.E.V. poured out as the Alpha ripped its horn free and tried to grab Caleb.

The two locked claws, the boney swords clattering loudly as they wrestled. The Alpha's footing was slippery from the green slime before Caleb stood up tall like the Alpha had done to intimidate him and the monster realized how big Caleb had become. Standing a full head taller not counting the horns, Caleb had reach and size, and sure-footing, he planted his heavy claws, slicing into the tile flooring like soft clay. With all his strength and a mighty roar, Caleb lifted the Alpha over his head and slammed him down on the ground. Exhausted, Caleb backed away, feeling the strain of his new, heavier body in his burning muscles.

"You... *pant*... like that?" Caleb smirked, sweat dripping from his brow.

The Alpha shook its head, dazed and clearly pissed, jetting a burst of hot air through its nose in annoyance. The F.E.V. that had gotten all over the monster's head and back seemed to absorb into its hide, making its dark scales glow a sickly radioactive green. Caleb looked on as the monster grew as it stood up, eclipsing their size difference and the dark knot-like spines along its shoulder, back and tail suddenly erupted longer and sharper. A deep chuckle that came from the beast vibrated through Caleb's body filled him with dread.

"Fight is good. Strong mate make strong brood."

The beast grabbed Caleb by the throat with incredible speed and squeezed hard as it lifted him up into the air with one hand, using the other to draw a thin slice across the bright red crest on Caleb's chest. The hormones raged in his mind as his nethers burned. He hated the wetness between his legs, hated the deathclaw's stink, hated its stupid face. With a stifled roar, Caleb willed every ounce of strength into his arms and grabbed the long horns of his adversary. Tensing his muscles, he pulled the horns in either direction and kicked his talons into the neck of the monster. He felt heat trickling down his toes as the deathclaw choked a stifled bellow in pain. Caleb tugged with all his might and felt the left horn give way. With a wet crunch, it snapped free and the monster tossed Caleb away, its neck weeping blood and a wild rage burned in its eyes.

"Caleb... Bitch!"

Its broken speech cracked as blood oozed from its lips. The monster hissed and clambered up onto the metal rafters. Caleb had hardly any strength left, his legs ignoring his pleas to move, to run. His claws curled round the long spear of his "mate's" lost horn and gripped it weakly on the ground. The monster leaped down from its perch, roaring as it meant to bodyslam Caleb. His pip-boy flickered and a grimly low percentage shone on its amber VATS calculator. The beast landed with an explosive crash, knocking beakers and equipment from the tables and shelves of the laboratory as it shook the entire level.

Hot blood dripped onto Caleb's face. The hideous face of the Alpha was stretched out in agony, its tongue lolled out between bloody, broken fangs. Its eyes were wide in surprise and pain. Caleb groaned weakly, having taken most of the weight of the monster, and looked down to find the broken horn had hit its mark. Bracing it against the floor, Caleb only had a moment to get it into position. It had impaled the Alpha through its chest. Blood choked its breathing and it groaned a haunting dirge. Something inside Caleb hurt to see it in such pain, but he stifled his body's instincts. Caleb tried to roll the beast off of himself, but lacked any strength to move. His limbs trembled and the weight atop his body made his breathing weak. He felt hot, shallow breaths from the beast's nostrils flare as it tried to speak, but could only sputter a bloody drool before it collapsed atop Caleb, dead.

He lay beneath it for what felt like hours, drifting in and out of consciousness. Caleb's body had used up everything it had to barely survive his battle and took an excruciatingly long time to recover enough to finally squirm out from under the dead Alpha. Dragging himself up to his feet, Caleb looked around for anything to eat. He was a monster, but he refused the easy option of cannibalizing the other deathclaw for food. Plus, he had no idea what the F.E.V. in the Alpha's blood could do to him if he ingested any. He didn't want to be any bigger or weirder looking than he already was.

Finding a still-working fridge, Caleb opened it to discover that none of the appliances in the communal area had even been plugged in. This place was filled with unused, mint-condition pre-war treasure and he had no idea how he would be able to sell any of it now that he was like this...

Caleb pondered as he sniffed for anything he could salvage. His stomach ached madly as he tried to imagine a place that wouldn't shoot on sight and his answer always came back to Goodsprings. Out of the way of any crazy Strip politics, caravans didn't usually set up camp in town, so he could... maybe...

He remembered the last time he spoke with his Uncle Pete nearly 10 years ago. He had warned Caleb. Made him promise to take care of himself... looking down at himself, Caleb felt he had broken that promise handily. He sat a while, feeling the ache of hunger fade for a bit and thought about herself. Him. Self. He wasn't a woman exactly, but he didn't really want to go walking around as a giant female monster telling people he was Caleb the prospector. He had to create a new identity. He had time to think about it on the road, and so Caleb resolved to try to refer to herself as female, if nothing else it would relieve the growing internal confusion she felt. She. God, what a day.

