

"Burden"

Blessing and burden both start with 'B'. The similarity ends there.

A captive of my own choice to do what was right to me at the time, judged and condemned for what I was. Many things transpired before and during my captivity in the cells at Gaoler's jail that prelude my current predicament. I had chosen to save the life of my only friend instead of escorting the caravan. Ignoring the warnings of the caravan leader had reaped me no reward. While I had avoided being gunned down on sight because I had a wounded mare I had not escaped consequence for my actions. Giving myself up provided Gangrene the quick care she needed at the cost of my freedom and all my worldly possessions. Now I was property, wearing a collar packed with enough explosives to pop my head off if I did anything to disobey the authorities.

Greenvale Heights was an ill attributed name. This complex was subterranean and made by a mixture of subway and sewage sections opened up to one another with hastily constructed tunnels. The only thing that was accurate about its name was the green moss growing on the majority of the walls, bioluminescence causing them to glow. Ponies scraped the walls daily, using it as a staple food. Thankfully I didn't feel the need to eat the gruel the guards presented to me in a shallow tin bowl.

The name rightfully belonged to the gated suburbs that sat above the tunnels, circled in a massive concrete and sheet metal wall. On the surface wealthy ponies lived in reconstructed homes that weakly echoed their former opulence. A skilled working class kept the generators and water purifiers running underground. I didn't know much other than that.

The cell blocks were next to the sewage treatment pumps, turning the floors and walls into a reeking quagmire of dampness. Dysentery and abuse by guards were the most common ways for captives to die here. Harsh working conditions forced upon captives to work off their time weakened once strong bodies and left them empty shells, sick and wilted. Their only hope was to be 'purchased' as indentured servants by one of the businesses or a wealthy member of the community or outlast their sentence. It was no wonder the name for the jail was just as unfitting. They called it 'The Sink' where ponies would wash free their crimes and become clean. There was no way to become clean in a place like this. You could only breed desperation and disease here.

The cells were rooms formed from metal bars with extra metal plating held on by rivets and layers of rust. Across from the cell a red brick and white plaster wall held a huge collection of bounties and wanted posters. I recognized one of the stallions from their poster, the explosives maniac Chunky Salsa. He wasn't photogenic anymore, that was certain.

'Chunky Salsa'
Muffin Cake Raider
Second in Command
Crimes:
Mass-Murder
Gang-Rape
Kidnapping
Wanted Dead or Alive
750 Cap Reward

Well he sounded pleasant. No wonder he was such a pain in the ass. Gangrene would be elated to see his bounty and more than eagerly claim her half of the reward. She was well, I hoped. The tough mare had probably recovered by now.

I had no idea how much time had passed since my incarceration-could have been days or even a week at most. There was no clock or method of measuring time here. My only clues were the frequency of the meals that were delivered and how often the ruddy green stallion Gaoler slept at his desk. That hadn't been much of a clue, seeing as the sheriff was in the habit of constantly taking naps between rounds of hassling the inmates, bringing in new ones, taking his time to hurl insults at the ghouls in the cell next to mine, or leaving to relieve himself.

Admittedly I was appalled to see rationally thinking ghouls down here. Gangrene had mentioned them before but I didn't know how I would feel when I met one. I was a ghoul too! Maybe I should have been happy to not be alone in my status as an undead. Except something set me apart from other ghouls. My body was incredibly well preserved and wasn't rotten like their bodies. I could pass for living if I covered up the stitching and masked my smell. Suffice to say, these ghouls probably couldn't pull off the 'living' look very well. Also there was the whole...stigma of being accused of being a 'Deadmare' I had to deal with.

“P-pardon me...” One of the ghouls, a mare that called herself Marble was trying to get my attention, tapping her hoof against one of the cell bars. “Are you going to eat your food?” She asked, reaching a hoof through the bars to reach for the cold lumpy spew they fed us here. It was just out of her reach.

Marble was a curious thing to me, much of what I knew about how the place operated was because of her. She claimed she was once a reporter for the ‘Pegasus Press’ for Cloudsdale long ago, making her predate the war just like I did. I imagined she must have been lovely in her time, with both ears instead of one with a bite mark missing and her soft auburn pelt pristine unlike the patchwork mess of flesh and bone it was now. She was locked in here because she had been accused of stealing food. She had an appetite that was uncommon for ghouls.

Inching the bowl to her, she was able to stamp her hoof on the edge and drag it to herself. A few other ghouls in her cell moved over, asking her to share. She did so without even considering how little there was. A bulk of the food went to a ghoul foal in the cage with them who had been crying almost non-stop.

His story was particularly sad, Marble had told me his family had run a caravan that was hit by Chunky Salsa who used a ‘Balefire Egg Launcher’ to decimate everything. Instead of dying he and his family became either ghouls or ash. He was the only one to retain his sanity. The colt’s own family had tried to eat him.

By the time my food was gone, Marble had not eaten any of it. The kind mare was now rocking the ghoulistified colt off to restful sleep in her hooves, planting a kiss on his forehead and laying him down on the filthy mattress that was their bedding. “Thank you. You know we ghouls don’t really need to eat much, but the kid’s not used to it. Eating a filling meal helps a ghoul think they’re still equine,” she said to me through the bars, running her hoof over the foals tattered and patchy black mane.

“It’s no problem. I wasn’t going to eat it anyway.” I replied, waving my foreleg to her in a dismissive motion to convey that to me it wasn’t a big deal.

On the other side of me a living inmate grumbled, rasping irritably. “Aw come on guy! You gave your meal tah them? They don’t even need the food that badly!” A butter covered stallion with a cutie mark of a crossed pair of pickaxes gripped the bars on his side and glared at me. “Hey if you ain’t gonna drink your water give it here!” His accent bore a resemblance to Gaoler’s.

Wordlessly I picked up the cup in my grip and held it out to him. The stallion plucked it from my grasp quickly, afraid I might do something horrible to him. Taking a long draw from the small cup he downed it all and smacked his lips, thirst quenched.

“Guess you’re not so bad,” he said while casting the cup aside to clatter across the hard stone floor. “Them ghouls don’t need food, you should give your next meal tah one ah the breathers. We need it a lot more than them corpses,” malcontent words spilled passed his peeled lips.

“We’re ponies too!” Marble growled to Gold Digger, what was left of her curly brown mane was standing on end.

How long have you been a comedian, Marble?” he asked jeeringly, “Because that’s the best joke I ever heard!” Gold Digger laughed, pressing his forehead against one of the bars. “You an that stupid brat that cries alla fucking time. Least them other ghouls have the decency tah stay quiet! So turn your ass around and don’t speak tah me you filthy f---”

The metal bar cried out dully as I struck it, bending out against Gold Digger’s face, silencing and sending him to fall flat on his back. “I know an even better joke for you, “ I said with a smile, wrapping my metal digits around the bent bar and pulling it back into shape. “And it’s punchline involves you eating the next meal I give you through a straw...”

Gaoler snorted from where he was napping, face pressed firmly to a book he had been pretending to read. Maybe I would have been convinced of his literacy when he was awake if he hadn’t been holding the book upside down at the time. “Hrn...Yeah lil’ misseh....It’s a loaded piece. Mmmm...I got plenty ah time tah show you how ah use it...” Dreams of grandeur, a window into his narcissistic and wholly egotistical dreams. He was easier to deal with after he drank himself into a stupor and slept. He slept through a vast majority of the hijinks that went on in the cells.

“Be quiet you three!” One of the other inmates said urgently, his voice low in a barely heard

whisper. “Wake up Gaoler and he’ll be pissed!”

The butter colored stallion pushed himself up, rubbing the side of his face sorely, “Sorry.” He replied sincerely. “Guess Ah deserved that. Ah’ll simmer down...” Hopefully simmering down did not involve pestering me. “Dang-gum. It must be true. You ain’t normal...” That was directed at me. Yeah, simmer down only meant speak quietly to the freakish stitched together ghoul-beast fitted with an explosive collar. He pressed his snout between the bars and nickered at me. “Hey, it true?”

Might as well get this over with, “Is what true?” I turned my head towards him and he backed away from the bars.

“That you’re one of them monsters from Dead Zone? The dead beasts they stapled death blenders tah? Them cursed body snatchers!” Gold digger shifted a bit, licking his lips. “It’s gotta be true. You got your own cell an one ah them blast collars. Only the dangerous ones get those...”

“Of course he isn’t that kind of ghoul.” Marble answered for me defensively.

“Ah ain’t talkin to you, missy!” Gold digger hissed, “Talkin to this here guy. Don’t interrupt when stallions’re talkin!” He looked to me, expecting an answer straight from my lips.

“If I was one of those things do you think I’d be talking to you? I encountered one of those things and they’re not very keen on conversation.” I answered him quickly, agreeing with Marble. I changed the subject before he could ask another question. “What are you in for? Unregistered use of your single brain cell?”

Gold Digger bit his lower lip, lowering his head, “Ouch. Guess yall callin it right. It was somethin stupid,” he said bitterly, “Ah found an ore vein while diggin a tunnel an laid claim. Dug it out an it turned out tah be pyrite.” He sighed, his lips flying from his teeth liberally. “Buckin false gold! Still sold well, but when folks found out, wanted ah refund ah couldn’t give it out onna account that ah spent my earnins investin. Thought ah was rich! Now ah’m facin forced labor tah pay off mah debts. Ain’t fair...”

“And by investing I’m sure you mean gambling.” I was blunt and to the point with him, speaking to him in the manner I would a child, “You ripped some ponies off and you got caught. The only thing that isn’t fair about that is having to put up with your poor company.”

