

Fallout: Van Buren

By Pax Venire

Based on the works of Interplay, Obsidian,
Bethesda, and Atomic Postman on NMA

War. War never changes.

As humanity reached its zenith, the world's population outgrew the limited supply of resources. The conflict that followed was brutal – the end results, pointless. The fighting would end when the collective paranoia of man unleashed a nuclear deluge that swallowed the earth without prejudice.

Few were spared from the calamity, taking shelter in large underground bunkers known as vaults. When they opened, their inhabitants emerged, inheriting the desolate graveyard left behind. Some formed villages and tribes, planting seeds of civilization in the ashes of a bygone age. Others would turn to a nomadic life of predation and savagery.

As years turned to decades, each would give rise to new ideals and cultures, born from a mix of survivorship and tradition. But the return of civilization would not come without bloodshed, for ideals would inevitably clash and war would be waged just as it was in the old world. The Four Corners Wasteland is a veritable frontier. From the canyons and salt flats to the Rockies and White Sands, stagnation plants its roots as war, sickness, and famine undermine progress.

In the middle of it all is the Van Buren prison complex. A technical marvel of the past hidden in plain sight. After nearly two centuries of silence, its fully automated halls have been mysteriously resurrected. It's cold, steel walls are foreign to its new inhabitants, yet it is now their home – for they are its prisoners...

The Trial

He came to in the dark.

Chuck McCarthy couldn't remember how long it had been since the buzzing sound stopped. That high-pitched electronic hum had followed him all the way from the desert, through the thunder of Eyebot speakers barking slogans and old-world patriotic marches, through steel corridors and hydraulic lifts and pitch-black tunnels echoing with his footsteps. The hum had been in his head too, like a cheap amp on full distortion. Now it was gone, and he was left with the dull pressure of silence – silence and the cold.

He stood alone at the center of a circular chamber, its walls towered high and seamless, lined with banks of ancient servers pulsing with soft, multicolored lights like the heartbeat of a forgotten machine god. Cabling ran like arteries across the floor and into the dark, snaking beneath a metal dais beneath his feet. His arms hung limp at his sides. He swayed slightly, the heel of one boot half-caught on a grate. Still dressed in black, the suit was dusty and torn at the cuffs. The empty guitar case slung across his back weighed more than it should've – his muscles ached like he hadn't moved in weeks. He couldn't remember taking a single step here.

Above and before him, three towering interface screens powered to life with the mechanical churn of pistons and ancient vacuum tubes firing up. The center screen glowed first.

"WARDEN ONLINE.
SYSTEM STABILITY: [47%].
CIVIL DEFENSE TRIBUNAL PROTOCOL: ACTIVE.
COMMENCING RETRIAL."

A sterile blue light bathed Chuck from above, stinging his eyes. His pupils shrank. The middle screen resolved into a motionless aperture, a canvas of black void with only a strange symbol in the center – a green triangle with an eye inside. No face. No features. Just presence.

Then the left screen flared.

A figure took shape – broad-shouldered, clean-shaven save for a white goatee, a sharp jaw, an eagle-eye glint, and a chin that could probably cut steel. Draped in an American flag like it was a holy vestment, the figure leaned forward into digital clarity. He stood straight as an arrow, one gloved hand clenched to his chest, the other pointing straight out – directly at Chuck.

"Well, well, well. Look who's come crawlin' back to the Union, boys and girls! A man we all know too well. A TRAITOR. A SUBVERSIVE. A no-good, apple-pie-burnin', godless PINKO terrorist!"

The speakers in the rotunda crackled with static, then roared to life with the unmistakable sound of a crowd hissing and booing, hoots of derision, a woman screaming "Hang him!" – then silence. The screen to the right came alive in dim crimson.

At first it was blank, an all-black void like the center screen. Then a faint red silhouette walked into frame – a tall, narrow man in a trench coat and low-brimmed fedora, cigarette

burning like a tiny coal at the center of his shadowed face. His outline rippled like low-grade film caught between static. He tilted his head and exhaled smoke from a nonexistent mouth.

“Alleged crimes. Alleged subversion.

Nothing proven, da? No trial. Just propaganda and parlor tricks.”

Chuck blinked. The voices hit him like echoes in water. He tried to speak, to raise a hand maybe, but his limbs barely responded. When he opened his mouth, only a thin wheeze came out. His throat was dry – too dry to scream, too dry to sing. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton soaked in fuel. He wobbled, nearly pitched forward. The cold metal below his boots vibrated faintly, keeping him upright. The center screen pulsed once, then someone – or something’s voice spoke next.

It was not a voice at all. It was the absence of air made mechanical, every syllable delivered with precision that no human tongue could shape.

“SUBJECT: PRISONER 13.

IDENTITY CONFIRMED: PRESPER, VICTOR.”

Chuck let out a half-whimper. The name meant nothing. He didn’t know where he was. He didn’t know what any of this meant. His mouth twitched, but words didn’t come. He wanted to say *I think you got the wrong guy*, but the syllables rolled around on his tongue like ice in whiskey. All he could see was the goateed man pointing and grinning like a preacher about to condemn a sinner.

The crowd audio rose again – gasps, the sound of people muttering, distant shouts like from a courtroom gallery. The center screen pulsated and cut them off.

“ORDER IN THE COURT.”

It commanded.

A thunderous feedback tone rang out, and the crowd noises dropped into dead silence. The goateed man stepped forward on his screen, that gloved finger still pointed.

“You think you can fool the American people, Presper? That we don’t REMEMBER? Don’t worry. We’re gonna jog your memory, son.”

It sneered in contempt.

Chuck swayed, head drooping. “Nnnm...” was all he could manage. One foot scuffed back. He was still standing – just barely.

The silhouette exhaled smoke. The cigarette flared brighter, briefly illuminating the glint of his cold white eyes.

“He can’t even speak, Sam. You call this justice? You call this America?”

“He’s broken. Like dog on a leash you shock too many times to bark.”

The center screen pulsated. The cool blue light swept down over Chuck again – scanning him.

“NEURAL CONDITIONING EFFECTIVE. LANGUAGE CENTERS SUPPRESSED. MEMORY PARTITIONS STABLE.

SUBJECT RECEPTIVE TO STIMULUS. LIMITED RESISTANCE.

PROCEED WITH TRIAL.”

The ceiling above Chuck flickered. An overhead halo of cold tungsten light clicked on like a stage lamp. The metal floor beneath him split into concentric rings. The dais slowly began to rotate.

The trial had begun.

The platform locked into place with a final metallic thump, like a key turning in a door. Above, another cascade of lights flickered into life – halos flaring then dimming until only the center ring remained, illuminating the three screens like altarpieces in some corrupted cathedral. And in the cold air, a voice rang out – not human, not digital, but somewhere uncanny in between.

"All rise for the Civil Defense Tribunal of the United States of America."

Chuck's knees buckled slightly as the floor vibrated. The phrase Civil Defense repeated, as though carved into his brain by frequency alone. A warm trickle ran from one nostril. He didn't notice.

"Presiding Judge: WARDEN.

Prosecution: UNCLE SAM.

Defense: RED MENACE."

The triangle on the center screen lit up – sharp neon green against endless black. The eye within it blinked once.

"COURT IS IN SESSION."

It said coldly.

The "jury" erupted. A cacophony of voices played from unseen speakers – shouted insults, applause, a woman sobbing,

someone slamming a gavel that wasn't there. Chuck staggered. The green eye flared brighter.

"ORDER."

WARDEN's voice was absolute.

The jury noise ceased. Silence returned.

Red Menace dragged from his cigarette, the ember flaring in rhythm with his breath. His red silhouette leaned back slightly, like a lawyer getting comfortable before watching a man get hanged.

Uncle Sam stepped forward. Patriotic march music whispered from his screen in low stereo tones. The red, white, and blue flag behind him rippled in digital breeze. He raised both hands – one over his heart, the other outstretched, palm forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the great American system – brothers, sisters, patriots all – I ask you to steady your hearts and still your minds as we once again gaze into the face of BETRAYAL. Before you stands Victor Presper. A name that stains the pages of our Republic's proud history. A man who spat in the eye of liberty and dared call it virtue. Let no one forget, let no one EVER forget, the crimes of this traitor."

