

“Shop and Drop”

Too much demand, not enough supply.

The plan had to be thought out carefully--so many things were riding on knowing exactly what to do and when. Our mission was to kill the warlord pinching off the supply routes to this region so the citizens of Greenvale could get much needed relief against several factors aiding in the slow decline in their population.

We had the disadvantage of this day being half-way finished, the shadows growing long across the ground. The sun would be leaving the city of Detroit soon and the moon's weak light could barely make it through the haze of clouds and smog that lingered like a foul fart over the city.

I split the caps from the advance for the bounty with Gangrene so she could get what she needed and we left for the stores down the road from Hopenharm Hospital. A most unfortunate name for a clinic, my opinion had not changed in the slightest.

Okay SteelGraft...Or whoever I am...You just need to keep your focus and forget about the timer you have around your neck! All mental exercises I used to remove my thoughts on the explosive on my neck failed me. Think about...Think...About who that was. From my memory, the foal that cried for his mother and hugged me in the cold October winds. It was in October. How did I even know that?

Down Truffle Avenue we conquered sidewalk and street, for as much wild grass grew around here the grounds were devoid of insect life. No butterflies, no bees, and no ants. Well there was that enormous cockroach I killed back in the Dead Zone. *Don't think about it!* Massive insects. *Damnit!* The grass near the street rustled, both me and Gangrene were alert and drawing iron defensively. I drew my weapon to feel safer, Gangrene drew out of habit. A small scorpion crossed my path and stopped on the warm sidewalk, curling its tail around itself. I relaxed, holstering my revolver. *So there are some normal sized wildlife still.* Gangrene did not hesitate blasting the tiny scorpion into a twitching crater.

“That was a waste of a bullet.” I asserted, “Are you afraid of scorpions?” My taunt was all in good humor, but the speed she made to shatter the scorpion to bits held hints of animosity.

“I wasn't about to let it grow up.” She blew the smoke curling from her rifle's barrel and holstered it. “It was a baby.”

Just a...Just a baby? Don't think about it. I'd shoot larger ones without hesitation. "Which store should we hit first?" I asked, we had started down the street lined with shops and business wagons.

"General-General first. We need to get you a new saddlebag that doesn't smell like a thousand asses cooking over a fire." *She has a marvelous way with words, doesn't she?* The mare lead the way as she was apt to do and steered our small party of two straight to the small trailer. A large wooden sign over the doorway facing the street boasted the name "General General"--A strange and absurd name just like every other name in Greenvale Heights.

The outside of the store had been fairly normal excluding the broken down wagons and a foot of uncut grass that had dried up. A group of Greenvale citizens were doing their part harvesting it from the yard and tossing out any assortment of trash, two additional earth stallions stood at alert to kill any wildlife that may be hidden in the thrush. Inside was what one would call a packrat paradise--Except the rats were hanging dead by their tails behind the counter with an advertisement for their sale. Wall to wall knick knacks and supplies ranging from the mundane canteen and most basic traveling supplies to the ridiculous 'Shark repellent' that was 100% guaranteed. I did not want to know why anyone would need shark repellent in a city.

The caretaker of the place was asleep, head tilted back and jaws open with drool running down the corners of his mouth. A simple looking decrepit mule with a mangy pelt that was stained by his previous attempts at his concoctions, the likes of which was probably aligned with the aforementioned '*Shark Repellent*'.

A mare of business, Gangrene began to assess what supplies we needed and things we did not need. After she had rummaged through several bins and shelves she had a small pile of supplies that she was seeking to buy. She slammed the supplies on the counter, rousing the old mule. "Up you ass!"

The mule sat bolt upright and look around in a state of terror before he settled his eyes upon his customers and relaxed. "Guess I should be grateful you didn't try running off while I was asleep." What great customer service.

Feigning interest was difficult with so many things to look at, while Gangrene haggled in the background I was taking in the sights and smells of the collected wealth of the store. Well, mostly it was just junk at first glance, one shelf was completely covered in metal scrap while another had bins of smoke-dried apple slices and meats. The meat was interesting, it smelled spicy and salty, as far as I remembered ponies were herbivores. *Who eats this stuff? Part of the normal cuisine for a survivalist.*

I wanted some, mostly due to morbid curiosity at it's taste and texture. I was very glad that I could still taste. I grabbed a nearby small sack from a pile and filled it. At 25 caps a pound it was pricey considering that a litre of water was around 15 caps. I took one pound, why not treat myself to something?

The beef jerky was added to the pile of supplies we were buying, receiving a cursory glance from Gangrene for it in mid-haggle with the mule. Their quick words exchanged lead to no lost love between them and the pale yellow mare emptied her satchel of the goods she planned on selling to him. All the duplicates to our magazines and odds and ends only net us a small sum of caps that barely covered my jerky.

Gangrene was a seasoned barterer, she took what she got for the sale and began talking the store owner down about his high prices. The unwelcoming geezer rumbled coarsely about supply and demand, their haggling ping ponged for several minutes until they eventually came to an agreement.