He went silent, the words sinking in and having an effect on him. An expression of befuddlement and anger washed over him and he spun away to sit with his other cell mates to play a game of cards. “Deal me in. This guy’s shit fer company.” He said under his breath, reaching for the cards they dealt him.

“Wow, he actually shut up...” Marble was impressed, “Usually he harasses us until Rolly starts crying again.”

“Rolly?” I asked her, looking over the other ghouls in her cell. I pointed to each one, “Which one is Rolly?”

“The foal,” she stated with a crooked smile, “His name’s Rolly. He has been here for a while. I’m uncertain as to why.” She ruffled her wings and began grooming what feathers were left on the scabbed and naked nubs. She came up with a feather between her teeth. “Oh! No, not more feathers!” She tried to thread the feather back into her wing, it looked like she succeeded. She smiled before the feather fell out again taking her smile with it. “Of all the luck. I wish I wasn’t so rotten and ugly. Maybe I could be like you...”

“Like me?” I looked down at myself, wrapped in bandages and held together with staples darting over my body, “I’m not following you. I don’t look that good.”

“You look so well preserved!” She bit her lower lip and threaded a rotten leg through one of the bars. “I’ve never been vain but I’d like to think I was pretty once.” She turned her leg, much of the flesh and pelt were missing.

“I don’t think anyone should want to be like me. I don’t even want to be like me.” I sounded almost mournful, not for myself, for Marble and the other ghouls. I reached out and took her hoof in my freakish prosthetic and she did not pull away from me. “In all I’ve seen in this world you are among one of the most beautiful Marble. How anypony could remain so kind for so long is a merit.”

She was flush and stammering out syllables, finding other things to look at other than my gaze. She gingerly pulled her hoof back, wiping her eye with it. “Where do stallions like you come from? It must be a much better place than here.”

“Not really. Well, maybe it smelled less. I came from the Dead Zone.” I warned her, scratching my cheek with a finger, tilting my head up. “From uh...The hospital. I was a patient there.” Was that all I could remember? At least I was being honest with her.

The mare nodded gravely, “That’s surprising. They say that place is cursed. And that’s where you lived? Is it as bad as they say?”

“Well I don’t have a frame of reference. I just know their bedside manner really sucks and they let the patients wander around murdering intruders.” I summed up my experience in the hospital in a vague way as to not reopen terrifying old wounds and possible repressed memories. I recalled getting pissed on during that particular adventure. I shuddered. “Though it was a lot cleaner than this dump. This place smells worse than my saddlebag.”

We spoke for perhaps ten more minutes on other things, she was a font of stories from before the war. She mentioned she had a relative treated at the hospital once and she loathe to think what nefarious things were being done there now. She even clarified on the ‘curse’ of the hospital. The short version was that the veterans were all killed when the mega-spells hit, and their unfinished business and desires created an evil presence in the form of soldiers that fought long after the war was over. I knew a bit more about the actual nature of the hospital than her. Necro-Net wasn’t common knowledge. Of course a curse made sense too, maybe I was doomed to wander like one of those ghost stories.

Sad whimpers signaled the waking of Rolly and Marble excused herself to comfort him. Left once again to my own devices I sat on the tattered mattress covered in hay, blood, and other stains whose origins I did not want to contemplate and thought. I planned for what I would do once I got out. Breaking out would be trivial, the bars were old and it would only take me a few hours to bend the bars or take down the door. Unfortunately, Gaoler was here a majority of the time, specifically to keep an eye on me. Amongst the many bottles of alcohol on his desk was the detonator to my slave collar. Gaoler had threatened to pop my head like a pimple already, I was in no mood to push myself out of his tolerant graces.

Escape might be out. So what if I got out of my cell? I didn’t know the tunnels and I might take a turn and end up right in front of the deputy barracks if my bad luck streak held out. There was no way a single pony could take on an entire population without weapons or skills and tip-toe to freedom.

Considering most of the ideas in my head to escaped all ended in my death or humiliation I opted for the third option in my mind. Do nothing. I would sit here until something happened. It was the easiest

option of them all and the only thing it strained was my patience. I was going to add 'Freedom' to my list of things I rather enjoyed. I'd place it at number five on my list. No, wait! Stop the presses! I rather enjoyed having Gangrene as a friend as well and that included Marble's good company! Freedom would be number six while Friends took its place at number five.

Mental List of Thing I Enjoy:

- 1.) Being Alive
- 2.) Not being cut to bits, blown up, and/or eaten
- 3.) Inflicting injury to abominations/raiders
- 4.) Cover of the chest high variety
- 5.) Friendship
- 6.) Freedom

That summed up everything nicely. My mental list was subject to updates and changes as I saw fit! It also distracted me for a few minutes from thinking about the smell or the confinement. This was the longest I had gone without being shot at or put in an awkward situation! Might as well enjoy the relative safe...boring...irritating environment. Being shot at was more fun than sitting here.

How was I supposed to pass the time? The living inmates were terrified of me and wouldn't let me play cards with them, Marble was dealing with an emotional child who shouldn't even be here, and Gaoler was asleep so I couldn't call him names or tell him how stupid his caterpillar mustache looked. Could I sleep? No, I didn't need to. I still wasn't tired. I changed positions where I laid so often I may have been doing formation swimming or aerial acrobatics...Except this was on a mattress. Laying still didn't feel right. I was missing something. I made the motion to tip a hat over my face and was annoyed something wasn't there.

"Where's my hat?" I asked myself. I didn't own a hat. I sat up in my bedding and brushed my metal fingers through my messy crimson locks, sighing wistfully. "I'm going to go insane..."

It was the blink of an eye, the single breath to span a century, it was the shortest millennium. That was how long I had been sitting there staring at the wall covered in the posters of the most wanted criminals in Detrot or even the entire world for all I knew anymore. The entirety of Equestria may as well been boiled down into this one city, because it was all I knew now. Faces of every most wanted pony, griffin, or beast glared smugly back at me from the wall. Their crimes liquified and filled the cracks in my sanity, freezing in the winter of my heart to widen the cracks.

Murder, rape, and thievery were their crimes. All of Equestria was their victim. They all roamed free while good ponies sat in cells struggling to survive. This is Equestria. My Equestria. The therapy of thought, promising myself I would rob the freedom of every wanted pony on that list, a driving fire in my belly and a push at the back of my mind turned all processes into a single path, a rail of all thought to focus on one thing.

Reality kissed me on the cheek and brought me down before wailing on my ego with a brick. I was just one pony, a weak thing in the grand scheme of things. What good would come of one pony standing up and proclaiming they were the vengeance of the wastelands? About ten seconds of laughter before I got drilled a dozen times in the head with bullets. I was my own rollercoaster of motivation and self doubt.

A deep rumbling voice growled, muffled behind the doors at the entrance of the cell blocks, the rusted steel doors slid open with a strained squeal. Two guards filled the doorway, large draft stallions that had to enter one at a time otherwise they'd get stuck in the mouth of the door. Thick combat armor covered almost every inch of their bodies fitted over a black undersuit. Grey and red streak decals decorated the scarred armor, a crest of a phoenix carrying a package with spread wings in a circle was stamped in white over the red shoulder pads. Riot helmets with dark face shields obscured any identifying features not totally encased in armor. On their foreleg was a mount that held a retracting baton on a swivel. I imagined they could pop it off in their mouth if they lifted their visors but that didn't seem to be its intended function. They carried along their side on a battle mount for the combat armor a type of combat rifle, 5.56 millimeter ammunition in a banana magazine fixed to the top with some form of auto-reload system. An Iron Shod firearm I recognized from the catalog in the magazine 'Ironshod Hotshots', the *Bloomberg* assault rifle.

Every eye was glued to these guards, though reactions were mixed. Some were passive while others backed away from their cell doors. Rolly began crying again and Marble was working on hushing his cries less gently, opting to cover his mouth with her hoof.

The stallion at the front looked around the area, moving towards the cells of the brig. "Hmmm, well..." He hummed, clicking his tongue to the roof of his mouth once he arrived at my cell. "This is the one." He moved his hoof up and pointed to the desk. "Wake that useless piece of shite up so we can get out of 'ere. This flat reeks to the rafters." He sounded foreign, a distinct smooth and jarring speech pattern assigned him to hail from a different region.

The other stallion in nearly identical armor nodded, moving over the the desk and slamming his

hoof down on the desk hard. Gaoler woke up with a start, scattering the bottles everywhere, some shattering across the floor.

Gaoler fell from his perch and tumbled to his side, getting to his hooves groggily, “Gah, what riot?! Jailbreak?! The buck is...” He raised his gun and fired several shots wildly into the ceiling causing a rain of rock and mold. That was the first time I’d ever see Gaoler fire his weapon. He didn’t seem to be good at handling it.

Cries of fear grew louder, mostly from Rolly who couldn’t be silenced by Marble.

“Shut that fuckin’ urchin up!” Roared the guard standing at my cell door, “Gaoler, unlock that cell if you need me to do your job for you.”

“Now wait a gosh dern minute! You ain’t got no ahtority here, Ahm the sheriff down here.” The green stallion stammered out, dredging up some form of courage. He was already plucking his key ring out from his desk despite his words, looking at each key. “What in ternashun you even doin here?”

“Can it Gaoler, you’re only here because no one wants the shit job of policing this place.” The guard mocked the jailer, tapping his hoof on the desk. “And I highly doubt you want it getting out how incompetent you really are. We’re here for the pale stallion, Baroness Bluff’s orders.”

The jailer dropped his keys and firearm, all concentration broken in the haze of his massive hangover and processing that. “You’re here for that stupid damn thing? Ah....Good ah guess, that weirdo’s creepier than a smiling hellhound passing out candy.” Composing himself he picked his key ring back up and segregated one key from the others on the ring.