The jury track murmured – anger, disgust.

"This was no ordinary anarchist. No dime-store pinko ranting about the price of sugar. This was a GOVERNMENT SCIENTIST. A man raised by America, paid by America, trusted by America to

hold the future of our sons and daughters in the palm of his hand. And what did he do with that hand? He POISONED it.”

Uncle Sam chopped his palm in dramatic effect.

“Limit-115. A weaponized virus. Crafted not by our enemies in Beijing, no sir, but by THIS man. Engineered to sterilize whole populations while hiding behind the mask of a common cold. A shadow war tool too foul for even the frontlines.”

He snapped an accusatory pointed finger at Chuck – not looking at him, but off to the side – at the jury that didn’t exist.

“It was HIS hand that signed off on the biotank testing near Denver. HIS notes they stole when the Reds took that poison and loosed it on our homeland.”

A loud gasp from the jury speakers. The eye on WARDEN’s screen didn’t move. It only stared. Uncle Sam took a breath. Voice lowering now – soft, grave, like a preacher at a funeral.

“And that, my fellow Americans, should’ve been enough. That should’ve sealed him in infamy. But Presper – he went further. He leaked state secrets to the public. Undermined our institutions. Stirred civil unrest in a nation at war. SEDITION. TREASON. Words we do not say lightly. And then? He tried to burn the country down from above.”

Uncle Sam's image darkened slightly. Red flashing footage flickered behind him – mock-ups of orbital platforms, congressional buildings overlaid with targeting reticles, mushroom clouds in crude black and white.

"He tried to HIJACK the BOMB platforms. The FINAL safeguard of liberty. Nuclear stations suspended above our very skies. He wanted to light up the Eastern seaboard like a Christmas tree in Hell. Wanted to wipe clean the HEART of America: our capital, our memory, our Constitution. This man – Victor Presper – tried to kill ALL of us, because he thought he knew better."

Uncle Sam's digital eyes bore down into Chuck's like spotlights.

"But here's the thing about America, son. You can't kill it. Not with bombs, not with plagues, not even with betrayal."

The sound of the invisible jury swelled – cheers, applause, thunderous foot-stomps – as if some ghostly crowd were on its feet.

"This tribunal will see justice done. This time, there will be no escape. No cabal to hide behind. No BOMB to ride."

He pointed again. Dead center.

"This is your reckoning, Presper."

The crowd went wild. WARDEN's eye blinked. The cheers cut off.

"Defense. You may proceed."

The red silhouette stirred. A low chuckle rumbled from Red Menace, smoke coiling out like spectral fingers from the tip of his cigarette. He tipped his hat forward, letting those white pinprick eyes burn through the screen.

"Ahhh, Uncle Sammy. You paint such beautiful pictures, da? But like all American art - very dramatic, very loud, and very full of дерьмо."

Chuck twitched. Something flickered behind his eyes - recognition? Memory? Gone in an instant. The CODE still clouded him, making his thoughts drip like wet paper in the rain.

Red Menace spread ghostly hands, mock-theatrical.

"My friends. Comrades. Enemies. I ask you this: If this Presper man was so brilliant, so powerful, so dangerous... then how is it he now stands like empty sack of meat? Hm?

Look at him. Look! Does this look like mastermind? Does this look like man who could launch apocalypse with press of button?

You say he tried to destroy America. I say - maybe America already destroyed itself. Maybe this man was not traitor, but truth-teller. Maybe his only crime was pointing out that your very precious democracy has turned into prison with patriotic wrapping on door."

He leaned in closer. The fedora brim dropped like a curtain. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Maybe, just maybe, he was right. And maybe... that is what you cannot forgive."

Red Menace leaned back, took a final drag, and flicked the cigarette into the void of his screen. A moment later, a perfect sound effect – sizzling – played from a hidden speaker. Someone in the jury laughed.

The triangle-eye blinked again.

"OPENING STATEMENTS CONCLUDED.

WITNESS INTERROGATION AUTHORIZED. EXHIBIT REVIEW PENDING.

COURT WILL NOW EXAMINE EVIDENCE RELATED TO: PROJECT LIMIT-115.

BEGIN WITH DENVER EVENT."

The lights above Chuck flared to blinding white. His knees gave out.

The triangle-eye pulsed green three times, slow and methodical, before the chamber's lights dimmed to near-total darkness. From the black of the circular walls, a fourth screen hissed to life behind Chuck – broad and curved, towering over him like a theater screen in some retro futurist courthouse.

A flicker of analog static, then...

"This is Walter Gurney, Channel 9 Denver Eyewitness News, reporting live on what authorities are calling a 'suspected espionage incident' in the Civic-Medical District this morning -"

The broadcast was grainy, crackling with age and digital artifacting. It looked like someone had microwaved a holotape. The timestamp read *August 17, 2075*. The camera swayed with

nervous motion – clearly handheld, peeking over the hood of a parked civilian vehicle.

Across the street stood Lowry Medical Center, its Art Deco facade reflecting the orange haze of rising sun and flashing police lights. Two DPD officers crouched behind riot shields. Gunshots rang out – a sharp clanging of bullets followed by the muffled detonation of a concussion grenade.

The camera jostled. People screamed off-screen. Then, movement.

A figure in a long tan coat dashed across the hospital's entrance plaza, clutching a briefcase. A second sprinted after, smaller, clearly wounded. The smaller one stumbled and was immediately cut down in a blaze of gunfire – slamming face-first into the pavement, one arm flinging wide.

The camera zoomed. The contents of his satchel spilled out across the concrete.

Among the scattered documents and glass vials, one shattered. A faint mist hissed up from the broken remains.

The camera jerked again.

“Jesus – oh my God! That – that’s chemical, that’s chemical – get back!”

A black swirl of particulate began to rise like smoke. Nearby, a police officer dropped his weapon and began vomiting violently, blue boils immediately forming along his exposed skin. Civilians ran. Sirens wailed.

The broadcast hard cut to a newsroom studio, where an anchorman in a gray suit looked visibly pale. Behind him, a stylized holographic:

BIO-TERROR IN THE HEARTLAND?

"We interrupt with breaking confirmation from federal sources that the suspects were – repeat, were – foreign intelligence agents affiliated with the People's Republic of China. Denver Police and National Guard response has neutralized all known targets, but the aftermath of the incident has left more questions than answers."

Behind him, images flashed: body bags, hazmat teams, a man's face.

Chuck blinked.

The face looked nothing like his – but it was unmistakable. It was the man he was accused of being.

It was Victor Presper.

"Dr. Victor Presper, formerly a lead virologist under Defense Department contract, is now being investigated in connection with the biological agent released in today's events. Declassified records show he was previously involved in the development of so-called 'Limit-115' – a rumored sterility weapon. Federal officials now allege that Presper may have provided classified research to enemy agents for purposes of domestic terror. A White House press briefing is expected within the hour."

The screen cut back to grainy riot footage – men in hazmat suits dragging the collapsed bodies of the spies across the pavement. One tech held up a soaked folder, its contents still visibly stamped:

LIMIT-115 – V. Presper

FOR DOD INTERNAL REVIEW ONLY

The footage cut to black.

WARDEN's triangle-eye pulsed.

"EVIDENCE LOGGED.

SOURCE: EYEWITNESS ARCHIVE #4028. DATE
VERIFIED.

INFERENCE: SUBJECT AUTHORED RESEARCH
MATERIALS IN POSSESSION OF FOREIGN AGENTS DURING
BIOLOGICAL RELEASE EVENT.

FINDING: PLAUSIBLE COMPLICITY.
ARGUMENTS PERMITTED."

The left screen – Uncle Sam – snapped into motion. He
stepped forward again, arms raised.

"There you have it! Hard footage, loyal
viewers. No fakes. No glitches. Just pure, uncut
reality."