Three litres of dirty water, three boxes of enchanted plasters, some incredibly weak foal brand cherry flavored healing potion, and a new saddlebag for 65 caps. Slim pickings for supplies, so we took what we could get. The mule tossed in the beef jerky for free, hoping that we would bring return business.

The new saddlebag was mine, I gathered, so when time came to leave I picked it up and swept our new supplies into it. The yellow mare tugged the saddlebag from my grip, "Oh no, no no no. You are not putting this saddlebag on until we get you cleaned up."

A bath sounded good, ruining my new satchel sounded bad. "Is that what the water we bought is for?" I asked simply, the amount of water wasn't anywhere near enough for a bath or even a shower.

The mare trotted out from the store, "That's for drinking wise-ass. No, there's a certain way the folks wash round here when water's scarce." She clicked her tongue to the roof of her mouth, "Come on, I'll show you."

Shower stalls outside, at least those looked like shower stalls. They were more like metal cubicles one would expect to find on a beach to rinse the salt water off before returning home or the simple showers at a chlorinated pool. There were no showerheads, just hanging buckets with pull chains that opened a nozzle in the bottom to let it's contents drain out. All this right out in the open, a community shower placed behind an unassuming row of houses.

The thing that baffled me the most though, was that there were troughs filled with fine white sands and grounds silt, almost the consistency of chalk dust. *What the hay is that?* Did they just...Rub themselves down with dust to get clean?

“Now since you’re so clueless about everything let me give you a little demonstration.” She said with honeyed words, sauntering up into one of the open stalls and filling the bucket hanging overhead with a large scoop. She made a show of everything, stripping herself of each part of her armored barding and peeling it off like a second skin. Every subtle wiggle was accentuated by her never-care attitude. She levitated a grit brush off one of the nails in the stall and pulled the wooden handle with her teeth. A cascade of shimmering white powder doused her, running over every curve and sparkling in the light. Her head tilted upward and even her face was covered in a fine layer of the silt.

This was Gangrene, the hard-assed Viper bandit with the bad attitude and the charisma of a snake. I shouldn’t be looking at her like this. But with her golden sunflower mane and tail and the ways she moved was completely different from what I came to know of her. She was beautiful to say the least, even when the dust caked up against the grime coating her form it did nothing to diminish how appealing she was becoming. *Stop staring!* I couldn’t. *Is my mouth hanging open?* It was!

The golden idol I saw before me began to polish herself with her grit brush, flaking off the clumps of sweat and dirt that had been gripped by the fine white powder. Her body was dusted and scrubbed to a dull polish and the trickle of dust soon slowed and stopped altogether. She finished her scrub down and shook the dust off her pelt, leaving a pile of filthy powder behind. She swept up the powder and put it in a waste bucket.

“See? Easy peasy.” She stated saucily, slinking up to me and pressing my jaw back up to meet its home against my upper teeth. She skirted around me and I followed her with my gaze. She began advancing on me from behind, pushing me to back up into the stall she had just used. “I’m not going to bother to ask if you liked what you saw. I know you did, deadhead...” She purred throatily.

“I...Uh...Buh...” *Sentences and syllables, Steelgraft! Sentences and syllables!* “I’m just very surprised at how well a little dust can clean up a mess.” I admitted, the world was still full of so much wonder and not all things were as horrible as they seemed. Gangrene was a testament to that.

“It’s talcum powder.” She answered, a small smirk creeping into her features and a mischievous twinkle shining in her eyes. “It has many applications, pharmaceutical, engineering, and even

construction. In it's most basic ground up state it's called soap stone, it rips the moisture and dirt right off."

"Sounds like an amazing thing. Seems like a waste to use it for this..." It was either using this powder or water, and the community needed the water more..

"It can be recycled." Gangrene filled the bucket over my head, and selected an appropriate grit brush from one of the nails on the wall. "And since you're so new to this I'll help you this once." The mare pressed her nose against mine and growled, "Of course I'm not exactly gentle."

She pulled the chain with her magic and stepped back. I was doused in the fine powder, sputtering as I tried to respond. I had not gotten to strip out of my battle saddle or bandages! A thick cloud of musty yet clean smelling talc filled my vision and soon I saw Gangrene working me over with the brush, tongue extended in an expression of concentration. "Oh look at what we have here!" She chuckled.

"What?" I sputtered out, feeling more exposed than I'd ever felt before. I may not be able to feel it but I knew where she was rubbing that brush, watching her with a nervous expression. "Hey, cut that out! I can do this!" To no avail, she was dead set on making this the most embarrassing moment of my brief unlife.

"Is that rigor mortis or are you happy to see me?" She cooed to me with a cruel snicker.

"Okay, stop no more! I'm done!" I snatched the brush from the air and gave the taunting mare a swift swat on the flanks with it. She squealed and retreated out of the stall to avoid my follow up swings, snorting out a mouthful of talcum powder.