“Unlock this ghouls’ cell too, I want to shut that kid up.” Rasped the guard pacing in front of my door and the cell next to mine that held Marble and the other ghouls. He seemed particularly bloodthirsty.

“No, please!” Marble begged, holding the sobbing Rolly close to her chest, “He’s just a little colt! There’s no need for that!”

“Ah ain’t openin no cell til ah see them papers.” He lowered the key ring, lifting his weapon up off the ground and setting it into the desk drawer. “So lets see the order.” He cleared off a place on his

desk and took a seat, spitting into a bucket he kept next to his desk.

Way to go Gaoler, he earned a few points with me. Maybe he wasn't such a lost cause after all, even if his motivation was to protect his own authority.

One of the guards presented papers and Gaoler donned a pair of reading glasses and looked them over, tilting and rotating them and squinting his eyes. "These look official." Gaoler coughed, returning the papers to the armor clad meat tank. "No idea why Miss Bluff would want him, be better off torchin him. Here's the slave collar detonator, the button is a little sensitive, least that's what I say when it ever goes off on accident. Sensitivity varies on my hatred of the particular inmate." He laughed softly, trying to force a smile.

The guards were unamused and their silence and heated stares through their visors pierced Gaoler until his smile fell to a nervous frown. "Ah'll just unlock the cell now," He muttered, snaking his way around his desk and pushing the iron key into the lock of my cell. The door slid open with a push of his magic. "Now listen here ghoulish beast, be on your best behavior, you get me?"

Getting up from my mattress was enough of a motion to get Gaoler to retreat several feet. "I get you Gaoler." I deadpanned, stepping out of the cell. I flexed each metal digit on my hands into the floor, tapping gingerly as I sized these massive stallions up. "Can we get going already? You're scaring the kid."

"Just follow us closely," One of the guards ordered in his booming voice.

"Disobey any order and your pretty necklace will make your head into an art piece." Threatened the other smoothly.

"Be safe out there!" Marble called out to me as I left the cell blocks. If only she knew how badly I wanted to take them with me.

They led me out of the cell blocks and along a pathway lit only by glowing moss and the occasional hanging light riveted into the ceiling a few feet above our heads. The old metal walls were rusted and had water constantly running down them. It wouldn't be surprising if this passage was directly beneath where they collected the water for the purifier. From the cell blocks we entered the maintenance walkway that stretched over a subway tunnel running perpendicular just below it, passing many pipes that

fed water and power to the many parts of the makeshift bunker. Steam spewed out in thick huffs, pipes vibrated and rattled. I saw some subway trains running beneath us, ferrying passengers and employees around the different platforms.

“A lot of things seem to work around here.” I observed, speaking to the guard in front of me.

“Yeah, things are breaking all the time but the township’s got a pretty good mechanic. They’re always working on making better defenses or cleaner water. Only so much they can do though.” The guard replied to me casually, seemingly glad to have some small talk while he navigated these passageways.

“A single mechanic? One pony did all this?” That seemed far-fetched and completely unbelievable. This was too big of a job for just one mechanic, no matter how skilled. We passed a cluster of small floating orbs of metal flittering about and spot welding wire sections together. As the machines finished their work lighting along the catwalk came to life.

“The Mechanic uses reprogrammed Robronco robots to do most of the work around the tunnels.” He explained curtly. “We do the jobs the machines can’t do.”

“Yeah, robots aren’t good at being assholes.” I chimed in scornfully, eliciting a growl from both guards.

“I don’t recognize that accent. You’re not from around here, are you?” I asked the guard at my front, his accent was puzzling yet familiar.

“I come from Trottingham. Lovely place, you know, if you like haunt n’ night terrors. Blasted place is crawling with spooks and mooks.” He briefly summarized his homeland in a brief sound bite. “I don’t miss it none, course Detrot’s a pit too.”

Trottingham, another city that still existed. Maybe I’d visit it someday after this mess was sorted out. I still had no idea what kind of mess I was in. “Do you know how Gangrene’s doing?”

“Who?” Blurted the guard taking up the rear of our train. Any closer and his face visor would be brushing my flank.

“The mare I came in with.” I asserted.

“We don’t know nothing about that.” He rumbled dully, snorting, “Maybe Misses Bluff knows.”

I was going to be meeting her very soon I hoped. The sooner I found out Gangrene was okay the better. Worrying wasn’t in my nature and I knew she had to be fine, but any doubt I dared to carry was weight my mind didn’t need.

A massive commons opened up through the next doorway that receded upwards into the ceiling, leading down a set of stairs to another identical subway platform marked by signs that flickered in dying neon. ‘Platform 4F’ was painted on every one of its vertical supports in faded white paint in case anyone forgot this was platform 4F. Several subway cars sat dead on their tracks, refurbished into housing for the workers that milled about, scraping moss off the walls or repairing leaks in the pipes. It was a colorful arrangement, if filthy. An automatic floor buffer sat in disrepair while a barely functioning auto-vac scattered trash instead of picking it up. It was a dump, the workers lived here in squalor. The pungent smell of musk and urine wafted upwards around the subway’s stairwell.

Boarding a maintenance elevator towards the back of the platform, it shook and creaked with the strain the cables were under. It swayed concerningly on its mountings and threatened to drop out at the bottom at an inopportune moment.

“This bloody thing gives me the creeps. Like it is always about to fail.” Grumbled one of the guards, pressing the button for what level he wanted to stop at. We were heading to the ground level. “At least we’re out of that fuckin pig pit.”

“Those slobs really live in the slum of slums.” Agreed the other guard, adjusting his riot helmet’s visor. “I’ll have to sterilize this armor twice before I can feel clean again.”

Since I didn’t know their names and they were identical in facelessness I gave them fitting names. The guard to my left? His name was ‘Snickers Snore Sassafras’ and he was an asshole because his parents never loved him due to his irritableness caused by insomnia. The one on my right? ‘Beating Barley Buffnerd’, a young wimp who went to chemical abuse to increase his strength, now he was the stallion that made the other colts eat sand! My personification of their personalities made them more likeable and helped me contain the urge against wishing them ill for now. I just knew that out of the two I only disliked

one of them a little more than the other.

‘Ding’ ‘Ding’ The elevator chimed at every level, ground level flashed on the LED light display before it failed and the lighting dimmed. The sliding doors had to be forced open.

“Welcome to Greenvale Heights’ community level.” spoke a chipper and familiar voice belonging to an earth pony mare in a fresh pin striped suit. Her short golden mane framed her face in a manner that recalled the flanged edges of a portrait’s frame with a slender face enhanced with subtle touches of eye shadow. It was the same opaque violet mare from the caravan I had rescued. She looked much better from the last time I had seen her, though now she had the addition of small framed reading glasses and a bandaid on her cheek.

“The blasted up-crate blew its gut box again...” Spoke ‘Sassafrass’ on my left after he had finished peeling the doors open completely. “I’ll need to page Mechanic to get this bonker-box fixed. We need the express elevator running.” Trottingham must have been filled with interesting sayings and expressions.

“Everything’s falling to pieces around here. Won’t be long and my armor will be more holes and epoxy than armor.” Commented ‘Buffnerd’ in a plaintiff whinny, wiping dirt and grit off his chest plate with a hoof.

I stood before the mare flanked on each side by the ‘wonder twerps’ security force, looking around the courtyard we now stood in. It looked like this used to be a park or a garden area for the fenced in suburbs. They grew food here now, tended by a few scattered ponies armed with makeshift rakes and watering cans. The air wasn’t as foul top side but the condition of the homes and buildings wasn’t that much better than the state of the quarters underground, just less trash laying around and the homes were fixed up better than the wrecks outside of Greenvale Heights.

“Ah, there’s the guest of honor.” The mare said to me with a sincere smile, “I do hope you remember me?”

“You’re the mare that lead the caravan Gangrene and I saved...” I affirmed, my steel blue eyes locking onto her gaze. “Lady, your hotel here sucks and the staff isn’t very pleasant or bright. Also room service was absent.”

“So you do remember me...my name is Pane, I’ll be your guide to the meeting with Baroness Bluff...” She said, adjusting her glasses with a hoof, glancing at her clipboard that dangled on a cord around her neck and popped the pen from the board to jot something down. Replacing the pen she released the board, speaking crisply, “With our sincerest apologies the Crimson Carriers are deeply regretful at how you have been handled. As such our CEO Baroness Bluff decided to drop the charges held against you and purchase your term.” She bowed her head, her will of iron not shaken by my rude sarcasm. “Please, follow me.” She lead the way along the winding path through the garden.

“Pane’s a nice name. You know, for a chiropractor...” I began following her, thinking the other guards would leave us only to be disappointed. There was no losing Sassafrass and Buffnerd. “You mind translating that to sanity? Why would I have charges filed against me?” I grit my teeth so hard I could hear my jaw pop, but not once did I raise my voice any higher than a firm and mellow bleat. “Was it because my passport’s expired?” If sarcasm was currency, I was a very rich stallion.

The mare gave me a troubled glance and sighed, “Actually that’s part of it. You’re an undocumented ghoul outside of the Dead Zone. Normally there’d be no problems if you approached Greenvale Heights and was admitted entry by paying for entrance. You didn’t have any caps and your friend needed treatment. So incarceration’s the standard procedure for safety.”

That made sense, but if that was only part of it then that meant it’d get worse. “Alright so what’s with the necklace of doom wrapped around my throat?”

Sassafrass answered this one, “It’s so you don’t cause trouble, we’ve never had one of your kind in here before.”