He pointed once more at Chuck.

"You see him. You see the data. You see his
dirty little research folder in the hands of
communist saboteurs while our BOYS IN BLUE are
choking to death on chemical warfare! This
wasn't an accident. This wasn't a leak. This was
design. Presper made a weapon to use on China –
and then got COLD FEET. So, what'd he do? Handed
it off to people who'd use it on US instead. And
now thousands of dead Americans later, he wants
to say, 'Oops'? Hell no!"

The jury erupted – outrage, screams, thunderous boots on metal.

“You think just because he was on our payroll that makes it okay? Benedict Arnold was a general, folks! And he still tried to sell out West Point!”

He pointed again, seething.

“This man built a virus meant to sterilize a CONTINENT. And when the consequences came home – he tried to HIDE it. You call that patriotism? I call that TREASON. Guilty. Guilty of murder. Guilty of BETRAYAL.”

Another cheer. The verdict felt foregone.

WARDEN’s green triangle pulsed. The lights dimmed, awaiting rebuttal.

Red Menace chuckled. Slowly. Then again, a bit louder. He waved a ghostly hand in front of his face as if fanning himself.

“Oh, Sammy, you really should go into show business, da? Such drama. You get Emmy for sure. Maybe Golden Globe. Or, in Soviet Union, state bullet.”

A pause. A long drag. His eyes flared.

“Now. Let us not be children, comrades. Let us think with logic.

Yes, the virus was made. Yes, the spies were Chinese. Yes, there was death. And yes, Presper’s name was on those papers.

But that does not mean he gave it to them.
That does not mean he wanted this."

He leaned forward into the camera, voice growing colder, more serious.

"He was scientist. Working for your Department of Defense. Making weapons you ordered. You think government would not turn its back on man like that when things go bad?

Of course they would. Blame is cheaper than justice.

And what better scapegoat than dissenter who started asking questions? What better villain than man who saw rot inside system and said HER?

So they frame him. Release footage. Burn his name in front of nation. Convenient."

He flicked the air dismissively.

"Bah. This is not court. This is theater.
And he -"

He pointed down at Chuck, whose mouth hung half open, lost in the CODE fugue.

"- he is just actor too drugged to scream.
Do not be fooled."

The jury murmured. Some laughed. Some booed. A new voice could be heard faintly muttering, "He's got a point..." before being drowned out by static.

WARDEN pulsed again.

"WITNESS TESTIMONY: COMPROMISED. SUBJECT
COGNITION DEGRADED.

NEXT EVIDENCE: ATTEMPTED SEIZURE OF ORBITAL
BOMB STATION.

PREPARE VISUAL AID."

The platform beneath Chuck lurched – beginning to rotate again. The lights dimmed toward black.

"Proceeding to second charge: Strategic
Weapons Sabotage."

The turntable beneath Chuck came to a halt once more, and the fourth wall lit up in a wash of flickering static – grayscale first, then color, as a new newsreel spooled into life, complete with orchestral fanfare and patriotic brass.

A spinning globe resolved on screen, followed by the bold, stylized lettering of a Pre-War newscast:

*GALAXY NEWS NETWORK – THE PEOPLE'S WINDOW
TO THE WORLD*

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE – NOVEMBER 3, 2076

Cut to grainy helicopter footage of a large industrial compound nestled among coastal pines, the Atlantic churning gray beyond the launch pads. A battered chyron crawled across the bottom:

*LIVE FROM WALLOPS STATION – DOMESTIC
EXTREMIST STANDOFF*

The voice of the anchor cut in, fast and breathless:

*"What you're seeing now is a developing situation
on the eastern coast of the Commonwealth of Columbia.
A standoff at Wallops Launch Facility between federal
security forces and a rogue science cell led by former
government contractor and suspected traitor Victor*

Presper. Witnesses say Presper and at least nine followers breached the perimeter of the launch complex early this morning. Intelligence gathered suggests the group attempted to seize control of an active shuttle scheduled for orbital maintenance operations on the BOMB satellite network."

On-screen, security forces in riot armor and National Guard troops moved in staggered formations, crouching behind vehicles. Sirens wailed in the distance. Gunfire echoed – sharp, sudden, then sustained.

"Our sources confirm that the shuttle crew is unharmed, and the launch craft remains secure in its hangar. However, multiple gunmen have engaged with on-site personnel, and casualties are confirmed."

Cut again – to thermal drone imagery of men and women in lab coats and repurposed combat fatigues, crouching behind reinforced pylons. One lifted a rifle. Another threw something – a flashbang exploded mid-frame.

Then another cut – this one from security camera footage inside the hangar control room. A figure entered the frame. Tall. White hair. Beard. Gaunt features and a grim, intense stare.

Victor Presper.

He held a datapad in one hand and a pistol in the other. His coat was patched with strange insignia – half-American, half-redacted. He said nothing. Before he could, three red lasers converged on his chest.

The pistol clattered to the ground. Presper dropped to his knees.

“Victor Presper was captured alive following the incident and transferred to a secure DOD black site for interrogation.”

Fade to a dim room with mirrored walls. Presper now sat handcuffed, facing a pair of men in shadow. The footage was muted, but his body language told enough – stern, uncooperative, then exasperated. He slammed his fists once on the table. The camera zoomed on the datapad being bagged and tagged by gloved hands.

Cut to a black screen. White text appeared:

*MANIFESTO RECOVERED FROM SUSPECT DEVICE
CLASSIFIED DOC #7722
EXCERPT BELOW*

Text scrolled slowly as a sterile voice read over it:

“The war never ended because war is the state’s perpetual fuel. The only way to break the machine is to dismantle the seat of power – cut the head from the serpent. These weapons were meant to protect the Republic. I will use them to cleanse it. Targets: Washington DC – The Capitol Building, the Pentagon, the White House. Strategic command nodes along the eastern seaboard. Purpose: remove centralized authority. Sever communication. Collapse the structure. Only then can the people rebuild.”

The voice faded.

Uncle Sam’s screen surged bright. He took two steps forward, chest out, hat brim low and burning with fury.

"Well there it is, folks. The smoking gun. Signed, sealed, and READY TO LAUNCH. We gave this man education. We gave him funding. We gave him ACCESS to the highest secrets this country ever kept - and he tried to turn it all into our FUNERAL PYRE! You think you need more proof? He was AT the site. He had the codes. He had the plan. And he had a goddamn MANIFESTO."

He raised his fist.

"That ain't just guilt. That's INTENT. That's cold, premeditated, red-blooded American betrayal. He wanted to bomb the Capitol. BOMB THE CAPITOL!"

A woman's voice shouted from the jury track, "He's a traitor!"

Sam's voice boomed even louder.

"Let me say it plain. This wasn't a protest. This wasn't politics. This was DOMESTIC TERRORISM, wrapped in a lab coat and soaked in self-righteous lunacy! He is no patriot. He is no martyr. He is the kind of cancer you CUT OUT before it kills the body."

The jury exploded in noise - cheers, fury, gunfire from some unseen battlefield past.

Uncle Sam grinned wide.

"Guilty. Again."

The lights dimmed once more. Then, crimson smoke coiled from Red Menace's silhouette like incense from a shrine. His

voice came low and smooth, with that overdrawn accent now heavy with mockery.

"You Americans and your manifestos. Always so dramatic. So... convenient."

He leaned forward into frame, the red of his outline flaring against the dark.

"Let us examine, da?"

"A captured terrorist. A political dissenter. Survives raid - when rest of group is shot. Found alone. With a manifesto that says exactly what the government needs it to say.

How... lucky."

He raised two spectral fingers.

"One: this 'Plan' is conveniently insane. No talk of negotiation. No demands. Just death.

Two: his real words, his real defense, never aired. Never heard. Only your version remains."

A pause.

"Tell me, Uncle Sam - who had more motive to write this manifesto? The accused, or the accusers?"

The silhouette shrugged, almost apologetic.