"Fine, haha! You're so fucking easy." She rubbed her sore rump cheek with a hoof. "Totally worth it." She found great pleasure in my discomfort, pushing my buttons brought her glee.

Clean and less smelly--Mission accomplished! A successful dust bath. At least keeping clean wouldn't be such an issue but I longed for a *normal shower* with this thing called *water*. By the end of the ordeal the powder had worked it's way into my stitches, caked in with blood and sick black batter. It took me several minutes of scrubbing and I still couldn't get all the powder out of the flesh valleys. My bandages were caked with powder so I stripped of them, adding my old saddle bag and coat to the growing pile of my cast-offs.

Everything went fine until I removed the bandages around my left eye. I had never considered why it was bound, figuring I was missing an eye. That wasn't the case as I found I could see, but the glaring light that hit my retina caused me to shudder and cover my revealed eye with my prosthetic hand. "Augh, that's sensitive." Sensory overload--Pain. Discomfort that grew from the sensitivity of light and the feedback I received. I briefly uncovered the eye and my world was briefly filled with information--Projected images in the form of cursors and readouts. The buildings around me were displayed in a manner that they must have been before the war, crisp and clean.

Unable to understand lead to creeping fear in the pit of my soul, a cold nagging whisper of a thousand woes suggesting I may not be entirely equine afterall. My companion approached me, concern etched into her face as her smirk fell to a neutral worry.

"You alright there Steelgraft? Something wrong with your eye?" She was trying to get a good look at me, guiding my foreleg back to the ground. "Let me see you git, I'm a medic." She studied the nature of what caused me discomfort and came to a conclusion. "Sclera's pure black, retina is gaping. no eyelid...Sunken, scarring of the ocular muscles..." She frowned, "Someone really did a number on this eye." She pressed her hoof over it and blocked the light from reaching it, "Looks like a botched operation if I ever saw one. Someone tried to do surgery on your eye--Looks like some kinda implant."

Great, more things wrong with me! Just what I needed, a busted eye. It'd be better to just not have an eye at this rate. Gouging it out briefly crossed my mind as an idea while another considered self mutilation to be the worst possible path to follow. "Great, someone tried sticking something in my eye..."

My companion wrapped my eye with a fresh roll of gauze after making sure the wound was clean, "I don't know how to treat something like this. Maybe you should go see that ghoulish doctor at the Morgue? I'll finish up shoppin' up here."

If one good thing came with being a grab bag of mistakes was escaping the mundane act of shopping to go see some new sights. I'd yet to meet Undertaker and I needed to see him anyway. Two birds one song kinda deal, right?

"Yeah...Sure." I managed to mutter, the sensitivity left me unfocused and woozy. My cornea was on fire and I was still reeling from the sensitivity. Two things to worry about in a fight now; Little trips down memory lane and a crippled eye that had to remain covered. *I think my warranty expired ages ago.* A hundred years of sitting around doing nothing but being nailed to a wall and things tend to age and fall

apart.

To say that platform 3E was a rat infested den of horror that escaped someone's deepest, darkest nightmares of being buried alive would be a polite understatement. It definitely was rat infested and saturated with colors the like of red and black, red brick walls, signs and markers warning of potential pathogens and sicknesses when dealing with the dead, and my personal favorite was the panhandlers playing on the better natures of citizens for caps. Beggars that had injuries, boils, or grotesque growths and mutations. 3E was nicknamed 'Leprosy Lane' by a majority of the townsfolk that never dare venture here. This is where the ghouls lived, second class citizens along with the mutated and the crippled.

Even the lighting here was bad, dim and flickering, recalling my time in the Veteran's Wing of my own hospital of horrors. Leaking pipes rumbled and belched steam and the subway cars sat dead, rusted to their tracks. There were shops down here that catered to ghouls, run by ghouls, and shopped at by ghouls. A small mural on a far wall read in bold letters 'Tomb Town Lives' and was flanked by several images of mausoleums and a light growing on the horizon. Upon closer inspection I had to admire the work, the flowing weight of every stroke was deliberate in execution.

The culprit who painted this was nearby with a can of paint, working on a new addition to their wall. This average adult pony was a ghoul that wore thick sunglasses. He tapped his brush out on the can and spoke in a raspy voice, "Whatcha want smooth pelt?"

"Just admiring your work." I said in a friendly manner, ignoring the comment about being a *smooth pelt*. My pelt was not smooth, it was interrupted by a railroad track pattern of stitches holding me together. "Do you know where I can find the morgue?"

The vagabond dipped his brush and mixed two colors on a lid to make a soft orange and began applying that to an empty space on the wall, "Yeah, just follow the subway tracks and take the first ladder down. You'll hear a lotta boomin' noise and music coming from the Winkin Mare that's just above it."

"Thanks." I was about to leave him to his work when he brought my attention to his donation cup by tapping it a few times with his brush. It only had two bottlecaps in it.

"Your words mean nothin to me. I can't eat words or buy new paint. If yo--"

He fell silent went I made a donation of clinking caps into his can, twenty plinks of metal rattling.