“I saw plenty of ghouls in The Sink down below.” I reminded them sternly, “Or do you just not let ghouls up topside, Sassafrass?”

“Sassa-what? What’re you on about mate?” The guard asked quizzically, “What’s a Sassafrass?”

“You’re Sassafrass, Sassafrass.” I stated bluntly.

“I’m a what? But my name isn’t Sassafrass it’s---” He began only to be cut off by my insistence that his name was indeed Sassafrass.

Buffnerd soon joined in, bickering with me what his name actually was and affirmed he was not Sassafrass. I argued the contrary. “If I have to wear the exploding collar than you have to be Sassafrass and you have to be Buffnerd. It’s for your own protection.” My statement held finality and conviction that they struggled to gain traction against.

“He’s mental mate, all them ghoulies are.” Sassafrass said to Buffnerd in a low mutter.

“I’m starting to think the detonator is going to get sensitive real soon...” Droned Buffnerd numbly.

The mare leading us didn’t miss a beat, ignoring us up to a point until Buffnerd mentioned the slave collar around my neck going off, “It’s a shame really, because your name may as well be dirt if I have to issue corrective coaching to your performance as an employee...” She hesitated briefly, chuckling under her breath, “Buffnerd.”

“Frozen mid-syllable at the rebuke their lips were sealed and only allowed their apologies refuge into the nippy air, “Our apologies ma’am!” They blurted together, almost as if they’d practiced the line to be delivered on cue for a play. “I think, uh, Buffnerd does suit me if you think about it, Miss Pane.” Buffnerd agreed, nodding his head so viciously the visor lifted halfway up.

“I have a suggestion, do your jobs and nothing else,” Pane proposed this idea cheerily and undaunted by their comments, “And before we get on another tangent I’ll explain it by the short yard. You were charged with the loss of the caravan’s goods.”

I stopped stock still where we were, next to the fountain in the center of the garden. The once simple garden fountain was in ruins, the statue that was supposed to be on the center pedestal was missing it’s head and a majority of its limbs, water squirted from a nozzle in the stump of its neck. It looked rather macabre in a setting like this, surrounded by life growing in this harsh environment.

“Straight shot in the dark here buuuuuut...” I fumed darkly, “Is it a stretch to say I saved your lives and you’re shafting me over it?” I could understand the slave collar on a dangerous ghoul or prisoner. Sympathize with them over their trepidation of me was easy. This was not easy to relate with.

Both guards stopped and so did Pane who faced me, “No, it’s not. The community is suffering because supplies never get through. It got so bad that Baroness Bluff thought of sending me along with Gaoler to ensure the transport of the latest supply run. We used decoys caravans. We almost made it before Chunky Salsa sprung an ambush on us.” She tugged at the clipboard held on the lanyard around her neck gently, her ears cresting back against her skull. “The town wants a scapegoat they can put their fears into and blame. They want you to pay for what the Muffin Cake Raiders have done to our township.”

“...So they wanted someone to blame...” I began to pace into the garden, treading over tilled and damp soil, out a dozen feet and back. It helped me think even if it was literally going nowhere. The guards followed my every move, keeping up with me. I backed up, they backed up. I stepped forward, they stepped forward. At least they didn’t repeat what I said. “Why would they choose me?”

“Like he said earlier...” She flicked her head towards the guard on my left, “We’ve never had one of your kind here before. Not this far from the Dead Zone. Yes, you’re a ghoul and we’ve seen our fair share but you’re a specific type of ghoul. You’re a Deadmare, or as The Mechanic calls you, CyberZombie.”

“So that makes it right by the winds to blame me for their problems? We did them a favor! Where’s Gangrene? What did you do with her?” My nerves were rattled. I stopped pacing and curled my digits into the earth. Sassafrass whistled at me, waving the detonator in the air. Any trouble and my head would look like a blossomed gore flower. What was the big deal about these Deadmare? It was like a hot button for terror for ponies around these parts. They just seemed like extra terrifying hazards in a landscape already full of deadly hazards.

“Motivation does not justify blaming you. That’s why Baroness bluff dropped the charges and elected to buy your term to let you free. And your friend is safe, she’s at the clinic resting.” She pushed her glasses up her nose and perked her ears, “I visited her several times over the week to be sure of that. She is doing just fine”

“I guess I should be grateful for that. Does that mean I get to ditch the pop top?” I pointed at the slave collar carefully, unaware of how much agitation the spiteful python around my neck would weather until going off. “How long was I your ‘guest’ down there?” I added curiously, “You neglected to tell me that.”

To my great disappointment Pane shook her head with slow grace, drinking in a deep sigh through her nose. “You were in there for six days,” She informed me smoothly, “I apologize but

paperwork takes time, especially when the Township's mayor was against the idea of letting you live. The collar is a compromise. Furthermore, Baroness Bluff, the mare that bought your term, has a favor to ask you."

"There's always a catch..." The words were mine but it felt eerily like I was sharing my body with an impulsive stallion that spoke his mind. "What's the favor?"

"Maybe she wants you to be her butler or something." Suggested Buffnerd dumbly. I was going to agree with the 'or something' part of his otherwise braindead comment.

Sassafrass gave his companion a look and punched him in the shoulder with a hoof, "We're supposed to keep quiet you nutter! You want to get canned?"

The mare cleared her throat forcefully and silenced both stallions with a stern stare, "You do know how easy it would be to schedule the two of you to take the next caravan to Tomb Town, don't you?" She once again adjusted her glasses, her ice cold gaze centered on me. "Now sir, if that is the extent of your queries, it is time for me to escort you to the meeting with Misses Bluff."

"It looks like I don't have much a choice." I theorized, following her into the wake of the community center.

Greenvale Heights had been a modest community before the war with every common luxury a middle-class family could afford. A park with a garden and jungle gyms, a school with a small track field for games and bleachers for parents to watch their foals make memories and compete in the name of fun. The community center even had a pool to accompany its gym; the gym itself remained but the pool had been filled in with soil and was used to grow crops.

A small auditorium in the community center acted as a meeting room for collaboration among the different companies and members that were among the loose government of the township. The walls were covered in orange and dark brown vertical stripes high into a vaulted ceiling with small warm dome lights. Cleanly polished tile checkered the floor like a chess board. This was the first place I'd seen that looked nearly pristine, like it was never touched by the ravages of war--even the windows were intact and reflective. A single janitor pony in ruddy overalls pushed a cart out of one of the bathroom stalls across from us into the foyer, cleaning up every blemish or scuff that dared to make residence on the floor. She

was having some trouble with the scratches my gauntlets had left in the floor's near mirror finish. I felt guilty but admired the mare's determination to keep this place clean even if it seemed a pointless exercise.

“Why do they bother keeping this place so sterile? Do they do surgery here too?” I joked, fidgeting in the bench I sat on with Pane. The two guards stood at attention at either end of the bench.

“This is the center of our management. Our courthouse, meeting room, and yes, if necessary we even set up a place for our physician to do treatments if his clinic is overflowing. It happens more often than you think.” Pane's answered me crisply, lifting her clipboard to roll her eyes over the top page.

They had concluded one meeting, the double doors to the auditorium opened outwards and vomited a trail of multi-colored ponies of various shapes, sizes, and states of dress. Cleaner than those I'd seen, some wore suits while others wore simple barding. Several sets of eyes lingered upon me and mutters drifted from them as they spoke to one another. Either they were talking about me or I was getting paranoid. Several made way into the restrooms marked by signs that indicated ‘Fillies’ or ‘Colts’.

Sitting next to me on a bench was Pane, she was looking over the papers on her clipboard and making marks where appropriate using the pen gripped between her teeth. She slashed at the paper with swift conviction like one would do when drawing a blade across flesh. She recapped her pen and let the clipboard bounce off her chest on her lanyard. “It's time for your meeting...” She wanted to get this over with as much as I did.

I stood up and followed. “Who were they?” I asked yet another question. It couldn't be helped when I knew horse apples about anything around here.

“The board members of various companies that hold interests in Greenvale Heights.” She replied boredly. She had a will of iron to answer my questions but was getting tired of answering them. “They were likely discussing the state of our supplies and reserves.” She added.

“They didn't seem happy.” Buffnerd bellowed morosely.

“When are they ever happy?” Snapped Sassafrass, snorting against his visor. “More than likely it's more rotten folly.”

Our party approached the double doors that had expelled the previous members of the board. Buffnerd and Sassafrass both took one of the doors and held it open for Pane and I to go through. No sooner had I crossed the threshold of the door it slammed behind me and locked from the outside.

The auditorium was dark, the only part that was illuminated was the door behind me and a long oaken table that was set up with chairs all around it's perimeter. Several carafes of water sat along the span of the rustic table with glasses for each chair. At the far end of the table, a distance of around ten feet, sat an elderly unicorn mare with a grey mane fastened up into a bun and a sagging sable pelt. Her eyes were hidden behind a thick pair of glasses, reflecting the light produced by the two ornate gothic candelabras set on the table. She was almost avian in appearance with how she held herself, head lowered and extended, a lit cigarette on an extender looked like a twig held in her beak.

Pane briskly made her way to the old hag of a mare I figured was Baroness Bluff and whispered into her ear and offered her several papers off the clipboard. Her task finished she sat down by the hag and watched passively until called upon.

“Ah, he's here? Good...Good. You, boy, sit down. Don't be shy...” She croaked, sucking deep breaths of her addiction to turn the stick to ash, tapping into an ashtray that Pane swiftly held out for her. Her voice was like fine sandpaper, a hint of roughness that left everything it touched feeling smoother.