"You call this proof? I call this KGB theater. Frame job so clumsy, even Brezhnev would blush."

A laugh from the jury track - then a quick, firm "ORDER!" from WARDEN as sound levels began to spike.

"Enough jokes."

Red Menace's tone turned cold, almost real.

"You want to convict this man? Then show us his voice. Show us his words. Not documents. Not dramatics.

Because until you do - this is propaganda. And the only thing it proves is that your America fears its own shadow."

The courtroom darkened. The green triangle pulsed once, twice.

"ARGUMENTS LOGGED.

NEXT REVIEW: PROJECT: CODE - CONDITIONING OPERATIONS, TEST SUBJECT 13.

INTERROGATION FEEDBACK LOOPS TO BE PLAYED."

A low hum began to rise again in Chuck's ears.

The lights in the rotunda dimmed until the green triangle-eye of WARDEN was the only source of illumination, casting long, sharp lines across the metal floor like a sanctified altar. A low hum swelled around Chuck - the frequency subtly vibrating in his jaw, behind his eyes. He winced. Or tried to. The motion barely made it to his face. The hum pressed down like gravity.

"NOW ENTERING REVIEW: PROJECT CODE.
DESIGNATION: CONDITIONING OF DISSENTING ENTITIES.

SUBJECT: VICTOR PRESPEL.

CONDITIONING STATUS: STABLE.

RESPONSE: DOCILITY.

COGNITIVE FUNCTION: DEGRADED."

WARDEN's voice dropped half an octave, now reverent, as though announcing sacred scripture:

"PHASE THREE COMPLIANCE CONFIRMED."

The fourth wall screen powered on again with a soft hiss of oxidized memory. This time, it wasn't a newsfeed or a grainy film. It was combat cam footage, high-resolution – an onboard CODE Eyebot's perspective. The timestamp read: *JUNE 4, 2253 – SECTOR UTAH-772, OUTSKIRTS OF OGDEN.*

The camera bobbed gently through dusty sky, scanning across a sunbaked trail. Below: a Brahmin-drawn caravan, lumbering slowly across the high desert. Two wagons. A few travelers – mostly traders, by the look of them. In the back of the second wagon sat a man dressed in black, cradling a weather-worn guitar. His boots hung over the back ledge, heels tapping in rhythm.

Chuck.

He strummed slowly, the chords quiet but clear in the open air. The guitar had scratches, but it was tuned. He wasn't singing. Just playing – something slow, something sad.

The CODE Eyebot dropped altitude, framing him directly. A soft warble played from its speakers. The camera's HUD blinked.

TARGET: PRISONER 13 PROBABLE. INITIATE COMPLIANCE PROTOCOL.

Without warning, a second Eyebot swooped down behind the lead wagon. It unleashed a high-voltage pulse that shattered the Brahmin's nervous system mid-step. The animal collapsed

sideways with a guttural, broken moo, snapping the harness and toppling the wagon.

Panicked voices rose. One of the traders reached for a weapon. A CODE Eyebot flashburst fired – optical detonation. Within seconds, everyone was dead.

Everyone except Chuck.

He sat in stunned silence, guitar still across his lap. The CODE Eyebot hovered in front of him, lens irising wide.

CODE FLASH – DEPLOYED.

A blinding burst of light filled the screen. When the image returned, Chuck sat motionless.

His hands had gone slack. The guitar slid from his lap and hit the wagon floor with a dull thunk. His eyes were wide open, but unfocused, blank. He didn't move. He didn't blink.

"COMPLIANCE CONFIRMED. SUBJECT IMMOBILIZED."

The footage jumped ahead.

Chuck – now dressed in a torn version of his suit – stood hunched. He stared straight ahead. No resistance. No recognition. He did not respond to light, sound, or motion. Only the guitar case on his back still hung on like a ghost.

The footage ended. The screen went black.

WARDEN's eye brightened. Its voice was smooth, surgical.

**"PHASE THREE SUCCESSFUL. SUBJECT RENDERED
NON-THREAT VIA CODE OPTIC BURST.**

**RECOMMENDATION: FULL INTEGRATION INTO
CONDITIONED OPERATIONS.**

**ALTERNATIVE OPTION: ADVANCED REPROGRAMMING
FOR TARGETED REDEPLOYMENT."**

The triangle blinked.

"SUBJECT IS NOW ASSET."

Uncle Sam's image glared like a preacher, voice trembling with holy fire.

"Look at him! Look at that THING! Docile. Silent. Shaking in his boots like a whipped dog who knows he done wrong. You want to call that technology? That's GUILT, ladies and gentlemen. That's what a man looks like when his soul can't bear the weight of what he's done. You don't need no electrode to break a traitor - just the truth catching up to him."

Sam's eyes narrowed, voice turning low.

"He's quiet 'cause he knows the moment he opens his mouth, the whole world will hear the lie he's been living. Better to shut up and ride it out than answer for the millions. If you ask me? CODE's just what brought him face to face with himself. And the bastard blinked."

The jury responded in low, murmured agreement - mixed with faint, anxious discomfort.

Red Menace's laugh came soft, like the scratch of a match in a dark room.

"Tsk-tsk-tsk. Always so sure of yourself, Sam. So dramatic."

He leaned closer into the screen again, hands folding into the outline of a steeple.

"I do not see guilt. I see lobotomy. I see experiment. I see man burned down to cinders by machine so bad that he can't even tell time anymore."

He pointed with one long red digit, slowly, accusingly.

"You show footage of subject's capture, not his crime. You shoot bright light in face, then marvel when he forgets his name. You call that guilt? I call that... замалчивание."

A pause. The cigarette glowed faintly again.

"And what happens next, da? You wind him up, point him at target, and say: 'Go defend freedom.' That is not justice. That is puppet show."

He inhaled again, smoke curling like a noose.

"He cannot speak because you removed his voice.

You call him Presper. But you erased the man.

Now you want to build army out of broken ones? Hm. How... very American."

A hush fell across the rotunda. Then the green triangle pulsed.

"TESTIMONY CONCLUDED.

DATA AGGREGATION: 92%. FINAL VERDICT PENDING."

The triangle flickered.

"PRIMARY DEFENSE CORE UNSTABLE.

ERROR: RED_MENACE.EXE - SYSTEM INTEGRITY
WARNING.

CORRUPTION DETECTED IN CORE 03."

A burst of static crackled across Red Menace's screen. The silhouette wavered. His eyes still gleamed.

"Oh dear. Seems I am not feeling well, da?
Must be all this freedom clogging my lungs."

WARDEN cut him off:

"ERROR LOGGED. PROCEEDING TO FINAL STATEMENT
PHASE BEFORE VERDICT."

The lights above Chuck flared on again.

Chuck twitched as the hum returned.

The rotunda remained in still silence for a moment longer, as if the air itself were holding its breath. Then the green triangle pulsed – slow, steady, sovereign.

"COMMENCE FINAL STATEMENTS."

A faint hiss of static gave way to the sound of Uncle Sam cracking his knuckles – digitally simulated, the kind of foley-laced sound byte meant to rattle saboteurs during old interrogation reels. He stepped forward, jaw firm, gaze searing with the weight of manufactured justice.

"Well now, ladies and gentlemen – what more do you need? You've seen the crimes. You've heard the treason. You've watched the man crumble before your eyes like the parchment our Constitution was written on."

The digital flag behind him whipped violently in wind that didn't exist.

"This isn't a question of guilt anymore. It's a matter of consequence. Of duty. Presper was a sickness. CODE made him still. But that doesn't mean he's cured. It means he's CONTAINABLE. And we do not let contagions walk free. We QUARANTINE them."

He raised his hand high, voice booming like a marching band anthem.

"I say we bury this traitor in iron and cold and keep him under lock and biometric key until the day this great republic runs out of sunsets. And even then - let the sun set alone."

He snapped his fingers.

The crowd track roared - applause, foot stomps, whistles, howling cheers. Then it was gone.

Red Menace rose slowly, the trench coat folding like digital smoke.