He picked up the can and shook it a few times, a mixture of satisfaction and surprise creasing the rotten features of his face. He shook the can again, “You call this alms for the poor, cheapskate?”

Is 20 caps not a lot? I had no idea the value of these things. I scooped out another handful and dropped them into the can until it was almost filled to the brim. “I have no idea how much these things are worth. I wish we still used bits.”

The ghoul froze stiff for a moment and swallowed, “Yeah, dying shame we use ruddy caps now. They’re plentiful if you look hard enough though.” He dipped his brush and resumed painting, using long elegant strokes of his brush. “Eternal Herd bless you. Hope you get whatever you’re looking for. Just be careful. Leprosy Lane’s got a reputation for being unsafe.”

I found his advice to be odd, most normal citizens avoided 3E, but the more adventurous had sought this platform for its harsh and dangerous vibe. I’d encountered several griffins here already, all wearing armor with a set of talons emblazoned over their shoulder pads. From what I gathered there was no party like a dead pony party and the bar had music and atmosphere to spare, attracting the rough and rude mercenary types.

Neon signs and flickering lights advertised the bar the further down the tunnel I went. Trash everywhere, bums sleeping under flaps of cardboard, and more beggars looking to me, shaking their cap jars. Some of the ‘sleeping ponies’ were still as the grave but I had learned from experience that checking could be rude or give you a sudden and deadly surprise. Zombies with buzz saw arms among those surprises. The first ladder I encountered was on my right, next to a staircase that lead to the Winking Mare. The committee of bad names strikes again!

Business first and pleasure later. I’d hit up the bar and seek a contract with a merc to help me with taking out my target after I got a check-up with the ghoul doctor and got some combat enhancing chems specifically made for ghouls like me.

A ladder, it was thought provoking why a purely quadrupedal species would use ladders like these. The rungs were extra wide for hooves and the slats were pitched forward slightly to help maintain a grip, but it all seemed awkward. Even for me it was a bit of a stretch to accomplish the climb down even with digits to grip with. At the final four feet I dismounted the ladder and landed back on all four hooves.

“And what can I do for you my friend?” A cheerful voice muffled by a plague doctor’s mask. This was Undertaker? This particular doctor had been the one to save my plot when Chunky Salsa had me

in his sights. As if reading my mind, he added, “I have not forgotten you. My memory is quite good, a week of your absence did not plague me with amnesia.”

The esteemed doctor was no longer wearing his cloak, but his mask remained on. Not a single inch of his pelt showed through the thick black banding around his body held in place by buckles and straps, even his horn had a rubber stopper on its end. *Yeah that's totally appropriate attire for a doctor to wear! A crazy doctor.* The world was filled with wonder. Sometimes too much wonder.

His practice was beneath the subway level where the runoff from rain and moisture would go. The floor we stood on was grated metal that allowed the fluids to flow into runoff channels below into the sewers. From the looks of the tilted table and the small river of blood seeping from the corpse he was preparing I guessed he used it to drain bodies of fluids. There was a desk with his personal items which included a radio and a small pony mannequin that wore his burlap cloak and pointy wide brimmed hat.

“I came in for a check-up. I didn’t expect you to be Undertaker. I guess it’s nice to see you again.”

“Ah, yes, an educated guess I hope. I am the Undertaker, but I’m also a doctor of Ghouls. It’s a shame that there aren’t enough doctors willing to treat ghouls.” He replied in a chiming voice that almost sounded like he was singing. His horn flickered again and he turned up his radio. “I see, I see. You don’t mind if I listen to music, do you?” I shook my head slowly and he chuckled, “Very good! Take a seat at one of my empty examination tables while I cover the dearly departed Mister Gloss up.” He draped a stained sheet over the body and dusted his hooves off in a small bin full of fluid.

“One moment, let me get sanitary before I start mucking with you. It’s a habit, but a good one to keep, even though ghouls really have no worries for infection.” While he went about stripping the rubber socks off his forehooves, I began listening to the radio.

“--ther tale of woe with a bad ending folks. Steer clear of the roads at night unless you want to end up like those poor unwary caravaners. Now lets lighten the mood with a bit of music. These’re classics your mothers and fathers listened to, so lets go back to a simpler time with some old blues that tug those heartstrings and sooth the fire in your hearts.” The radio sputtered with the occasional static, but I could make out every word easily, a stallion radio show host was telling a story that hadn’t had a good ending, ending it with a bit of advice. The song that played after was a slow and soothing melody that evoked emotions I was rather familiar with now--Wistful Longing.

Pity me, oh pity me, I can't remember who I was. That would be so pathetic to say aloud. My internal voice was a broken record of the same thing. I didn't want to be defined by what I couldn't remember. I wanted to stop thinking about it. I was sick of trying to remember.

"And ready!" The song had barely hit the chorus after the first set of verse before the doctor was prepared to see me, laying out a sheet of rubber to stand on while he sterilized a few tools over a small blow torch held aloft in his telekinetic field. "Now what seems to be the problem?"