The air started to stink of deathclaw blood as Caleb searched for whatever supplies she could find. Her instincts were on edge so she tried humming a classic tune under her breath to

calm herself down. The deathclaw part of her brain was messing with her, focusing on darkened corners and odd smells more than Caleb ever felt the need to before. It was something she'd need to get used to.

Finally, some luck, as Caleb discovered a set of construction tools tucked into a closet. She could try to shave off some of her claws length so she could get back some dexterity before going back out into the wasteland. Gathering the meager supplies in her satchel, she added them to a bundle she tied together filled with a handful of the most valuable science equipment she could grab from the tables.

Caleb was right in her guess as she entered the mouth of the side corridor and smelled hints of fresh air trickling down into the lab. She carefully made her way up through the narrow tunnel dug out by the dead Alpha, dragging the blood-soaked horn behind her like a club. It was a fairly long and winding tunnel, such that it surprised her to wonder just how good deathclaw smell must be to find a lab this deep. The smell of the F.E.V. must be pretty potent, but she'd need to be outside in the fresh air before she could tell the difference. She passed a few piles of broken brahmin and mole rat bones, picked clean and covered in deep scratches she could tell were from the Alpha. Caleb felt the hunger pang across her belly again. She would need to hunt when she got to the surface and hoped to not get shot at by any passing traders. A lone deathclaw was dangerous but manageable for a small group of mercs guarding a caravan and they wouldn't hesitate to fire warning shots at her. She regained her focus, slipping through the small mouth of the Alpha's tunnel- her tunnel, Caleb corrected, the Alpha was dead and the Vault belonged to her now.

Caleb scaled a small cliff inside where the tunnel opened up into a cavern. A thin spring of water trickled across the floor of the cave and Caleb crouched down to smell it. She brought the pip-boy near the water and detected very few rads and she couldn't smell anything wrong with it. Leaning down to take a drink, she felt how dehumanizing it was to lap water up from the ground, but her body's survival instincts pushed her down to all fours and drink. Her massive jaw was awkward and her long claws stopped her from just cupping it in her long paws. She slowly slurped the cool water, relieving the pain in her belly somewhat after a few drinks. She messily dribbled it down her chin and carefully wiped her mouth with her forearm. Being so careful to not hurt herself performing human movements was annoying. She couldn't wait to cut and grind down her nails, wondering if she could turn her claws into spikes for traps. She felt happy to still be able to think about building things. Imagining her brain melting and becoming a mindless beast horrified her.

Light filtered in around a partially collapsed rockface. Upon closer inspection, the rock seemed to be a camouflaged piece of heavy duty plastic, maybe salvaged from some old-world display. Caleb wondered what would have become of her if the Alpha had overpowered her, possibly crippled her, bred and trapped her inside the vault to pump out eggs and feed babies forever... Caleb shuddered.

It was over... she wouldn't have to deal with that fucker ever again.

She dragged the horn with her as she stepped into twilight. She'd been in there the whole day. Replacing the false rock door, she decided it was wise to relieve herself outside the cave to ward off any wildlife sniffing around. Nothing, generally, went out of its way to fuck with deathclaws. Caleb looked around before checking her pip-boy map. There wasn't much nearby, Boulder City was a picked-clean ruin with only a handful of settlements within a few hours walk. She scanned the horizon, watching the moisture rippling off the El Dorado dry lake and tiny human silhouettes slowly move down highway 95. Caleb felt a pang of melancholy wash over her. She wouldn't be able to walk the long 15 back home. She'd be a monster anywhere she went. Hunted as an abomination. She wondered if she made the wrong choice in the vault. Maybe being a broodmother would've been better than being the biggest fucker to shoot at in the wasteland...

Suddenly, Caleb caught a new scent on the wind. She wasn't sure what it was, but it smelled earthy and... warm? It was hard to describe it with how complex her sense of smell had become. Caleb crept down, keeping her giant silhouette low and wondered how silly she probably looked sneaking around as fucking huge as she was, spines and claws and her long tail. There was another scent, more faint, but it made her mouth water. She was so hungry, she wondered if her deathclaw body would be okay with just eating whatever she found raw. A brahmin, bighorner, a coyote... everything sounded good to the starving monster-girl.

Cresting the hill as quietly as she could, she found the source of the smell: a tiny herd of bighorners grazing on the hillside. Her mouth instantly watered and she couldn't help but drool. She was so hungry and had barely any strength to give chase on anything that had more fight. She saw three, including a calf, clustered together close by and none had heard or smelled Caleb yet.