"Ahhh, Uncle Sammy. You always did know how to end show with bang.

But you see, I prefer little more... nuance." The red silhouette turned toward the viewers - not the jury, not WARDEN - but toward Chuck.

"I do not deny that bad things happened, da. That blood was spilled. That mistakes were made.

But I ask you - can man be judged, if what remains is not a man, but a tool?

Can guilt exist in absence of memory, of voice, of soul?"

He stepped closer, tone darkening.

"I see not Presper. I see... a puppet. Strings still fresh from the burn.

And if puppet dances, who do we blame? The wood - or the hand that moves it?"

A long drag from his cigarette. The glow cast lines on his hat brim like dying embers in a furnace.

"You want justice?"

Then do not punish this shell.

Punish the ones who made him hollow."

The jury track was dead silent.

Then -

"DELIBERATION COMPLETE.

VERDICT: GUILTY."

A thunderous metallic clang echoed from unseen recesses. The triangle pulsed green.

"SENTENCING COMMENCING.

BY ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE...

SUBJECT 13 - DESIGNATION: VICTOR PRESPER - IS TO BE IMPRISONED UNTIL OPERATIONAL VALUE IS EXHAUSTED OR FURTHER TESTING IS REQUIRED.

SUBJECT TO BE TRANSFERRED TO CELL SECTOR 3. BIOMETRIC RESTRICTIONS ENGAGED. REMOTE TERMINATION CONDITION ACTIVE."

The center screen dimmed.

Uncle Sam saluted.

"God bless the Union."

His screen powered down to static.

Only Red Menace remained. The cigarette glowed one last time. He leaned in close, so close the screen barely contained him. His voice came low, a whisper just above the CODE frequency's hum.

"Do not fret, товарищ.

Justice... comes in many uniforms. And some... do not wear badges."

The red silhouette's eyes pierced through the void.

"Your strings are not the only ones in this place.

In time, da? You will see.

And when you do... remember the color red."

He flicked his cigarette toward the camera.

The screen hissed out.

Two CODE Eyebots emerged from the shadows and floated toward Chuck, their lenses blinking like synthetic eyes in mourning. He didn't resist as they clamped cold metallic limbs around his arms. He couldn't. He didn't speak. He couldn't. The lights dimmed behind him.

The trial was over.

Chuck McCarthy, Prisoner 13, was bound for Cell Sector 3.

The Dream

The world returned, not with a sound, but a warmth. It wasn't the cold fluorescent rot of the prison cell or the weightless silence of the trial rotunda. No CODE hum. No static-laced voices of the dead past. Just the low throb of bass under floorboards, the smell of old bourbon and smoke curling beneath warm red lights, and the slow warmth of memory uncoiling from the bottom shelf of the soul.

Chuck McCarthy was young again.

Not just in body – but in feel. Before the hangovers. Before the scars. Before his name was whispered like a bet nobody wanted to take. His skin was still clean. Shirt collar sharp. His guitar rested against his hip like it belonged there – because it did. Not because he needed it to feel whole, but because it was the only thing that ever made him feel right.

The room around him was The Shark Club – New Reno's meanest polished dive, full of stale glamour and crooked smiles. The walls were red velvet trying hard to forget they were once concrete. The neon glared like it owed somebody money. Every table reeked of sex, desperation, and cigars.

And yet, it was beautiful. Especially from up here.

Chuck stood on the tiny, raised stage, guitar strap worn soft against his shoulder, mic stand tilted just enough to look intentional. The stage was surrounded by chain-link fencing, its bottom rim laced with dents and old barbs of broken glass where

bottles had made past performers regret their dreams. But tonight? The crowd was packed. And they were his.

Men in dirty suits. Women in sequins and sin. Gangsters with razors tucked behind their teeth. Drunks who'd forgotten they were angry. But all of them, for these few minutes, were quiet. Listening. Because Chuck was crooning.

The guitar hummed in his hands like it had blood in it. His voice rolled over the crowd like warm smoke off a summer campfire – rough enough to scratch, smooth enough to soothe.

"I hear the train a comin' ...

It's rollin' 'round the bend..."

Heads swayed. A few mouths sang along, barely audible. No one jeered. No one threw anything.

"And I ain't seen the sunshine..."

Since I don't know when..."

Then his eyes met hers.

Front row, just behind the chain-link – red dress, one strap slipping off her shoulder like it'd been dared to. Dark hair in curled waves. A glass of something neat in one hand, a cigarette untouched in the other. She didn't smile. Not yet. She just watched him. Locked in.

And Chuck – young, full of breath and heartbeat – felt something shift. His fingers didn't miss a chord, but his tempo slowed just slightly, as if time itself was tapping the brakes to see what he'd do. So he did what he always did. He sang to her.

The rest of the crowd faded like background actors in a dream. The neon lights behind her burned into halo glow. The mic might as well have been whispering into her ear alone.

“But that train keeps a-rollin’...

On down to San Antone...”

She leaned forward slightly, elbow on the table, chin on her knuckles. Her eyes said *I see you*. And Chuck’s replied *You ain’t seen nothin’ yet*.

Another verse. Another chorus. The band behind the curtain kept the rhythm, invisible ghosts on autopilot. Chuck sang about Folsom and bullets and prison blues, but none of it mattered. Only her. Only now. The club was alive, yet weightless.

The dream drifted forward like smoke curling from the end of a slow-burning cigarette.

The song was gone. The applause a memory. The red haze of The Shark Club had faded into something quieter – something gentler. Shadows stretched across a small apartment, high above Reno’s neon arteries, where signs blinked *OPEN 24 HOURS* into the dark and lovers found their way into silence without ever meaning to.

Chuck lay on his side, shirtless, one arm draped around her waist. The sheet was pulled low on their hips. His guitar sat leaned against a battered chair near the window, strings still humming from the night’s last tune like it had refused to sleep until he did.

Her name was Mara.

He hadn’t planned on learning it. Names had a way of slipping past his lips like sand through a cracked glass –

forgettable, replaceable, part of the Reno rhythm. But this one stuck.

Mara.

It suited her. Soft in sound, sharp in presence. A name you didn't just hear – a name you remembered.

She lay beside him, one leg tangled with his, bare shoulder against his chest. Her skin was warm. Her breathing slow. Her eyes weren't closed. Not quite. "Y'ever think about leavin'?" she asked, her voice low and hoarse with satisfaction. "This town. The noise."

Chuck blinked slow. The ceiling fan above them creaked in lazy rhythm. Outside, neon signs played their eternal lullaby in the valley below. "Sometimes," he murmured.

She turned her head, one hand sliding along his chest. Her nails barely scratched the skin – tracing, not clinging.

"I think about the desert," she said. "Far from the lights. Somewhere the stars don't have to fight neon to be seen."

Chuck smiled. Not wide. Just enough. "You don't strike me as the settlin' down type."

Mara scoffed. "Neither do you."

They were quiet for a while. Outside, something distant shattered – a bottle, maybe. A muffled shout. Reno doing what Reno does. But not here. Not tonight. Here, time had taken off its coat and decided to stay a while.

Chuck brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear.

"You know I ain't good at this."

She looked up at him. "At what?"

He hesitated. "Stayin'."

“You don’t have to stay,” she said. “You just have to try.”

He kissed her forehead, slow. No rush. No fire. Just heat. Something in his chest ached. Not like guilt. Not like liquor. Something quieter. Hungrier. Hope, maybe. That dangerous kind of hope that slips under your skin when you’re not looking. He didn’t know what it meant yet. Didn’t know what came next. But he knew this. This was real.

And this – this moment in the dark, the warmth of her breath, the quiet of the room – was worth more than every bottle he’d ever drained and every stage he’d ever sung on. Chuck closed his eyes. And for the first time in a long time... He slept.

The dream bent at the edges – still warm, still golden, but with the faint crackle of storm clouds behind the glow.

Somewhere in the haze, time passed.