A welcome distraction and possible solution to one of my problems! "A few things." I began to explain my situation in a way that wasn't too vague but not too descriptive, "One of my eyes is messed up. It hurts to see through it. And I've been having...Memory issues."

My eyes took an immediate back seat, "Memory issues? Are you having trouble remembering things?" His voice was heavy with concern. That worried me.

"Can't really remember much of anything, doc." My response was met with a few hums and nods of the doctor.

"I see, I see. How have you been sleeping?" He asked while checking me over. He was doing a few tests, checking my reflexes which were unresponsive. Next he was listening for a heart beat, checked his stethoscope and tried again. "Could you breath for me?"

I inhaled as directed and exhaled, speaking as I did. "I don't sleep. Or eat...Or really need to breath. That's the same for any ghouls though isn't it?"

"Uh no, that's concerning and isn't normal." Undertaker corrected me, "Contrary to popular belief ghouls do need to breath, eat, and sleep. They're just naturally more resilient. Of course all those responses could all be mental, the mind still perceives the body to be alive. I have yet to complete my research on the subject matter."

"Hey that's all really interesting, but what concerns me is the fact you look like a gimp." I regretted those words the moment they left my lips. I made no expression that I regretted my words but I did, internally. Externally I was incredibly curious why the Undertaker looked like a fetish stripper.

“Oh?” He chuckled, his laugh muffled by the mask, “It is for your protection and mine. Much like that explosive collar around your neck protects others from you and you from others.”

“I don’t see the parallel.” I grumbled bitterly. The radio began playing another song but I wasn’t paying attention, all I knew was the songs were quite familiar as if I’d heard them before. The song was something about sleeping or something, ‘leaving the exciting day behind you’.

“Maybe you will come to understand with time. But many fear what you represent. People will fear what they do not understand.” He sighed into his mask, the large beak resting over my shoulder as he began unwinding the wrappings around my left eye. “The amnesia, lack of sleeping, and your sensitivity to sunlight may be attributed to a degenerative condition of your occipital and temporal lobes. Actually that doesn’t account for the lack of sleeping.” He mused, levitating a small pen light and flashing it into my left eye.

An explosion of pain socked me in the back of the skull, lancing a hot nail through the soft butter of my brain. I fell back off the table and crumpled to the ground writhing and clutching both hands over my face, “Augh! Ow!” I drew a reflexive breath in through my teeth and fell limp.

“Are you alright my friend?” He asked with less than genuine concern, seeming to be noting my reaction and judging it mentally. “That’s actually good news...”

“That really fucking hurt.” I chuckled, giving a soft snort. “Good news? How is this good news?”

“How fast you responded. It means your injury isn’t due to degenerative tissues in the brain. It has to be something wrong with the eye itself. The brain has no nerves.” He scooted the table back and lifted me up, carefully setting me back down. “I was afraid you might be a lost cause, a degenerating brain is a death sentence for a ghoul as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Care to enlighten me?”

“Oh certainly!” He began, sounding excited to tell me what he knew, “A ghoul should always be aware of the signs they are slipping. You see ghouls are dead in a way. Their minds can hold on, an anchor or purpose typically helps them. It is magic after all. There are a plethora of theories on such a subject but research is inconclusive seeing as I’m the only researcher I know of that studies ghouls. The psychology of a dead mind is most intriguing and thought provoking in it’s function.” He lectured me in a

long winded flair that had me blankly taking him at his word. He referenced a chart of the brain, pointing at several parts with a pointer he summoned from thin air, "You see the brain is made up of fats and lipids, it's structure and connections reestablish themselves throughout life and it adapts. However in ghouls adaption is harder, the brain does not make new connections and only breaks down. Eventually the higher brain functions cease altogether and the result is the primitive brain taking over--Survival instincts and the expression of violence towards the living. The strangest thing is that they no longer require food but they still seek to eat the living. I've observed a fair number of ferals and...Are you even listening?"

I had listened for a minute or two and then lost interest, he was droning on and on. While I appreciated him explaining it to me I really didn't want to sit here for a lecture. "I said enlighten me professor, not bore me to death. And this isn't helping my condition."

Frozen in time he tilted his head back and forth with audible pops, "You are right. I do tend to ramble." He rolled up the chart and set it aside and cast the pointer into oblivion from whence it came. "Now I need to ask one more question, this one is very important. Can you remember anything about your life at all?"

I nodded numbly, "Yeah. I remember I had a family. I keep seeing things, the world warps around me and I'm suddenly somewhere else. Then I remember something and it keeps bothering me. Just short fragments of memories, nothing...Solid."