I moved to the chair closest to me at the far end of the table, pulling out the chair and clambering into it. I rested my forehooves on the table, blowing a stray clump of crimson mane from my only eye. “You're all class lady, you don't creep up the auditorium for just any guest, do you?”

The old crone laughed, a dry yet sweet laugh, “Oh no child, I only want you to focus on me...You'd be so distracted if you gandered all the guns trained on your chair...”

Was that fear knotting my stomach? Out there at the dark edges of the auditorium there were guards, armed with weapons trained on me. The explosive collar was more than enough! “You have all your bases covered.” I observed, my gaze drifting from the dark sectors of the room and trailing back to the mare.

“I like to have contingencies...” She smirked, cracked and sagging lips raising her cheeks against the bottom rim of her glasses. “How are you feeling today?”

“I’m so happy to be here I could just die.” I groused kindly, drumming my digits against the table’s top. “I certainly hope this will be a blast...” Gesturing to the collar I managed to get a roar of laughter from the elderly mare.

She drained the last of the life from her cigarette and ground the burning embers into the ashtray before slipping another into the holder, licking her lips. Pane held out a lighter for her and a small flame jumped from the end like summoned magic. “You’re certainly fresh for a corpse.” She rasped coarsely. She sucked a few puffs of her cigarette against the flame Pane carefully held and leaned back in her chair, a few scant curls of grey coming undone from her bun. “You’re not stiff like those...” She wheezed, “Wimpy plot devices...”

Did she just call the other board members dildoes? “And you look pretty good for an old hag,” I taunted sternly.

“You’re still sore about spending a week in The Sink? It couldn’t be helped...” She assumed that’s why I was being cross with her. She was right. She turned her head so slowly I hardly saw her move. I could have sworn I heard her neck creak but that was probably just her chair. She leaned over towards the pale violet earth pony and whispered to her loudly, “Pane, dear, what’s the first order of business?”

Pane looked at clipboard, flipping over a few pages and squinting to read in the dim light. “Introductions and...official gratitude, Baroness Bluff.” She reminded, pushing up her glasses once again as they began to slide off.

“Oh, yes. I’d forget my own head if it wasn’t screwed on. Now...” She turned back to me with the same slowness that could rival a tortoise...a dead tortoise. “I am the owner of Crimson Carriers Caravan Company...I didn’t choose the name. My late husband, Barren Bluff, chose the silly name...” Her eyes twinkled with memory behind the lenses, head tilting back and she gave a sigh of longing. “I’d like to thank you for saving my secretary and my customers...Mister?”

“Steelgraft...” I gave her the alias I used. “If you’re so grateful then why don’t you take this slave collar off and let me go?” It was worth a shot, though it was almost pure sarcasm to drive a point home no one other than me cared about.

The old witch drank my words and for a moment I thought she hadn’t heard me. She drew another long sigh of smoke from her addiction stick and blew smoke rings into the air. “I’m afraid it’s a

little complicated.” She didn’t sound afraid. “You see you managed to...liquidate a significant drain on Greenvale’s economy. While we lost the supplies and suffered a financial loss our devotion to save our customers has earned us more business contracts. Unfortunately that raider punk you killed was small time compared to his boss...”

“Gangrene and I did you a favor. Holding me captive to your whims isn’t painting you in a good frame.” If my unrest could take physical form it would be an elephant in the room. I’m certain the mare could taste my anger in the air. She looked eerily calm and contemplative.

“Yes, you did. That’s not being debated my dear deadmare...” She cooed softly, “Would you like a cigarette? These are Clever Cloves, smooth mint. They’re my favorite.” She shook the carton in the air with her magic. “Or candy? Anything to make you more comfortable?” she asked sweetly.

“I’d be more comfortable without a bomb collar around my neck.” I informed her.

Pane whispered into the old hag’s ear, nodding and producing a few notes for her. Baroness Bluff nodded solemnly. “I’ll just get on with it.” She began, “We did you no small favor ourselves. The mare you brought in, her injuries were extensive...and with those raiders and their tubby warlord hitting every caravan, no supplies have gotten into Greenvale in months...” Her voice rose and she began to cough, covering her mouth with a hoof.

The secretary filled a glass with water and pushed it to the elderly mare, making sure her boss was alright before taking over the explanation. “The payout for Chunky Salsa’s bounty wasn’t enough to cover her treatment. The loss of the supplies is felt by all residents here. when I filed my report to my boss she took action to make sure your friend was taken care of and to grace you a stay of execution.”

“A...stay of execution...” I parroted numbly, processing everything they had both said. Everyone here was suffering, no medical supplies. The sickness, unrest, and unhappiness of the ponies I had seen so far must be caused by the need for supplies. They were stagnating. Suddenly my own life seemed insignificant to their plight, any reservation or anger I felt was replaced for a greater understanding.

“Yes, the board wanted to have you destroyed. A ghoul with metal parts is said to be an omen, a sign that the settlement is going to die.” Her explanation only mystified the reanimated corpses as some mephistophelian machination that foretold the fall of a civilization. “The collar is a compromise with the board.” She spared a carked glance to the elderly mare, “Are you alright?”

Baroness Bluff was drinking heavy gulps of water, draining the glass and calming herself. “I’m feeble, not dead.” She cleared her throat and Pane refilled her glass of water. “Young stallion...I know it is unfair to ask this of you, but we need as much of those supplies recovered as possible...The warlord needs to move on to greener pastures.”

A job to do, they wanted me to finish what I unwittingly started. They wanted me to recover the lost supplies if any remained unused and kill the warlord leader that was organizing the raiders against the caravans. “You’re putting too much faith in me. That was a fluke. I don’t know anything about fighting or...killing. I just--”

“Did what came naturally.” Pane finished my sentence word for word. “Your kind is resourceful at creating nightmares.”

‘Your kind’, it was a most sincere insult that struck me where I was most tender. Denying any connection with the other creatures from the Veteran’s Ward was an old luxury I could barely afford. “I’m nothing special.” I reaffirmed. I may as well humor them for what they did for Gangrene, “Who’s lucky bachelor number one?”

“So you’ll do it.” Baroness Bluff drawled, smoke billowing from her nostrils. “You didn’t have a choice in the matter but it looks better for us if your signature is on the dotted line.”

The unwitting fool playing a part in a play, they had no hero and looked to the first stranger that stood against the current. What was this raven’s motivation for this? I doubted her sincerity in her story, whether or not she’d pop my top I ventured not to query. I stood up from the chair and slammed my fists into the table causing the candelabras and carafes to shake, tipping a few full glasses. “Alright hag, spare me. Tell me what I need to know and I’ll disappoint you later.”

The old mare nickered, patting the table with her hoof heartily. “Oh I like a stallion that gets straight to the point! I love that look!” She was beaming at me with a smile of perfect gleaming ivory; I guessed dentures. “We’ll see if you fail to deliver. Pane, tell this boy what he wants to know.”

Leaving Baroness Bluff’s side the secretary approached me, producing a file from her clipboard and laying it open. The wanted poster there showed the face of a pig, fat, ugly, wrinkled and bulging obscenely. Five chins and squinting, beady eyes glared back at me as the creature drew a fat slug across their upper lip. “This is your target.”

“A pig...?” I snorted out, looming over the file. I began to read over the articles inside the folder, leafing them out. “No...A glutton.” I corrected myself, my upper lip curling in disgust. “Muffin Cake.” I had been privy to his smug face on the wanted board at The Sink but he hadn’t been nearly this fat!

‘Muffin Cake’
Muffin Cake Warlord
Crimes:
Mass-Murder
Cannibalism
Slave Trading
Wanted -Dead-
2,000 Cap Reward

“He looks like a lumpy sausage.” My astute observation received a nod from Pane.
“What’s with the slug?”

“That’s his tongue...” Pane pointed out, “The artist had trouble drawing it. Your target is Muffin Cake, the warlord that dominates this region. He attracts raider ilk with fear and promises.”

“Are you sure he doesn’t use an orbit and promises to not eat them?” Was I a comedian in the making or a sarcastic plot doughnut? The latter obviously, neither of them even snickered at my joke.

“That slug sausage is a cannibal. Eating his own isn’t beyond him.” Pane uttered balefully, taking off her glasses and setting them on the table. “Please take this seriously, lives are at stake.”

“Sorry, that was in bad taste.” I admitted crisply, “So tell me what you know about my target. There’s only a few things in here...” The file only contained an updated wanted poster and artist rendition and a small map of the local area and large areas of the industrial park circled as

if by random.

“That’s all we have on the target. For as big as he is he’s very good at staying hidden. He could be anywhere in the industrial district in one of the many manufacturing facilities.” She gestured to a place on the map where large portions were circled, “It’s the only place that could support his clan and still be in proximity to strike our supply lines. As you can see it’s a fairly large area...”

“That’s not very helpful. This will take time...” I studied the map closely, finding Greenvale Heights on it and tracing my finger along the streets I’d need to take to get to the industrial complex.

“You have three days...” The old bag of skin and bones interjected into my discussion with Pane. There was a blunt edge to her words, both forehooves pressed together as she gazed over them at me.

“A deadline?” Bad mojo all around, deadlines had consequences and costs. “What happens after three days?”

“The collar comes off after three days.” The old witch cooed through pursed lips. “One way or another...” She added with lethal finality. “The clock is ticking. We won’t last long without supplies and if we can’t get the next caravan through we’re finished.”

“No pressure.” Pane quipped in a straight fashion that could be mistaken for sarcasm.

No pressure? No pressure!? Oh no this was metric tons of pressure! I was literally only a week fresh into this world, most of which I spent sleeplessly in a jail cell and had no idea how to fight raiders! They had unrealistically high expectations of me and there was nothing I could do. Here’s a great million cap idea, next time they could just shoot me for doing them a favor. I was going to need Gangrene and my weapons for this...And alcohol by the barrel to convince me this was a good idea.