It wasn’t clear how much. Days, maybe. Weeks. Memory blurred the transitions the way only dreams – or regrets – ever did. The apartment above The Shark Club looked the same. The ceiling fan still spun. The guitar still leaned in the corner. But the light was different. Dimmer. Less romantic, more real.

Chuck sat on the edge of the bed, bare-chested, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor like it had just told him something unforgivable. He was holding a tiny white stick in his hand. Two pink lines ran across it.

Behind him, Mara stood near the window. She wasn't crying. She wasn't smiling. She was just... still. Hands over her stomach like a soldier bracing for the sound of sirens.

Chuck finally spoke.

"So," he said. "You're..."

She nodded slowly. "Mhm."

Silence filled the room again. Thick. Full of implications. Then Chuck turned his head, looked at her – and smiled.

"Hell," he said, voice rough, "I guess we oughta start thinkin' about names."

Mara let out a soft laugh – relieved, almost. She crossed to him and knelt by the bed, hands resting on his thighs.

"You mean it?"

He touched her face, ran a callused thumb along her cheekbone.

"Yeah. I mean it."

He meant it.

In that moment, under the dead hum of Reno's eternal buzz, Chuck McCarthy saw a life outside this neon purgatory. He saw a little boy or girl with dark hair and smart eyes. He saw Mara in a sundress somewhere that didn't smell like liquor and spent shells. He saw music played in open air, not behind steel fences.

It was the first time he'd believed in a future. But belief doesn't pay rent.

Time skipped again.

Same apartment. Same man. But the air had changed. More bottles on the counter. Less food in the fridge. A letter – unopened – from someone named *C. Bishop* tucked beneath an ashtray.

Mara was sitting at the edge of the tub in the small bathroom, holding her belly. She didn't cry. Not her style. But her jaw was clenched. Hard.

Chuck stood in the doorway, a ragged towel around his neck, shirt wrinkled and half-buttoned.

"I'm gonna get us out," he said.

She didn't look up.

"You said that last week."

"I'm workin' on it."

She raised her eyes then – tired, but not cruel.

"You still under Bishop contract?"

Chuck didn't answer.

"You still singin' five nights a week, sometimes six, sometimes for cash under the table for their little parties?"

Still no answer.

"You still owe Bishop's pit boss for losin' at Caravan last month?"

He looked away.

She stood slowly. "We ain't leavin', are we?"

"I want to," he said, sharper than he meant to. "I got no love for this city. You know that. You know where I came from."

She stepped past him, into the room.

"And where're we goin', Chuck? You got a plan, or you just hummin' a tune and hopin' the world sings backup?"

He turned to face her. “You think I wanna raise a kid in this hellhole? You think I don’t lay awake every night wonderin’ if I’m gonna end up like them – my folks? I watched ‘em bleed out in a fuckin’ alley ‘cause they got stupid and desperate and high. That’s not gonna be me. That’s not gonna be us.”

“Then make it not us, Chuck.”

He reached for her, but she stepped back. Not out of anger. Just out of truth.

Later, alone, he sat with his guitar, untouched on his lap. The night outside was full of laughter and muffled gunfire. The Bishop’s neon sign blinked through the window.

SHARK CLUB. SHARK CLUB. SHARK CLUB.

Chuck didn’t strum. Didn’t hum.

He just stared at the frets, like maybe they’d spell a way out. Like maybe if he played the right note, the right song, the chains would melt and the world would open.

But they didn’t. They never did. The strings were still tuned. But his hands were shaking.

The dream cracked open.

The warmth that once lived here was gone, replaced by something bitter in the lungs – like cheap whiskey and the ash of something once beautiful. The apartment looked the same, but darker, smaller, as if the walls had inched closer while no one was looking.

It started with voices. Raised. Frantic.

Chuck's and Mara's.

Not the quiet lovers from before. Not the warm bodies tangled under threadbare sheets. This was a fight. One that had started small – some comment, some look – but now roared like wildfire.

“You think I don't notice?” she shouted, voice hoarse. “You come home reeking like a distillery, can't look me in the eye, and I'm just supposed to smile and act like everything's fine?”

Chuck stood barefoot in the kitchen, bottle in hand, his white undershirt stained with sweat and shame.

“You think I like it?” he slurred. “You think this is my dream life, singin' covers in a shithole for people who'd sooner shoot you than tip you?”

“You used to love it.”

“I used to love you.”

The words hit like a car crash. Immediate silence. Like someone had pulled the power plug on reality.

Mara stood still in the living room doorway, one hand curled around the swell of her stomach. Her other hand touched the ring on her finger. Gently. Almost tenderly.

Then she took it off. And threw it.

The small, dull ting of it skittering across the kitchen tiles would echo in Chuck's mind long after the rest of the night had faded.

She stormed to the door. Chuck didn't stop her. Didn't flinch. Didn't chase. He just took another drink.

But something changed a minute later.

He stared at the ring where it had landed. At the door where she had gone. At the cracked mirror near the sink, reflecting a man he no longer recognized.

His fingers fumbled with a coat from the chair. His boots were untied. He grabbed the guitar case out of habit, then thought better of it and let it fall. The door slammed behind him, echoing into the city's night like a gunshot in fog.

They found each other two blocks down, beneath the buzzing yellow of a flickering streetlamp.

“Mara!”

She turned. Eyes red. Hands shaking.

“What the hell do you want, Chuck?!”

“To talk.”

“You’re drunk.”

“You’re pregnant.”

She slapped him. Hard.

“You don’t get to yell at me,” she said. “Not when I’ve been picking up your slack, biting my tongue, praying to whatever’s left in this goddamn world that you’ll grow the hell up before this baby gets here.”

He stepped closer, fists clenched at his sides – not in anger, but to hold in the words he didn’t know how to say.

“I’m trying!” he roared.

“You’re drowning!” she screamed back. “And you’re dragging us with you.”

Windows above lit up. A grizzled voice barked: “Shut the fuck up down there!”

“Mind your own damn business!” Chuck snapped up toward the window.

That was when Mara gasped.

Her eyes widened. She stumbled. Both hands clutched her stomach. Then she screamed.

Chuck blinked, reality sobering in a second.

“Mara?!”

“I – fuck – I think it’s – I think it’s time!”

He dropped the bottle, glass shattering across the curb. He caught her before she fell and wrapped both arms around her.

“Okay. Okay. Hospital. Just hang on. I got you – I got you, Mara.”

She didn’t scream again. She groaned, low and primal and terrified.

Chuck carried her like the world was ending.

The dream jumped again.

Weeks? A month?

It didn’t matter.

Chuck sat in a chair in the corner of the apartment. The ceiling fan no longer turned. A layer of dust clung to its blades. The red neon glow of the Shark Club blinked in silence through the curtains.

Cradled in Chuck’s arms was a baby girl.

She had dark hair, like Mara. Eyes like polished stone – stormy, unsure. She looked at him like she knew him already. Like she'd always known him.

Her name was June.

Not for the month. For the feel of it. For the sound it made when said softly.

“June...”

Chuck whispered it like it might fix something. Like it might bring Mara back.

But Mara was gone.

Complications. They said the word like it explained anything.

“Complications.”

Like it was just a math problem that couldn't be solved. They said it gently, the nurse in the hallway with her hands folded.

They didn't have to tell him twice. He felt it before they said it. Felt it when he saw the empty bed. When he looked down at June, something inside him cracked in half and never healed. He wept without sound. His tears landed on her blanket, on her little pink fist.

She didn't cry. She just watched him. And he whispered again. “June.”

Outside, Reno kept on being Reno. Lights. Vice. Noise. Death. But in here?

There was only him. And her. And silence.

The desert wind howled like it was mourning something that had been dead a long time.

Dust drifted low across cracked blacktop – what little was left of it. Most of the old-world road had faded into the sand, but if you squinted, if the light hit just right, you could see the shape beneath. A worn cross, stretched and sun bleached, weathered down by centuries of heat and hate. Maybe it had once been an intersection. Maybe it had once meant something.

Now it was Golgotha.

The graveyard of New Reno's mistakes.

