

New Page

-Hugo-

"Y'all interested in being heroes?"

It was a bold question, but the woman delivered it with such earnestness. Hugo was tickled. He dropped his leg from the table and reached into a pocket behind his bandolier, pulling out a crumpled pack of old-world cigarettes. His tiny crew exchanged glances in his periphery.

"Ah." He let out a dry laugh, tapped out a cigarette, and popped it into his mouth. "That ois an interesting question." He lit a match and gave the cigarette a long drag. "Could be."

She'd found them at the open-air bar in the center of the ramshackle settlement. Seemed like a bad idea for a place with such unforgiving summers, but it kept things quiet during the day, and it sure made one thirsty for the piss beer they managed to scrounge up each evening. Many of the tables had been taken already, and the single bartender kept busy at his counter at the base of a tentpole. From it was strung electrified strings of light powered by the bar's generator which gave the space a warm, cozy feeling.

Hugo's crew had sprawled out on folding chairs around a card table toward the edge of the square. The stringy Astrid, her hair pulled back tightly in braids, and the massive Zeke took turns nudging each other as any woman strolled by. Palmer dozed, head in hand, glasses on table. What a mess. It had been days since any of them had aired out. Their leather armor creaked and reeked, and yet it was by unanimous vote to prioritize beer over finding a bath that evening.

The woman who had approached them appeared weary and disheveled. Her plaid shirt and jeans were crumpled, sweat-stained, and crusted in dust. Hugo guessed she'd arrived from the road that very day. She wore a messenger bag which she clutched to herself like a security blanket. Her hair was haphazardly pulled back, and her face was so dirty it made it difficult to judge her age. Not a youngin, but a good couple of decades younger than himself, if not more. He scratched self-consciously at his more salt-than-pepper beard. A clean swath across her forehead hinted at a missing hat. Through the grime, a busted lip and scratches along her cheeks could be seen.

She continued. "You heard about folks going missing from the new settlements around here?"

"May have heard something about it."

"It's a slaver camp." She leaned closer. "I know where it is."

He leaned back. "And? Go tell the sheriff, or the mayor, or whatever law they got left out here. The local militia's sure rarin' to shoot things."

The woman was already shaking her head. "These people are idiots. They'll get everyone killed. You know that."

"Not sure what you're expecting the four of us to do."

"I need to rescue someone, but I don't got a lot of caps."

"Oh." He exhaled a long, stale cloud of smoke. "And you thought being big ole heroes would be reward enough. Wouldn't have to pay nothin' for our services."

"You won't have to rescue everyone, just my friend. And, and then all you have to do is return and tell the folks here about the camp, and they'll give you all kinds of reward, I'm sure of it."

"You can't promise a reward that ain't yours to give."

Her eyes darted around desperately. "It's not like you couldn't use a boost in reputation around here."

Hugo took another drag. "I see." He eyed her. "That aside, there's somethin' you ain't tellin' me."

She kept her head bowed but didn't offer anything.

"What's your name?"

"Clover?"

"You sure?"

"My name is Clover."

"I'm Hugo."

"I know."

"That's right... our reputation and all." He teased at the cigarette between his lips. "What exactly did you hear?"

"You, uh, were hired to rescue the son of the Mayor one settlement over. Everyone thought he'd been kidnapped by the Children of Atom cult that's been passin' through the region. Which is weird because there shouldn't have been any bombs dropped around here. You snuck your way into the camp, actually found him, but he didn't want to leave. So you let him stay. You told the Mayor that his son, who I've pieced together is NOT a child but in fact a full-blown adult, had decided on his own to join the cult. His daddy didn't take too kindly to that and rallied the other settlers to confront the cult with him. He said his son had been brainwashed and didn't know his own mind, and HAD to be taken back for his own good. It turned into an all-out blood bath, but y'all refused to fight for either side. Am I right?"

Hugo was impressed. He'd heard much more salacious retellings floating about already, yet this woman managed to sift through it all and find the heart of it.

"You believe all that?" Hugo asked.

Clover shrugged. "I believe the part about y'all sneakin' in and findin' your man."

"And what about us bein' cowards?"

The woman glanced at Zeke and Astrid warily. "Y'all stood up to an angry mob demanding a fight you didn't believe in and refused. That ain't coward's work."

Hugo didn't think they were cowards, either, but it felt good to hear it from someone else, even if it was from someone trying to get on his good side. "Tell me how your friend got snatched."

Clover shifted in the chair. The sudden antsiness caused a minor alarm to go off in Hugo's head, but he suspended his assumptions for now. Losing a friend and surviving a slaver attack could agitate anyone.

"They got the jump on our camp a few nights back." She said. "We'd been crossing the wastes for almost two weeks, and I guess we got lazy with the fire. So fucking stupid, I know."

Hugo watched for signs of performance, indications of lying. Everyone lies, he reminded himself, but by how much, and was it important?

"How many were you?"

"Just the two of us."

Astrid suddenly sat up. "Wait, you and your friend been walking the wastes alone? You got a deathwish or somethin'?"

"Astrid! I got this," he said sternly.

She leaned back again with a huff and kicked her feet up across Zeke's lap.

Hugo turned back to Clover. "How many of them?"

"Four? I think?"

"How'd he get snatched but not you?"

"He, um... he...." Clover struggled.

Hugo's first instinct was to assume she was stalling for time, coming up with a lie she hadn't expected to need. However, she had that faraway look he'd recognized in so many after an incident. This woman was no longer sitting at their table under the pleasant string lights. She was at that campfire, staring up at the faces of her would-be slavers: glowing, golden, and grinning

maniacally.