It would be easy, she thought. Just like popping a gecko in the head. She ran the scenario over in her head a few times, imagining how she would take one down. Looking down at her improvised club, the Alpha's horn, she had her answer. She tossed the horn just over their heads, as it landed in the brush next to the largest bighorner, the trio was spooked and groaned with surprise, breaking into a run right into Caleb's direction. An intense rush filled her mind and she lunged forward directly into the largest, the female and drove her claws into its flank. It groaned and reflexively flung its head forward, its eyes wide with fear. The male stumbled away in surprise and gave Caleb her chance, cutting across the female's front leg, slicing shallow through the ankle. It took flight, racing to its calf to protect it as it hobbled from its leg wound.

Satisfied that she had crippled the bighorner, she spun on her heels, diving through the cloud of dust before pouncing upon the male's back and biting down through the back of its neck with her insanely powerful jaws. Like a vice, her teeth crunched straight through the bone, severing its spine and the beast fell dead instantly. She watched the calf trot away, mewling

loudly. Her body was tense and her deathclaw instincts screamed at her to kill the morsel. She forced her eyes to blink, to clear her mind, to be human again, and sighed deeply as the tension across her neck and back muscles relented, her hot blood relaxing. She was fighting an apex predator's primal urge for blood, but she knew that she would feast on the male bighorner. She could always catch the others later if she was hungry. She looked over at the blood trail down the hill from the wounded female and was content they would not return, deciding she should try to figure out how to take apart the dead male first. She'd never had to hunt or dress a bighorner before and was somewhat lost as to where to begin.

Caleb bit into the male's tough underbelly and spat. It tasted awful and was like biting into a tree. Despite it being the thinnest part of the beast, its hide was fibrous and tastes like excrement. Instead of enduring any more of that, she used her claws to slice apart the hide and had to stop herself from digging in right there. She wasn't a fucking animal- not yet. She would start a fire and cook the bighorner. Butchering it was less difficult than she thought, with her claws she at least had the advantage of very sharp tools. She carefully pulled out the guts and tossed them aside and began working, hoping the smell didn't attract too much attention.

Her satchel had a magnesium fire starter and a hot plate too small for any of the thick, jagged slabs of steak she was producing. She figured that if anybody was watching through a scope, they'd be laughing their asses off seeing this big dumb deathclaw using its fingernails to butcher up steaks and cutting them smaller in order to fit on a steel speed limit sign in order to cook. Her belly angrily called out for food as she flipped over the first, smelling deliciously as she dropped a sliver of fat down on top of the cooked side. Bighorner was usually lean, but the male had plenty of fat on him to use for flavor and Caleb caught herself drooling as she watched it cook. It took several more minutes of fussing with it before the thick steak was medium rare like she preferred, but Caleb finally was able to eat. Plucking the meat from the hot metal with her claws, she devoured it in a single bite. She chuffed happily as the piping hot steak warmed her belly and immediately started on the next steak.

As she got into a rhythm with each piece, her mind began to drift from the work to more existential matters. Her new life, her humanity, identity. She couldn't go walking around the Mojave Wasteland as "Caleb the talking deathclaw", the folks not immediately shooting at her would treat her like a sideshow at best. She had to come up with a new name, dispose of her old life and try to eke out something new. The anxiety gnawed at her. She decided to leave these problems for "tomorrow" Caleb, so as to not spoil her meal.

The moon was high in the sky by the time Caleb finished her meal, spending several hours cooking as much as she could until her hot plate's fuel was completely spent. Her belly was full and the terrible shaking in her limbs had faded. Leaving the carcass for scavengers, Caleb decided it was best to get some rest back in the hidden cave nearby. She gathered her things and carefully slipped back through the cavern wall. Smelling the entrance to be sure she was still the only occupant. She marked near the doorway with her scent again and found a flat bit of ground inside along a dark corner and laid down awkwardly. Her unwieldy body was hard

to get comfortable with all the spikes and claws, and her tail curled around her body. She laid with her head on her arm, listening to the soft babbling of the tiny spring of water running along the floor for only a few moments before she was fast asleep.

She dreamed about turning into a deathclaw. Feeling it all again except this time, she didn't have control and the beast she'd become took over, giving itself to the Alpha. As the monster bred her, it chuckled deeply and she shot awake. She could still feel the sensation from the dream, the warmth in her belly fading as her body ached just as it did during her battle. Her body wanted to fuck. Wanted to breed. Caleb shook the sleep from her head and looked down at herself. Yes, she was still a deathclaw, but she was unbroken. She would retain her humanity. If she ever did decide to be with another deathclaw, it would be on her terms, not because some instinct forced her to.