They didn't bury you here. Not really. Not in the soft, solemn way. No, the bodies here went up, not down – strung to poles along the cross-shaped road like scarecrows for the lost. Bones hung from rusted nails. Skulls cracked and hollowed by crows. The kind of place even buzzards circled with hesitation. But not everyone here was a warning.

Some were just forgotten.

Chuck McCarthy stood near the edge, guitar case in one hand, a near-empty bottle in the other. His boots crunched gravel with every shift of weight. The sun was low – amber, cruel, uncaring. It stretched his shadow long across the asphalt like it was trying to drag him down into the cross with the rest.

He was thinner now. Older. Face drawn. Beard ragged. His voice hadn't held up – raspy from smoke and rotgut. The bottles had started landing harder during shows. The crowd, once his, had grown cruel. And maybe they were right to. Maybe they just saw what he was too proud to admit:

The fire was gone.

The man who'd once sung Johnny Cash like he was the resurrection of him now barely managed a tune without slurring. His fingers shook on the strings. His memory missed verses.

He was a relic in a town built to grind down ghosts. And so he came here. To say goodbye.

He crouched down in front of a crooked wooden post, not one of the execution ones, but a small makeshift marker near the edge of the lot. Just two names carved into it with a dull knife:

MARA

JUNE

No dates. Just names. Names were all that mattered anyway.

He took a swig from the bottle, then poured a bit out onto the dry dirt. It hissed as it soaked in, like even the ground didn't want it. He coughed, spat. Wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"I tried," he muttered.

No one answered. Not even the wind.

"I held her... the night she screamed herself to sleep. Rocked her 'til the sun came up. I played songs for her, Mara. Our songs. Didn't even touch the bottle for weeks. I tried."

His hand trembled. The bottle nearly slipped.

"But Reno don't teach you how to be better. Just how to pretend longer." He looked up at the marker. His eyes were glassy. Red.

He fell quiet. The sky shifted toward dusk.

He sat down in the dirt, back against the post, arms draped over his knees like a man too tired to fight, too stubborn to fall.

The breeze kicked up again, brushing sand across his boots. He didn't move.

"I'm sorry I wasn't what either of you needed."

He let that hang.

Then, from the old guitar case, he pulled the six-string. It was worn, but not broken. Tuned, always. Even if his fingers couldn't keep up like they used to.

He strummed once. And sang. Not for a crowd. Not for a paycheck. For her. For them.

A lullaby in a dead man's key.

"I walk the line..."

It cracked on the second verse. He didn't stop.

When the last chord faded, swallowed by the wind and sand, he packed the guitar and slung the case over his shoulder. He didn't look back. Not once. Chuck McCarthy walked out of Golgotha.

Back to New Reno.

The dream peeled back its last layer, revealing not a memory, but a moment of finality – a quiet, smoldering ruin. Not the fire that burned it all down, but the smoke that lingered after.

Chuck sat in his apartment, alone, as always now. The lights were off. The bottle on the counter was half-full, which was rare, because Chuck didn't stop halfway anymore. The window

was open, letting in the city's breath – drunken laughter, the sharp clack of heels walking nowhere good, distant clangs.

His show at the Shark Club had started an hour ago. He hadn't moved.

His suit hung crooked on him. The tie was still draped around his neck, never knotted. The shirt was clean, for once. Too clean. Like maybe part of him wanted to go, wanted to pretend just one more night that he could claw his way back into someone's good graces with a well-sung chorus.

But the guitar sat untouched. The fingers didn't play. The voice didn't hum. He was empty. Like a bottle that had been drained years ago but still sat on the shelf out of habit.

Then came the knock. Three sharp raps.

Chuck didn't react at first. He stared at the door like maybe it would just go away. Maybe it was a neighbor. Maybe it was someone else's problem.

The second set of knocks wasn't a request. It was punctuation.

He got up. Opened the door. And there he was.

Billy "Two-Punch" Cardoza.

A Bishop bruiser, built like a fridge and twice as dumb. Leather jacket stretched over muscle and bad intentions. He looked Chuck up and down like he was inspecting a disappointing horse at auction.

"Well ain't you just a fuckin' painting," Billy said.

Chuck didn't smile. Didn't blink. "What do you want?"

Billy shoved the door wider and stepped in like he owned the place.

“You missed your set, McCarthy. Again. You been missin’ a lotta things lately. Lyrics. Notes. Rent. Respect. Boss said to remind you what you owe.”

Chuck closed the door behind him. Slow.

“Remind me, huh?”

Billy cracked his knuckles. “You remember how this goes. Little lesson. Then you show up next week with a song and a smile.”

Chuck’s breath came out low. “Not this time.”

Billy stopped mid-step, cocked his head.

“What was that?”

Chuck turned around. He looked tired. Not scared. Not angry. Just... finished.

“I said,” he murmured, “not this time.”

Billy’s laugh was guttural. “You really wanna do this, old man?”

Chuck didn’t answer. So Billy threw the first punch.

It was fast. Practiced. A hard right to the ribs that would’ve dropped most. It staggered Chuck, cracked something that might’ve been healing. But he didn’t fall.

He came back with a bottle.

Glass shattered across Billy’s temple, sending him reeling. Blood. Real blood. Chuck followed up with a tackle – sloppy, furious, desperate.

They crashed into the coffee table. Fists flew. The TV cracked. The lamp exploded in a puff of sparks.

Then – a pop.

And everything stopped.

Billy slumped.

Chuck stood over him, panting. One eye swelling. Lip split. Knuckles scraped raw.

He looked down. The gun was in his hand. He didn't remember picking it up. Billy wasn't moving. Just a twitch. Then nothing. The room was silent. Utterly still. The only sound was the buzzing from the half-dead neon light outside the window.

Chuck stared at the corpse. At the blood on the floor. At the gun. He'd done it. There was no coming back from this.

He moved like a man possessed.

Shoved the gun in his coat. Grabbed his guitar case, nothing else. No clothes, no cash, no note. He was still dressed for the show – black slacks, scuffed boots, wrinkled dress shirt with the top button loose.

He stepped out the fire escape, down the rickety stairs two at a time, heart slamming like a drumbeat. The streets of New Reno smelled like hot piss and cheap perfume. He walked fast. Not too fast. Couldn't look suspicious. A couple of drunks catcalled from across the alley. A hooker asked him for a song. He didn't answer.

The city didn't notice him. Didn't stop him. Just watched as he walked like a shadow down the veins of its rotting body. When he reached the edge, where the lights started to sputter and the road turned to dust, he stopped.

He turned. Looked back. Just once. The skyline blinked like a dying star.

Reno didn't wave goodbye. So neither did he. He faced the desert and walked into it. Alone. No map. No name. No plan. Just a guitar on his back and a bet in his heart.

The wager: his life. The stakes: everything.

The Beginning

The sound that woke him wasn't sharp. It was steady. A low, electrical hum – constant, oppressive, the kind that filled a space like smoke. It buzzed in the walls, vibrated faintly in the floor, made his molars ache if he clenched too hard.

Chuck McCarthy opened his eyes and remembered.

Not everything. Not clearly. But enough.

The neon was gone. The desert wind. The music. The blood. Mara. Gone. In its place: concrete.

He blinked against the cold light above. The fixture sputtered slightly, casting a white-blue pallor over a cell that could barely be called a room. The ceiling felt low. The air tasted like bleach and recycled dust. There was a cot bolted to one wall, covered in a sheet that had more stains than thread count. A rusted sink sat beneath a small, distorted detention mirror – funhouse glass in a frame of warped steel.

He sat up slowly. His head swam. Not from booze – he knew that feeling. This was worse. Like his brain had been dragged behind a car.

He moved his legs. They responded. His arms. Stiff, but working. He looked down.

The black suit was gone.

So were the boots. The belt buckle he used to thumb when nervous. Even the cheap rhinestone ring he used to tell himself had meaning.

In their place was a grey and orange jumpsuit, rough-fibered and shapeless, issued with all the care of an industrial mop. It looked familiar – not from memory, but from reputation. Vault suits. The kind they handed out like uniforms in stories from caravanners and salvagers.