"That is worrying." He spoke softly, "An enigma! A mystery, there is little explanation for why that is occurring. Memory orbs can invoke such things but to project your memories onto the world around you and reliving them? That's hallucination...That means mental instability and psychosis. Except you're not exhibiting any tells for insanity or lapses of cognition." He moved my hand from my face, ignoring my protests and took a close look at my eye, "Black Sclera, dilated retina, and a glowing iris. Blunt force trauma? Doesn't explain why it's glowing. Mutation? Possible. Could also be a faulty ocular implant but those are incredibly rare--Still plausible. I could prescribe iodine eyedrops, radioactive agent can cure cataracts in ghouls and heal eye injuries due to radiation healing wounds in ghouls. Except I am unsure how radiation will affect you..."

"Could you speak simple Equestrian, doc?" A large majority of this was way over my head.

"Ghouls are accidents. A symptom of surviving megaspell fallout and not having the good fortune of dying." He drew in a shallow breath and exhaled, "You're an intentional creation. That I am certain. Treating you will be a challenge for me. If I had a cybernetics specialist to consult, it would make this easier, due to your nature."

“Can you help me or not?”

“I can try.” He spoke with an inward sigh and exhaled sharply like he was snuffing a candle. “I think I have a medical eyepatch you can use. I’ll read up on what I know and see if I can diagnose your problem. Is there anything else you need from me? I need to see to Mr. Glossy before he begins rotting.”

The drugs for ghouls, right! I needed those, Mechanic had told me the Undertaker had them here. “The eye patch and some ‘chemical enhancers’ for ghouls would help out in the whole ‘slaying a war lord’ “

The doctor sputtered and wheezed, coughing on his words, “You what? I...how do you know I have those?” He swiftly tried to cover his tracks, backpedaling towards his desk, “Those are strictly for medical purposes and treating ghouls! They aren’t meant to be used for that flagrant--”

I slid off the table and approached the doctor, grabbing him by the mask’s beak and pulling him into a stern glare. “Listen here doc I’ve had enough horse apples for one day. I’m a walking mess and I’m expected to go out and slaughter some sod I don’t even know. No one asked me, I have no choice. And you know what makes me most unhappy?”

“Wha...What’s that?” The doctor stuttered nervously.

“Twiddling my hooves while that slug’s out there still murdering folk. I don’t like sitting around, I don’t like lectures, and I sure as buck don’t like your attitude right now...It needs adjustment.” My digits squeezed firmly down on the beak until it began to crumple.

When I released the doctor he nearly collapsed, shaking with nerves. He twisted his mask a few times and blew hard into it to reinflate the beak of his mask, “You’re right.” He admitted sheepishly, moving to a nearby wall and pulling a few loose bricks it. “I do not envy your position. I shall give you free access to my stock so long as you use it to help Greenvale.” There was a hidden safe behind the bricks in the wall. He entered the combination and opened it, selecting a few items and locking the safe. He put them into a small burlap bag and scribbled a few notes upon a few pieces of paper, “No time for long winded explanations. You can read, can’t you? The descriptions for each drug and it’s notable effects are on this note. Take it and my blessing. Go with Celestia and Luna’s lights to guide you.”

“You’re forgetting one thing,” I mentioned while stowing the drugs into my saddlebag. I pointed several times at my still exposed left eye, “I need to be a cyclops because this hurts worse than a hammer to the face.”

“Of course, yes. Let me find that for you.” It took him a minute of scouring the desk but Undertaker finally produced the promised eyepatch and even placed it upon my head gently. “Now my secret is safe with you, yes?”

“Cross my heart and hope to fly.” I promised.

“Fly. Hah, that’d be quite difficult for a unicorn such as yourself.” The doctor whinnied dismissively, “Now if you’ll excuse me I must prepare a body for burial.”

I resisted the urge to mention how I flew a couch out of a hospital and simply laughed, leaving the Morgue behind and checking one thing off my mental list. Next stop was the Winking Mare to see if I could recruit some help.

“You want to WHAT!?” The griffin I had been speaking with at the bar’s counter spat his drink all over, snorting out choked squawks. “...Hruk...That’s suicide!” He left the counter and slipped into the crowd that was writhing and pulsing to the beats of the music.

That was strike two so far. Attracting promising and tough looking mercenaries with a free drink to speak with them about the job was cutting into the last of my caps. The first had taken the drink and drank it in one go, listened to me all of three seconds and laughed before slapping me on the back. He had said nothing as he rejoined the crowd just as my last mark had done.

Thumping bass and fake smoke mingled in the air, trembling at the shake of massive sub woofers that were set into the walls near the dance floor. The mercenaries came here to blow their earnings and forget their troubles in a river of booze. The same four songs repeated constantly in a stream of flowing sweat and thumping rhythm. Insanity was easily defined as doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result--Everyone here followed that to a perfect ‘T’. Maybe they didn’t expect a different result, maybe it was out of social habit that they congregated here to do drugs and drink until they couldn’t remember.

I was no shrew, I loved a good party. The energizing music had a pleasing feeling that tapped into my carnal desire for action. Even while sitting still the vibrations I could scarcely register the stimulation that I was accomplishing some form of momentum. *Running in circles will only wear out the floor and make you look aimless.* I pounded the bar several times and the bartender served me another drink, sweeping a few more of my caps off the counter and into a small bucket he kept. I could taste the bitter alcohol, it's effects were dull on my palate, no intoxication boiled in my brain. This was a vice I could not enjoy. At least I could taste, the beef jerky I had was very spicy and pleasant.