“I need my stuff back...” I muttered in defeat, there was no way out of this. Which also meant I really had nowhere to go but up, little to lose and...I forgot where I was going with that.

“Your belongings will be returned to you once the leave the auditorium. This concludes our meeting. This has been a pleasure Mister SteelGraft.” Baroness Bluff chimed pleasantly, “Now don’t you have a job to do? Tick Tock, Tick Tock.”

Back in the foyer once again, leaving Pane and that old crone behind in the auditorium. I had only stayed long enough to sign a document agreeing to this contract that lasted a term of three days. I was guaranteed freedom once the mission was complete and the icing to the cake was I got to keep the bounty, which Baroness Bluff acted as if it was by the graciousness of her kind heart that she humored me to keep the fruits of my labor.

“That bad, huh?” Buffnerd chuckles from one side of the doorway.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Sassafrass,” I taunted, “Hand over my saddlebag and I’ll be on my way.” Pleasantries were for ponies with time to waste. My fortitude for patience was getting stretched thin.

“I thought I was Sassafrass.” The guard on the other side of the door frame bluntly stated, “You called him Buffnerd.”

I smirked, “Of course. Silly me. Who has my stuff?”

“Just go outside and your things will be delivered to you.” Sassafrass pointed a hoof towards the door, “Go on, as much fun as it is foalsittin you we have other duties to attend.”

Everyone is so damn polite, I thought bitterly, leaving the building and entering the garden commons where I would have to wait for someone with my belongings. The decapitated fountain seemed like the best place to wait, in the center of the park on an elevated concrete slab. *I should be easy to spot here*. I did stand out, the only stapled stallion of this township. I scanned the gardens and watched for movements among the homes.

A single spritebot rolled in a sputtering and jerking orbit around the gardens, stopping at each pony and blurting out a cheerful ‘Hi!’ before moving onto its next target. This one was odd, adorned with flapping fins and was pink--Not painted pink, the metal was pink. There were places where the machine had been damaged, scratches covered it’s surface but in those crevices the pink permeated the entire metal.

“Oh hi!” It blurted in a sharp and excited voice, nearing me. Seeing the metal bauble talk was unnerving, it sounded so...cheerful. Could a machine be cheerful? “Are you feeling peachy keen, friend?” A soft pop of static rolled from it’s speakers. The voice while tinny was that of a chipper and happy mare. A familiar voice that I couldn’t quite place.

“I don’t feel a thing...” If reality shattered and a marching band came strolling out of the still broken maintenance lift it would still be more subtle than this thing. “I’m waiting for someone to bring me my things so I can go kill a warlord. You know, just a typical...what day of the week is it?”

“It’s monday!” The blathering bauble said, then it gasped. “You’re new here aren’t you? You are!” The sounds of trumpets playing sounded over it’s speakers and a jaunty tune began to play, heavy trumpets and drums began to sound, then it took a deep breath, which was odd since it didn’t need to break, and began to belt out lyrics to a song.

“Welcome welcome welcome
A fine welcome to you
Welcome welcome welcome
I say how do you do?
Welcome welcome welcome
I say hip hip hurray
Welcome welcome welcome
To [Greenvale Heights] today!”

During the course of the song the music never missed a beat, the pounding of drums rising to the forefront briefly before dying to the battle cry of trumpets. The bauble didn’t stay still, rolling in the air in somersaults as if possessed. The last chorus bashed out over static broke by the crags of the incredibly tinny voice insert of Greenvale Heights to the original song.

I was unable to escape listening to the song, stunned by the sheer audacity. *Is it over?* I hoped,

hearing the music die down to silence.

“Wait for it!” The bauble announced, heralding the firing of confetti into the air from a compartment that opened on the top of its chassis. “Another successful welcome wagon delivered!” The spritebot was proud of herself...Or itself. I didn’t know how to judge its gender. “How do you feel?” She began to ramble at this point about her favorite colors and asking me what mine was, then somehow she got on the subject of birthday parties.

“Thanks...I certainly feel...Welcome.” This was just awkward. I backed away slowly and turned around to trot away only to have my vision filled by the same spritebot. *How the hell did she do that?!*

I turned back around and the spritebot wasn’t there. I took off on a brisk trot to escape the aggravating device only to be ambushed from a bush by the offending contraption. “Augh! How do you keep doing that?!” I gasped.

“Hello again!” The bot chirped happily and then it giggled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, silly. I’ve never seen you before! What’s your name?”

“It’s Steelgraft.” For now that was my alias anyway, “Could you leave me alone? I’m waiting for someone.” I wasn’t keen on spending a moment of the last three days of my life annoyed.

“Wow, me too! We can wait together!” It chimed out, “My name is PNK-3! But all my friends call me ‘Oh Celestia have mercy get away from me!’”

“You...Have a lot of friends, don’t you.” I stated dryly.

“Everyone is my friend!” It insisted. “So, who’re you waiting for SteelGraft?”

“Someone that has my things.” The drive to continue this delightful conversation was null, I was at an impasse. I could try ditching the idiot ball but I doubted I could shake it given its ability to just appear in random locations.

“Oh that’s so neat! I actually have to make a delivery! I was looking for the stallion I was

supposed to meet but then I got side-tracked. Everypony gets a smile and a hello!” Another curl of smoke and static rose from it’s speakers, the low drum of music was heard before it died. “Oh! Maybe you’ve seen them? They’ve got a long red mane--Like yours, one big blue eye--Like yours, and are covered in bandages covered in filth just like you are!”

Waving a prosthetic gauntlet in front of the pink drone I clicked my tongue and stammered out to get her to stop her blathering, “You’re looking for me. Me, I match that description!” The spritebot fell silent and hovered closely, so close that it pressed it’s chassis against my nose.

“Hmmm...Are you really who you say you are?” She interrogated, turning on a light that shot intense beams into my eye. Suddenly we were in a noir detective movie or something.

Reeling back I covered my eye, lights dancing at the peripherals of my vision. “Yes! I am who you’re looking for! Now give me my things and get lost!” Was I over reacting? Definitely. I think I could be forgiven my transgressions due to the poor hand the game of life had dealt me.

It complied, supplying my belongings in a sudden burst of light. The summoned belongings dropped right onto my head and floored me. “Whoops!” PNK-3 giggled out, insisting shortly after that that was purely accidental. Pain pounded through my skull--The source of the spasm inducing pain was the horn which had been knocked loose and was askew. A firm twist and tightening of the bolt realigned the bone organ into it’s socket and sent alien sensations of sinking, falling, and burning throughout my body before all sensations died completely.

Pleasant didn’t describe the feeling of fucking with my horn. I was not used to feeling anything. Maybe being numb was better, the sensitivity of the protrusion from my head was crippling. “What...Did you do that for?” I hissed through my teeth, pushing myself up to look through my saddlebags and collect my belongings.

“I just don’t know what went wrong!” PNK-3 confessed loudly, “I think the Mechanic got the coordinates wrong when he locked onto our position.” The spritebot’s theory seemed plausible, of course I had no idea how my saddlebag had teleported to be just above my head.

“How did he do that...?” The world was filled with equal parts wonder and horrible. It was a multi layered cake with uneven slices made of whatever ingredients you found in tartarus’s kitchen. It was a wonder but it was still terrible.

“Magic!” The robot replied happily, “Don’t you know about magic? It’s everywhere! Not just in unicorns.”

“Everyone knows about magic...” I grunted, riffling through my belongings. I had donned one of my spare doctor coats and refastened the holster to my *Cornhusker* revolver to my upper right leg near my shoulder. I could draw it easily by turning my head and biting the mouthgrip or I could draw it using my prosthetic hands. I hung SteelGraft’s ID around my neck and refastened my battle harness and it’s attached shotgun. Everything was here except the black box and the recording I had found in Patient 39’s room. “Where’s the rest of my stuff?” I spat accusingly, looking up from my emptied saddlebag.

“Oh, uh...It’s not all there? Oh I know the answer to it!” She cleared her throat with a cough and began to imitate someone’s voice poorly. “PNK-3, let the deadite know I’m fixin him a favor. I wanna get this recordin’ here and get it to play. And this black box? I’m running a few scans on it. I think I might know what it is.” She was trying to sound like a stallion, one with an accent that sounded like he was some city slicker stallion. “End recording!” She wailed out with a laugh, “That’s what The Mechanic told me to tell you.”

“...I really have no time...” The saddlebag was mounted onto the battle saddle and I turned to leave the spritebot.

For an hour I wandered trying to find out where anything was. The local signs were difficult to make out, the locals scurried away at the very sight of me or to avoid the idiot ball trailing in my wake. All I wanted to do was find the clinic to get Gangrene and figure out what I was supposed to do. But the sights were more spectacular than I had realized, maybe I wasn’t lost at all but wandered to explore and see everything. The community here worked hard together and accomplished feats of engineering I thought impossible with few tools. Greenvale was home of the ‘Earth Pony Way’ who worked thrice as hard as any other pony group with little complaint. Even while starving, sick, and unhappy they hadn’t turned on one another like the raiders outside had.

The park was where they grew food, the residential homes and school was where they housed their young. I saw many adults, weakened by hunger pressing on. PNK-3 confided in me that some families had their rations cut due to shortages and the fathers went hungry for their children. A father taught his young colt how to till the ground using a plow, his muscles straining under his flesh. Three days...It wasn’t just my deadline. It was a milestone to the grave for everyone here.