She shook off the dream and took a drink from the spring, enjoying how cool it was on her throat. Her breath stank like meat and Caleb wondered how big of a toothbrush she would need to keep her maw full of razors clean. She came back to her name, how she saw herself and resolved to sort it out when she had some idea of a living situation that wasn't a cave near an active trading route. She could only stay hidden so long and she would rather nobody find this cave at all until she found a way to make this whole ordeal worth it. She had to leave so Vault 144 could stay a secret. The F.E.V. stuff was going to cause problems in the wasteland and Caleb needed to think of the right way to dispose of it. She remembered breaking one of the tanks in the fight with the Alpha and worried what would happen if it were to escape into the soil or the groundwater.

The more she thought about it, Caleb believed she'd need to bury both of the tunnels down to the vault door and the back one the Alpha dug. She would need to buy some explosives- probably C4 and a remote detonator in order to not collapse it on top of her too. Unfortunately, she did not have anything like that on hand. Looking down at herself and the meager supplies she had left after her ordeal, Caleb decided she would need to make the trek to Goodsprings. It was the only place she knew that had folks level-headed enough to not shoot at her immediately. That and her family...

Hopefully Uncle Pete was still kicking these days. It would be easier to convince the town she was of no harm to them if she had his support. She could cut across Black Mountain now that she was nearly immune to rads and take the northern pass to Sloan. There were still isolated packs of deathclaws and radscorpions that roamed the hills there, but that meant fewer caravans to run into- most still took the long way around to and from New Vegas.

Caleb sighed. It would be a gamble. She could use some cloth to cover most of her body, but there was no hiding her gait, her tail, her horns. She was extremely conspicuous to say the least. With an annoyed snort, she stood up and found the steel file she salvaged from the construction closet down in the labs and began to file down the claws on her left hand. She'd still be able to fuck up anything that came her way with her right hand's claws and her left was

dextrous enough that she could wield tools and some guns. She unrolled her dark green army blanket and planned out how she would cut a head hole to fit. At least some coverage from the sun was better than nothing in addition to confusing her very particular silhouette from the naked eye at distance. She didn't want to catch any sniper fire passing the I-88 trading post

Food and sleep had significantly helped her state of mind. Setting a goal and planning the route took her thoughts away from the fact she was a monster and all the problems her body was creating became a kind of puzzle she could slowly solve. In just a few minutes, Caleb had filed off one of her claws with only a small amount of blood. Once she was finished, she could collect her small haul of salvage and any other supplies that the F.E.V. hadn't ruined. She wasn't entirely sure how she was going to get the people of Goodsprings to not shoot at her on sight, but that was a problem she could solve later. The sun was rising high in the sky by the time she crawled out of her cave, replacing the cover and smelling the wind. She was starting to learn what certain aromas were and appreciate the information she could glean from the improved olfactory sense. Humidity, smoke, blood, humans stank a very particular way to deathclaws and it unnerved Caleb a bit the tickling on her neck she got when catching a whiff of human flesh.

She regarded her predatory instincts with suspicion, believing that at any time she could be overpowered by some wildness and do things she wouldn't otherwise. It was exhausting to constantly police her own subconscious like this and Caleb hoped she could find some kind of harmony with her deathclaw-self. With one last glance at the hidden entrance to her cave, she was off, hoping to arrive at Goodsprings before evening via her shortcut. Donning her makeshift cloak, the deathclaw was off, pistol on her hip and satchel tied across her chest. She passed the bighorner carcass, and noted how much had been eaten overnight. Bones were chewed on and several were cleaned or missing. Wild dogs most likely. A few buzzards flew overhead and Caleb felt uneasy. She scanned down the hill to the west- limited cover and a few shrubs. To the north, she could see a burned out car skeleton being used as a rest stop for a few travelers. Nothing strange. Her instincts were definitely picking something up and putting her on edge, but she couldn't see or smell anything weird.

Caleb pushed those feelings aside and carried on, slowly lumbering down the hill west. She'd have to cross a few roads but she was confident she could scare off most trouble without a fight. A breeze blew that cooled her scales nicely and the deathclaw wondered just how hot or cold-blooded she was like this. Cooked meat seemed to do well on her stomach and she hoped her body would appreciate other human amenities. She needed some familiarity in her new life.

On a hill, a few hundred yards away, a scope glinted in the light. It followed the odd cloaked deathclaw for a while as it marched west. An ungloved hand closed the viewport and a heavy mechanical gyro whirred as a massive metal body slowly stood up from its prone position hidden under a canopy of camouflage. Slinging the scoped laser rifle over its shoulder, the metal form wordlessly made its way towards the hill the deathclaw was seen slipping out of a

narrow cave and purposefully hiding the entrance. Peculiarities like these were often seen close to strange technology. The power-armored Brotherhood Paladin was certain they'd found something.