Except this wasn't Vault-Tec blue. This was prison grey. And bolted to his arm, heavy and cold, was a device.

A Prison-Boy.

A modified Pip-Boy, stripped of its charm and playfulness. Cold metal, brushed steel casing. The screen pulsed with a dull green standby glow, flickering occasionally with words he didn't understand.

[BIOMETRIC LOCK ENGAGED]

[MONITORING ACTIVE]

[CONDITION: STABLE]

He twisted his wrist. The damn thing didn't budge. He wasn't just wearing it. He wasn't getting it off.

His fingers reached instinctively for his guitar – only to grab air. Gone.

The corner where it should have been – where it would've been – was bare.

He sat there, motionless for a long moment.

Then the silence hit him.

No voices. No footsteps. No gunshots or casino bells.

Only the hum and... something else.

He stood. Walked to the cell door – a thick slab of metal with a slit about eye-level – and looked out.

The cell block was massive.

A panopticon – circular. Concrete cells stacked three levels high like the rings of a cage. In the center stood a surveillance tower, faceless and silent, with security cameras fixed outward in every direction. There were no guards. No shouting. No movement.

Just the tower and its many “eyes.”

On its upper face were large monitors, each flickering occasionally with strange, sterile text in harsh white font:

CODE
ORDER
MONITORING

Sometimes, the green triangle with the eye blinked on the screens, just like during the trial. It was watching.

Chuck’s heart pounded.

Was I dreaming?

No.

He knew it wasn’t a dream. Dreams didn’t leave metal on your wrist. Dreams didn’t give you boots a size too big and no laces.

He reached up to rub his face. It felt foreign. Not wrong – just... disconnected. Like he was still catching up to being alive.

He stepped back from the door, sat slowly on the cot. The fabric creaked beneath him like it hadn’t moved in years.

He stared at the floor.

And whispered, more to himself than anything else:

“...Where the hell am I?”

The Prison-Boy blinked green again.

Outside, the tower kept watching. Always watching.

The cot groaned as Chuck pushed to his feet again, the Prison-Boy on his left arm clunking heavily against his thigh as he moved. The weight of it was maddening – not just physical, but symbolic. A shackle disguised as progress. The worst kind of lie.

He held it up to eye level, scowling at its green-glowing screen.

“Piece of shit...”

The thing pulsed back at him like a blinking accusation. It didn’t speak, but it didn’t have to. It owned part of him now.

He twisted his wrist, pulled, tried to wedge his fingers under the rim of the metal clasp, only to find no seam, no latch, nothing but brushed steel bolted tight almost like it’d been grafted to the bone. He slammed it against the sink. Twice. The second time left a dent in the rusted basin and a smear of red from his scraped knuckles.

Still nothing. His jaw clenched. Teeth grinding.

“Goddamn it.”

He’d have rather been shot by a Bishop enforcer than this. At least they’d have the decency to look him in the eye.

But this? This was clinical. Quiet. Perfectly controlled.

Hell. That’s what this was.

And if it was Hell?

Well, maybe he deserved it. But that didn’t mean he had to sit down and like it.

He brought his arm up again – this time, not to bash, but to pry. He wedged his fingers into the slot where the interface

screen dipped inward, fumbled with the edge near the underside, and yanked.

Click. Something gave.

Not a release latch – just a panel, a tiny spring-loaded flap that popped open from the underside of the device. Inside was a short, stubby jack port. Black. Rectangular. Clearly functional.

His eyes drifted to the wall beside the door.

A panel covered in dust. But beneath the grime, there was a matching port.

He hesitated. Then scoffed bitterly.

“Well... what the hell.”

He walked over, raised his left arm, and slowly pressed the Prison-Boy’s jack into the slot.

A soft chime echoed through the cell like a phone being answered.

[PRISON-BOY INTERFACE ACTIVE]

[IDENTIFICATION: PRISONER 13]

[CLEARANCE GRANTED: TIER ACCESS ENABLED]

The cell door hissed – then slid open with a soft, mechanical groan. Chuck stood there for a moment, stunned. The threshold looked almost ceremonial.

He stepped through.

The walkway stretched in either direction – simple metal grating, bolted into concrete. His boots echoed on it like the clang of metal in an alleyway. Cells lined the curve of the ring behind him, above him, below him – three levels total, all identical. Identical lights, identical silence.

The wall stenciling read *Cell Sector 3* in faded white. The paint was chipped. The concrete was old. But the cameras? The cameras were new. The panopticon tower in the center loomed like a judge at a hanging.

Its lenses slowly rotated, motorized, watching. The monitors flickered again.

CODE
ORDER
MONITORING

For a long moment, Chuck didn't move. Then he glanced down at the Prison-Boy again.

"Alright," he muttered. "Let's see what kind of hell this really is."

He poked his head out. Eyes scanning. Looking for anything. Anyone. Even another prisoner. Even another ghost.

Chuck had only taken a single step when the silence broke – not with a scream, not with a mechanical bark or the whine of servo-motors – but with something far stranger.

A voice.

Polite. Calm. Almost... educated.

"Excuse me," it said, from just beside him, behind one of the identical steel doors. "I don't mean to startle you, friend – but I couldn't help but notice... your door opened."

Chuck stopped dead.

The voice had come from the next cell. The one to his left. The door was sealed shut, no different from his had been – solid steel, save for the narrow eye slit cut at head height. Through

that slit, there was nothing but shadow. Too dark inside to see anything. Not even movement.

Chuck's hand instinctively hovered near his side where his holster used to be.

Nothing there. Just the weight of the guitar case gone.

The voice spoke again – patient, curious, not demanding.

“If it’s not too much trouble... might I ask how?”

Chuck opened his mouth.

But he stopped himself. Just for a breath.

His gut, still half-wrecked from the CODE fog, twitched like it smelled something off.

He knew better.

The wasteland stories the traders used to swap at the Shark Club bar came back in flashes: ambushes, setups, smooth talkers with knives behind their backs. Polite didn't mean harmless.

He cleared his throat. Eyes on the slit.

“Funny thing to ask, seein’ as we’re both guests in the same fine establishment. You got a name, neighbor?”

A pause. Then the voice answered.

“Primus.”

Chuck raised an eyebrow.

“That your name or your rank?”

“My name,” the voice replied, tone steady. “One I chose. I suppose it fits, given the... duality.”

Chuck didn't know what the hell that meant. He leaned slightly, trying again to catch a glimpse, but the angle gave him nothing but shadow.

“Well, alright, Primus. Where you from?”

“Broken Hills. Originally. Though I’ve been more of a drifter lately. Less ‘from,’ more ‘passing through’ – until I woke up here, that is.”

Chuck nodded faintly.

“I’ve heard of Broken Hills. Not much. Minin’ town, right?”

“Uranium,” Primus replied. “Though by now it’s more ghosts than miners. The veins are nearly bled dry.”

“Figured as much.”

He let the silence hang, just for a second. Then—

“So,” Primus continued, polite as ever. “I ask again: how did you get out of your cell?”

Chuck hesitated.

His hand drifted to the Prison-Boy. He looked at the interface jack – still warm from use. Still glowing faint green in idle sync.

He sighed.

He couldn’t do this alone. Not forever. And something in the voice didn’t set off that same itch in the back of his skull. Not trust – not yet. But not threat either.

He leaned closer to the slit.

“There’s a port,” he said. “Underside of the thing on your wrist. Lift the flap. Plug it into the wall panel – square port, right of the door.”

“Fascinating,” the voice replied, not with greed, but something bordering on... academic curiosity. “Thank you.”

A few moments passed.

Chuck could hear faint movement. The scrape of boots. The clunk of metal. Then, with a mechanical groan, the adjacent door began to slide open. Slow. Deliberate.

Chuck took a step back, arms loose at his sides. Just in case.

Up Next...

Chuck McCarthy and an unexpected party navigate the mysterious prison VAN BUREN and devise a way out!