“You have no idea where you’re going, do you Steely?” PNK-3 hummed from nearby, never

having left my side even though I'd ignored her this entire time. "Just tell me where you want to go and I'll help you out! This place can be like a maze if you don't have a GPS."

"How do I get to the clinic?" I asked simply.

"The clinic is located at 3424 Truffle Avenue near the Residential block. There is also a small practice located down at subway station 3E near the bar for ghouls and body disposal." It informed me without breaking its unsettling cheerfulness. "Your friend wasn't a ghoul so she would be at Doc Murdoc's clinic..."

That name was incredibly unnerving, a doctor named Murdoc? That was a name you'd run away from the moment you heard it. The name alone was enough to scare the lameness and injuries right out of someone so they'd run from the clinic screaming in terror. A picturesque scene of an insane doctor bearing down on Gangrene with a bonesaw filled me with dread. *'Oh don't you worry we just need to take a blood sample!'* The shadow doctor rumbled in my mind.

"Yeah...Is the ghoul doctor named something a little nicer?" I probed.

"His name is Undertaker." The bauble replied happily, "He's really nice. Good bedside manner!"

"Groovy..." I clicked, following the bauble out of the park and along the well worn streets filled with wagons and the occasional fruit stand that sold apples. There was even a lemonade stand made out of a broken down sky wagon with a set of fillies selling their drinks to anypony wandering by. "It's almost like the war never happened for them..." I observed. "It needs more color..." Most of the paint on the modest homes were weather worn and faded, windows were broken and boarded, and each home bore barren lawns.

"I know! But painting up the houses is low priority while we have rumbling tummies." Toned the drone crisply. Then another voice played over the speakers, this one was a stallion, "Things aren't completely tanked but most of them don't know what's going on." This voice was a far cry closer to the one PNK-3 had been imitating. "The water purifier needs parts and the filtering system's going out. The caravans bring parts and trade we need to keep the underlying structures up and running."

"And this Warlord stops the supplies..." I added. "You must be Mechanic?"

“Yeah, that’s me. The one that keeps the place running. Sorry I’m not there in person. I sent PNK-3 up there but I still need to have words with you. It isn’t easy being the only one that knows how to fix shit.” A crackle of static sounded and PNK-3 blurted at the other voice aggressively, “You’re supposed to ask before you do a manual override!” She complained to the other voice. The spritebot wobbled and jolted around in the air, “I’m trying to talk to h---No you listen here mister, it’s rude to butt into a convers---I’m not arguing with you PNK-3 now cool your jets right now!” The machine fell silent flying alongside me and began speaking again, “Sorry about that. She gets testy.”

“More like possessed...” I suggested with a snort.

“A mare scorned ya’know? Anywatts here’s the heavy load for you. You have a job to do, what’s your plan man?” The voice asked inquisitively, taking a turn at the next street.

We began passing a few homes that had been refurbished into storefronts, one of the stores was ‘Shot Trotters’ which sold a vast amount of weapons, another was ‘Armor Armory’ which sold armor, and the most comical, ‘Trebled Trough’ which had a picture of an earth stallion blowing bubbles in a trough advertising it as the best eatery in Greenvale Heights. All the names were a bit weird or uninspired--The general store that sold the mundane everyday items was named ‘General General’. There was an ancient stallion wearing a combat helmet snoring away behind the register.

“My plan starts and ends with getting Gangrene.” I replied, trotting along the sidewalk and skirting around a wagon that had broken down in the center of the road. “Baroness and Pane blew spit at me and that didn’t help.”

Silent consideration for what I’d told him echoed soundlessly for a dozen seconds. When I thought I’d lost his attention for being an idiot, he spoke again. “I specialize in information.” The stallion boasted in that tinny voice, “And it’s in my best interest I help you. Gangrene’s one pony. You’re going to need more help. I can recommend a few things that will make your job easier.”

“I’m all ears.” His plan was better than mine because it was a plan. It had plan things...

“First I recommend you get more help. A contract with a Talon Merc might be just what you need. They tend to hang around the Trebled Trough or the bar, the Winking Mare.” The names around here had to have a committee filled with deviant yet unimaginative young colts. “You’re going to need

every edge you can get. I'd recommend you get some combat enhancing substances specifically for ghoulies. Undertaker should have some..." Then he paused just briefly and the sound of hooves on a keyboard was heard and then a few soft clicks, "Last but not least you should check out Armor Armory and Shot Trotters for better equipment. Your gear looks bad and I feel bad for letting you walk around in it."

"Sound advice but it's not going to help me find the fat fuck." I huffed, looking at myself and my gear and suddenly feeling very exposed. My gear was disgustingly filthy and I'd want another saddlebag. Curbstomp's smelly bag was so stiff it was almost a hard-case. "And how am I supposed to go shopping without the bones?" I was poor, the invert pockets expel moths and dirty lint level of poverty.

"I'll give you an advance on the bounty for Muffin Cake--500 caps should get you a decent set of threads and a better weapon." He offered. That generosity was a big favor and I was feeling better about my chances. "As for finding him..." The speakers crackled weakly, "I might know of a lead. I'll look into it." He promised.

We turned on Truffle Avenue and soon arrived at the clinic. A two story home with a black wrought iron fence had been converted into a clinic. A sign posted outside the gate had the insignia of the Ministry of Peace and the name 'Harmenhope Hospital'. Harm and hope should never be put next to each other when considering a hospital's name. The iron fence opened with a slow creak and the wind picked up, scattering dead leaves across the stone path overgrown by wild grass.

"Did you pick names out of a hat when you named these places?" I asked, giving a nervous chuckle.

"It was a community effort." The Mechanic answered, "Anyway you should get in there and get your friend." He reminded me crisply, tilting to study the cracks on the sidewalk. "Oh and before I forget..."

'BZT!' A sound of crackling energy echoed and a sack appeared over my head and crashed into my head, falling to the ground and spilling bottlecaps everywhere. "Oh damn, my digistructer's on the fritz..." He muttered, "Sorry bout that. I'd help you pick that up if PNK-3 had arms."

"Two for two..." I tweaked the nut at the base of my horn with a grunt, snorting and gritting my teeth. I was beginning to see my horn as an achilles hoof to my otherwise robustly enduring body. I began scooping great hoof-fulls of caps back into the sack. "Thanks for the advance. At least you have some

sense to give me a hoof in this mess.”

“I ain’t diggin the alternative.” He answered glumly, “Anyway goodluck. Remember what I told you and if you forget anything talk to any Robronco model robot you see round here. Chances are I’ll hear you.”

“You’re not coming with me?” Not that I’d be too sad to see PNK-3 leave, I just didn’t feel ready to fly solo just yet.

“Got things to do--Sides Murdoc hates PNK-3.” He explained simply. Another crackle of static flickered from the speakers followed by a belch of smoke. “S-see you around...” The speakers were failing and the acrid smell of smoke filled the air. “I’m back!” PNK-3 was back in control and soon became aware of where she was. “Oh this is the place! So you do know your way around. I have errands to r-run. I’ll see you around Steely!” The spritebot fled the area, warbling in the air awkwardly.

Well that was enlightening, eventful, and perfectly normal. For the crazy! I pocketed my goods and braved the rest of the yard to enter the clinic.

My brief introduction to the clinic had been through the wails and cries of the sick and the ambient music playing from a gramophone in this modest home. Classical music heavy on the string instruments played a concert of slow melodies that meshed with the groans and coughs that prevailed the clinic’s atmosphere. Harmenhope Hospital was a very small clinic serving a community of over a thousand. It was overflowing with the wounded and sick. Every room of the two story home had been modified into makeshift hospital rooms, only the kitchen and the rest room had been spared being stuffed with cots. The walls were covered in photos of previous patients, some after recovery and others that may have never recovered. The pungent smell of rotting fish clung to the air, this was not a completely sanitary environment and stains of blood were on every surface. This was leagues different from the Stable Heart Veteran’s Hospital. Less corpses more casualties.

A griffin dressed in scrubs was pulling slugs out of a squirming griffin that was draped over the couch in the living room. The griffin patient in question had gotten shot in the ass.

“How’s it looking doc?” The griffin winced, chirping in pain as the doctor pulled a piece of

shrapnel and dropped it into a tray on a nearby table.

“It look like birdshot.” The doctor mused, pulling out another piece of metal eliciting a squawk of pain. “Oh don’t be a fledgling.” He cracked the feline rear with gusto causing the griffin to baww loudly and fall into a panting heap on the couch. “Rest up...” He said, “At least one of us will get the rest we need.” His keen eyes turned and he smiled in the awkward way avians smiled. “Ah, a ghoul? I’m sorry I can only treat living. You’re looking for Undertaker down at 3E Platform.”

Doc Murdoc was a griffon insomniac that worked late into the night in his understaffed clinic. He was slender and polite if a bit eccentric, with dark plumage and the typical lion back half griffons were known for. He had a doctor’s headlamp on his forehead and blue surgical scrubs, his face mask was hanging around his neck making it look like a blue turkey wattle.

“My ass really...hurts...” The griffin crooned, beak buried in the cushions. His flank was covered in blood and the good’ doctor had neglected to wrap the wounds.

“I’m here to see Gangrene.” I said solemnly. “You might want to stop the bleeding...” I pointed a gauntlet to the griffin who was adding a new stain to the heavily stained couch.

“Ah you’re Deadite everyone’s got their feathers ruffled up over!” His eyes refocused on my gauntlet, the dull shine enticing him to give it a modest review. “Ah now that’s some nice shine...” The griffin on the couch was giving another swat on the ass with his open talon. “Oh I know what I’m doing. Are you some doctor yourself? Got some fancy med degree or...” He noticed the ID around my neck and leaned closer. His expression was a priceless mixture of awe and despair. “They just gave em out back then did they Mister SteelGraft?”