The spot next to me filled with an older griffin, his dark plumage and scars marked him as a veteran easily. He wasted no time and was very direct, every word he spoke was punctuated with the clicking of his thick, fearsome beak. "So you're the new contractor that's the talk of this little shithole? I also hear you've been looking for someone to help you on a big job. Would you like some advice?"

"Am I going to have to pay for it?" Nothing was free in this bar, I had to pay an admittance fee and even tip the overweight buzzard of a bouncer at the door because I was a new face. A Talon Mercenary that looked the part of a several hundred battle veteran wouldn't waste his breath on someone like me for free.

"Wow, aren't you sharp?" He slammed the counter several times and clicked his beak for the bartender's attention, "One glassa Beakardi on the rocks. My friend here's buyin." The bartender was cleaning a glass with a rag, not missing a beat of the order. He plucked a bottle off the shelf and dropped the glass, up-ending the bottle until it was filled, finally he added actual rocks. More caps were drained from my small pile leaving me with very few left.

The veteran took the glass and began to drain in in short sips, sighing with a deep and pleasant rumble that ruffled the feathers around his withers. "Ah that's the tingle. So I hear you're lookin' for a merc with the balls to go after one of the warlords, eh?"

"Yeah." I replied simply, running one of my digits around the rim of my own glass, "He has to die if we're ever going to get new supplies in around here."

He nodded and took another heavy gulp, dusting the feathers under his beak with dregs of his brew. He set the glass down, "My advice is simple." He leaned over so that his beak was merely inches from my ear, "Fuck off." He growled, "And get the fuck out of my bar."

I wasn't expecting that type of advice and posturing, that was a threat! "Come again? Last I

checked this bar was run by ghouls, not by you. How about we start over?"

The veteran rooster didn't respond right away, he opted for something physical. He hooked his talons into the back of my explosive slave collar and slammed my face into the counter hard, shattering the glass and soaking my face in a mixture of alcohol, blood, and sick black paste that oozed from my cuts. "Fuck your shitty little attitude little pony! You might think you're tough shit since I hear you're the one that offed that second rate bomb chucker but he's bird shit compared to that slug you're after."

I squirmed, trying to resist. He pulled back on the collar and slammed my head into the counter again. My horn shifted and pain blossomed through my forehead, he slid my cheek along the counter and slammed me into the counter two more times. I looked to the bartender entreatingly, looking for help. The bartender avoided my gaze and went further down the counter to ignore my plight. Were they just going to watch this happen? I'd fight back but I was told that any aggression from me would set the collar around my neck off.

"That fuckin bastard has a force of slavers and raiders they say is two hundred strong. He eats and fucks whatever enters his territory. Two kay caps ain't featherdust compared to how much of a job that is. No Talon would take a contract like that." He chuckled cruelly, "And no talon would follow a slave like you. You're lower than a ghoul, lower than dirt...I could do whatever I want to you and no one would stop me."

I was frozen, grinding my teeth together in a sick mixture of anger, pain, and fear. If he continued tampering with the slave collar he could set it off. "Just let me go. I'll leave."

"Nonsense! Let me walk you out..."

What's red, white, and has the momentum of a slinky down a flight of stairs? I know the answer! *It was me.* I was sent end over end, tumbling and rolling down the stairs from the winking mare, face planting in a puddle of mud at the base of the staircase. My horn was realigned with a few twists of the bolt at the base of my skull and I pushed myself up from my shallow grave.

"I hope you enjoyed our hospitality!" The older griffin squawked from up the stairs, hurling my saddlebag down at me, knocking me over again. "If I ever see you again I'll take your slave collar off for you by ripping your fuckin head off!" The griffin threatened, dusting his talons together and letting out a victorious guffaw. He certainly was helpful and polite to help me down the stairs. *He saved me the effort of walking.*

I picked up my saddle bags and put them back on, wiping the caked on mud off my face and leaving platform 3E to return to the surface via the subway entrance. It was already time to meet up with Gangrene again outside of Hopenharm Hospital, the sun was setting behind the blanket of clouds. Our first day of the three day middle of the week weekend was coming to a close.

“What the buck happened to you? Rough day?” She snickered softly, “Captain Ahab?” Gangrene found my retelling of my entire day to be hilarious. She wasn’t the least bit surprised with how the Talons acted towards me or how I was thrown out by someone who may have been their leader. “That’s kinda what they do. They like to live to spend their caps and they do risk evaluation to make sure they aren’t taking more for less. They’re right though, 2,000 caps isn’t much considering what we’re up against.”