It was a complete lie, I wasn’t any more qualified than him. He was better by default seeing as he treated all these wounded and made them well on very little supply or help. “I uh, specialize in holes. Perforatorial studies.” I lied, giving a wide smile. “Where can I find Gangrene?”

“You mean my number one assistant? Hah that lass has been big help around here.” He spoke vaguely, sweeping the air with his wings and standing on his hind legs to approach me and take one of my forelegs in my grip and shake it heartily. “My manners I forgot! My name is Doc Murdoc. Mister SteelGraft, I have heard good good things about you.” He released his grip and lowered himself. The plaintiff patient was then given the treatment they needed as Doc Murdoc began administering bandages. “Go upstairs. She might be resting. She hasn’t yet recovered and she has been helping me.”

“What? You’re not afraid of me? Not even suspicious?” He treated me like I was a normal pony. Just normal. That was more touching than it should have been.

“You rather I treat mistreated hero like bad ugly rock in mating roost? Bah...You get enough from others. This is place of healing. You are even my patient. Your spirit hurts because others treat you poorly. Here...You are like everyone else. You are patient.” He tightened the bandages on those wounds a little too tightly and received a squawk from the griffin he was treating. “Now go see your friend. She was worried something had happened to you...”

Utilizing my poor sense of direction I finally found the staircase. I half expected the steps to be covered in cots--How counterintuitive that would be! Cot sledding down a flight of stairs. Ascending the steps as quietly as possible did not stop the stairs from creaking and groaning under my weight.

On the second floor I checked the first of four rooms, all that was here was a few empty cots and some old bandages. I shut the door quietly and checked the next room. The patients in this room were fast asleep, the window was open letting in a pleasant breeze.

In the next room there was a nurse mare casting a healing spell on a patient, a young colt who was bandaged around the leg with a splint. I watched briefly, staring at the pale yellow nurse unicorn and chuffed softly, leaving her to her work.

Gangrene was not in the fourth room either. A plaque read ‘Doc Murdoc’ on the locked door. That was the griffin doctor’s room.

“What are you doing snooping around?” The saucy voice of a disgruntled mare broke me from my thoughts and startled me.

Spinning I came face to face with the pale yellow unicorn nurse, “I was looking for...” For a brief moment I evaluated this mare, similar to Gangrene but she had a cornsilk blonde mane that shimmered in the scant light filtering in from outside and a kind expression not hardened like the Viper I knew. “Is that you Gangrene?” I rolled my gaze over her in silence and my jaw hung at the air. I was speechless.

“Got a problem?” She cooed, pressing her hoof under my jaw and pushing it back up. “I was wondering when you’d show up. Get lost? What’s up with...that. Why are you wearing that slave collar?!” Her kind demeanor broke and her eyes narrowed into slits.

“You look...” She looked beautiful, cleaned up! wearing a doctor’s simple barding and a clean nurse’s cap. Her cutie mark was a medical box covered in bandaids! I lost my voice and stammered.

“Busy.” She stated grimly, “As soon as I was feeling better I started helping out here to save lives. I told you I was a medic before...” She about faced so quickly her tail whipped me in the face and she began strolling to the first room I had passed. “Why’re you so damn surprised?”

“You seem upset...” I mentioned with a hint of nervousness. “I thought you’d be happy I saved your life...”

“At first I was concerned that you died. That busybody bitch kept assuring me they were ‘doing everything they could’ for you...” She snorted and moved into the room, her demeanor changing in a metamorphosis of kindness. “Hello there~ Are you feeling better?” She chimed sweetly to her charges. Her bedside manner was amazing, her kindness towards her patients was remarkably deeper when dealing with those young and weak or old and feeble. She did what she could to make them comfortable, giving them a ration of water.

When she returned from the room shutting the door I asked, “What’s wrong with them?”

“Cholera, radiation sickness, and bad luck...” She replied sadly, “The water and food isn’t top quality...It wouldn’t be a problem if they had proper antibiotics...but somepony decided I was more important than the supplies.” She levitated a clipboard off a tack on the wall and began marking appropriate boxes and filling out the paperwork. She knew how to read and write but not how to read a map? *Here I thought she was illiterate.*

“I didn’t know this was going to happen!” I defended myself, at a loss for a proper justification for my actions, in retrospect I was convinced I made the right choice. “I didn’t want to lose the only friend I had. Those supplies would have been a bandaid on a gaping wound. Their caravan would still keep getting hit. At least this way we can stop it!”

“You chose me over everyone in Greenvale you idiot. How are we going to fix this shit? What

the fuck's your plan?" She groused coldly, her fur bristling as a hot snort of steam curled from her nostrils. "Had you just sat tight and...and not done anything maybe we could have avoided getting in this whole mess."

"You mean so we could ignore their problem..." I accused her. "You were fine with getting what we wanted here and moving on, weren't you? The ponies here don't complain, we would have never found out."

"And then I would have...I could just walk away guilt free but now I can't, SteelGraft. I can't walk away because I took an oath." She wiped sweat from her brow with a damp white towel and slung it back over her shoulder. "Now what the fuck are you doing with a bouncing betty latched under your brainpan?"

"It's a long story and my plan's a li--"

"Not here, we'll disturb the patients. Follow me." The mare interrupted me and trotted down the stairs and out the back of the clinic, passing Murdoc along the way. "Taking a break Murdoc." She told him, tossing a clipboard at him as she passed. "I need to have a little conversation with SteelGraft."

The massive backyard to this once luxury home was now a graveyard from fence to fence. Tires, wagon wheels, and wooden fence posts were used as grave markers. There were a few ponies here visiting graves. The smell of fresh earth clung to the air and several of the graves smelled fresh.

Gangrene was speaking again but her voice became the muffled wind that blew against my cheeks, cold and stinging. My cheeks were wet with tears and the world lost focus through my tears. Every breath was painfully and the pulse in my chest was a hollow that pulled on everything inside me where my heart should be.

I stood at one of the graves that evoked a sense of deja-vu. A grassy hill of rolling tomb stones that still had space for more graves. "Why?" a small foal asked me, a young buck whose features kept shifting and breaking away into static. "Did she do something bad daddy?"

"No, she did everything right..." The stallion I was replied, controlling my every action down this stroll of my memoirs. "Then why did she have to go?" The foal--My son asked. My son--I had a son once and a family.

“Sometimes doing everything right just isn’t enough.” I replied consolingly, the words were sour and bitter. My entire world had the focus and meaning of a lead balloon dragging an airship out of the sky. I was falling in flight lost, she was gone. He was all I had left.

I held the foal in my forelegs and hugged him. He was shivering and crying, trying to be brave for me. ‘Daddy I...I miss mommy.’ “I do too...” I didn’t think I could do this. I couldn’t raise my boy all on my own. *Why can’t this war just be over?*

More graves appeared on the grassy hill where they had never been before, rolling into place and saturating everything...

“STEELGRAFT!” Gangrene was fuming, waving at me frantically. “Are you even listening? Come on! You’re doing that stand stock still and stare at shit thing.” She pushed against me side and I nearly fell over, “You’re freaking out the visitors!”

Reality was back, I could no longer feel a single thing! I was glad to return to the numb existence of my body after a memory with such moving emotion. If I had a relapse like that during a fight I’d be in trouble, I had to find out what triggered them. I shook my head free of the cobwebs and faced the disgruntled Gangrene. “Sorry...I...uh, why are the graves so fresh?” I sought to change the subject and get an answer. Two birds with one stone.

She grit her teeth and rolled her eyes, taking a breath in and letting out a sigh, “Cholera kills quickly. In a single day...it’s called the blue death for a reason.” She elected to answer me before I asked, “It’s called that because it makes you shit blue rice water until you’re dehydrated and dead.”

That was...disgusting. I opened my mouth and closed it several times, struggling to find an expression that didn’t seem obtuse. “What a way to go...” I muttered. The three day time limit on my job seemed more generous now.

“Was that a joke, SteelGraft?” Gangrene growled.

“No! Why would I make a joke when the epidemic’s killing folk?” I waved one of my gauntlets

at the air in a defensive manner. I was attracting attention of the other ponies that were visiting the graveyard. “I have tact...” That was a lie, tact was for people too dull to utilize sarcasm.

“Are you going to tell me where you’ve been for the last week today or are you going to go off in la-la land again?” The mare snorted softly. “And who the buck fuck put that slave collar on you?!” She demanded, wanting to get to the seed of the problem.

“That’s where things get a little...complicated.” I began weaving the tale for her to bring her up to speed. I told her about my stay in The Sink, about my deal with Baroness Bluff, and the plan of action given to me by a floating tin can that sang a song of welcome to me. Her expression didn’t change from the dull, bored expression as I explained to her in length the burden the leaders of the community had sacked me with. I showed her the folder, the wanted poster, and the caps we had gotten in advance.

She slowly peeled the nurse’s hat off her head and spiked it into the ground. “Let me go get my rifle and barding. We’ve got a long three days.” She hissed venomously. As she turned her tail whipped me in the face. I saw nothing but her smooth flanks as she sauntered back into the clinic.

What day was it? Monday. PNK-3 had said it was monday. “...I really hate mondays.”

No Exp! You haven’t killed ANYTHING. I can’t award Exp for anything other than gratuitous violence. Refer to the [Character Progress Review](#) for more exact information.

New Mission: Baking Bad

Kill the Warlord Muffin Cake in three days or lose your head. You’d better plan ahead to clear this hurdle, it won’t be easy to do.