When I asked her about her day, the story she shared was much more mundane and pleasant. She had gone to Shot Trotters with my old weapons, trading in Curbstomp’s shotgun and battle saddle for a new scope for her Varmint Rifle. I had no idea how to use the battle saddle and the shotgun was too unwieldy for me, the scope she wanted was actually useful and would get used. She mentioned she bought some ammo for our weapons without even denting the remaining caps we had.

Then she asked me how many caps I had left--I deflated. “None.” I told her, the shame I felt was amplified by the expression of anger she took.

The anger passed and she rolled her eyes, “I’d slap you around a lil for being stupid but that’d be pointless seeing as you already kissed counter and ate glass.”

“Yeah, thank you o’merciful one. You mind helping me get the glass out of my face?”

A quick spark of her horn and she was already extracting shards of glass from my pelt. She laid one plaster over the bridge of my nose and called it quits. “That’s the best I can do. Ain’t wasting a single drop of healing potion after wasting three last time.” She sounded exasperated, possibly still upset over wasting three health tonics on me with no effect.

Even I didn’t understand it, either I was immune to healing magic or it just took a long time to take effect. I did heal when I was fighting Chunky Salsa afterall...After his head exploded. Which was just a coincidence.

The last place she had gone was Armor Armory, where she had her personal armor patched up and improved. She invested another 100 caps into a 'like new' burlap brown duster she offered to me. "And that doctor's coat ain't going to cut it against a bullet. This might fair better..." She unfolded it and tapped her rifle's barrel against the side of the sturdy looking canvas cloth. "This thing's got metal plates sewn into it. And it's light and cheap to maintain." The coat had a few holes in it and a few red stains hinted that it may not have protected it's previous owner very well.

"I see the last owner still on this thing. I wouldn't call it the best form of protection." I reached out, knocking on the coat and identifying where the plates were.

"You know I could just take it back for a refund if you don't want it." Gangrene teased in a light, airy tone.

I snatched the jacket from the air and hugged it close, "It's better than being naked!" I exclaimed before shaking it out and putting it on. It was a bit baggy and sagged on my form, weighted by the metal plates along the back, flanks, chest, and sides. "They didn't have any other colors other than brown, bloom, and bloody?"

Gangrene sighed, rolling her eyes and shaking her head with such force they might just leave her head, "No, that's all there was. It's made of canvas, you expect a different color canvas? It'll be red with blood soon enough anyway, just roll around in the first raider you kill."

"That's morbid, even for you Gangrene."

"That's a solution. Take it or leave it." She waved me off and yawned, "You know it's getting late. I think I'll turn in, been up all day treating patients and helping your hopeless plot. I feel like a charity."

She was being very helpful, there was little chance I'd have even made it out of that hospital of horrors without her. I watched the mare enter the clinic through the door, calling back to me that I shouldn't stay up too late. Tomorrow was going to be another long day for sure.

A sleepless night for me, I never got tired. Everywhere the lights went out all over the surface

streets of Greenvale Heights. Stores closed their doors and families went to bed. I was left burning the midnight oil, taking advantage of my restlessness to better prepare myself for surviving in this new gritty reboot of Equestria.

I went to a more secluded section of Greenvale Heights, a place that was empty, a firing range that had once been a small hoofball field. The bleachers that remained were rusted and overgrown with dead vines. Targets had been set up along the bench seats, bottles and cans just begging to be shot.

Within 4 meters I was fairly accurate, able to hit a can off the bleacher one out of every three times. I considered that good since I was using the mouthguard tongue trigger mechanism and had no real prior experience with firearms that I could recall. *33 percent accuracy*. I averaged at that every time, but beyond 4 meters my accuracy became nearly negligible, the targets were untouched. No depth perception, no clarity, and no spatial awareness. *Maybe if it fired couches I'd be more accurate*. That was a funny thought, hitting a small target with a larger object wasn't very hard. Bullets were small.

A hundred thunderous cracks later followed by the dropping of shells to the ground at my hooves. Many of my targets were still standing, taunting me with their wholeness. My reload speed was improving, aided by my increased dexterity from my gauntlets. I was getting better with understanding how to move them, how the chamber of the *Cornhusker* fell open to the side with a swift turn and jerk of my head, and most importantly I knew now to never try sticking the ammo in backwards. *It wouldn't even fit anyway*.

After cleaning everything up and tossing the broken targets into a nearby dumpster the sun had risen up, shining its light through the blanket of miasmic clouds. If there were weather forecasters in today's age they'd have fun forecasting overcast and gloom everyday all day broken up by the occasional snowfall or rain, region permitting. Weather pony in Equestria after the fall; easiest job ever. Overcast everyday!

Time to go see if Gangrene was awake and ready for day two of our grand adventure.

Experience gained! Killed a baby Radscorpion. It's a start.

Overall your performance here was bland, going to give you some role play Exp at least. Maybe you'll level next time you play.

New Flaw: **Into The Light**

Refer to the [Character Progress Review](#) for any character changes.

I need to review your character sheet. I expect you to give it to me tomorrow.

Here's a shout-out to my great editors, Requiem and Decaf! You guys make this possible. To all my readers, another thank you!