“They were laughing about how lucky they were to have found a g... a girl, and, well, the two of us. ‘Good stock,’ they said. My friend, he, uh, got between me and them. He pushed me back into the brush and told me to run. So... I ran... and I hid.”

Her hands gripped and twisted at the strap of her messenger bag. The fear was still fresh. Hugo waited until she was ready to continue. He could practically see her as she was that night: cowering in a dead creekbed, scratched and stuck by the scraggly thicket around her, holding her breath as steps grew closer.

“They were more interested in keeping the easy get and gave up searching for me after a while. I, uh, didn’t know what else to do, so when they left for their camp, I followed.”

“Hugo, please tell me you aren’t buying this shit.” Astrid groaned.

Zeke whispered something in Astrid’s ear but she waved him away.

“Ain’t no way this chick survives two days in the wastes, let alone trackin’ fuckin’ slavers.”

“Goddammit, Astrid. I told you I got this. Relax!”

Clover flinched and Hugo turned to her apologetically.

“Sorry ‘bout that, darlin’, but... she’s got a point. I can tell you’ve had a rough go of it, but you don’t strike me as the adventurin’ type. Closer to a vault dweller or city dweller who got caught up by slavers two steps into the wastes. I’m more likely to believe you’ve been set up to act as bait to lure us into a trap.”

“I wouldn’t....”

“Folks have been disappearing and if it ain’t some abomination, slavers are the next best answer. And who knows who that could be with so many comin’ in new to this area? You clearly just got here, so there’s no one to vouch for ya. As you pointed out, we ain’t exactly popular at the moment, so we wouldn’t be missed if we were dumb enough to offer ourselves up, never to be heard from again. My point is we’re all vulnerable out here, darlin’. You need help getting your guy. I need to protect my people where I can. So, please, to set my mind at ease, help me understand what y’all were doin’ out in the wastes.”

“I told you. We were making our way here.”

“Why? And why only the two of you?”

“It wasn’t.” She sighed and looked down again, “It wasn’t just the two of us in the beginning. There was a caravan.”

“You were a part of a caravan?”

“He was. Garreth. He was one of the guards. I just... bought me a spot on the wagon.”

“Why?”

She sat quietly for a long time. “Does it really matter?”

“Miss Clover, I’m not sure why you keep stallin’ but if you could be straight with me, I’d like to come to a decision before the night is over.”

She sighed. “I needed to get out of town. My, uh, husband... died. Killed, actually. Turns out he pissed off some dangerous people, and many of them were still angry.”

-Clover-

He’d been missing for only a few days this time, but she’d heard folks whispering in the square among the vendors. Finally, one of the street kids led her to his body for five bottle caps, negotiated down from ten. She was surprised how close by he was. From the warehouse office where they’d made their home, it was only a few minutes walk down the road to the buildings that were now all semi-collapsed shells.

His body was crumpled against a pile of debris. For a brief moment, she had hope he was only unconscious; bloodied for sure but sleeping. She reached for his shoulder tentatively. Afraid to make it real.

“Rowan?”

He didn’t respond to her touch. She swallowed and steeled herself before gently pulling back on his shoulder, however, his face was intent on staying turned away from her. She continued to pull at his shoulder until his upper torso twisted her way. She screamed. Whatever they used to beat his face in, it crushed the cheekbone and flattened his nose, causing his right eye to fall out of socket. The broken, near-toothless mouth hung agape in a silent scream.

She was already running through the warehouse before she realized where she was. She was thoughtless, sobbing; barely seeing the large industrial equipment as she wove her way between them. She looked up to their office home that hung over the floor in time to see movement beyond its wall of clouded windows. A new shock ran through her and she pressed herself against the machinery to hide.

-Hugo-

Clover blinked rapidly to clear the memory from her vision. “I needed to leave before they came looking to take their anger out on me, too.”

“What did he do?”

“You know, I’m not even sure?” She said. “He’d been pretty secretive the past year; would disappear for days and days. I didn’t like it, but we’d just come out of some really hard times, so I...

I guess, I didn't want to look too hard. I was afraid he was sneaking off to see someone else. I know, so fucking naive, right?" She let out a harsh laugh, but it threatened to turn into a sob and she swallowed hard to cut it off.

-Clover-

She watched from her hiding spot on the production floor. Heard the crashes of objects getting tossed around and the grumbles of men to each other. It was well into the night before the strangers left. Their flashlights pierced the blackness, blinding her, and she never did see who they were. It seemed like hours still before she could will herself to move. When she finally could, she crept in through the darkness, eyes wide, ears straining. Her heart leapt at every creak of the catwalk as she made her way up to the office. She prayed silently for there to be no one secretly waiting inside, for there to be no one watching from afar.

The room was a mess. The bed frame turned over, and the mattress shredded. The desk they used as their little kitchen area was emptied. The drawers pulled out with the prewar cans and boxes strewn about the floor alongside that week's mutfruits and tatos from the market. The hotplate and car battery were nowhere to be seen, along with the water. All the shelves were empty. Everything was on the floor.

She picked her way to the far corner of the space. As expected, the floor safe had been opened and emptied.

Good. Hopefully, it worked as the misdirection it was meant to be.

She picked her way to the other corner. There sat their makeshift toilet for emergencies, a bucket with the toilet seat. No doubt they'd shined a flashlight into it, but they hadn't bothered to move the bucket at all. She gingerly set it aside and found the floor tile undisturbed. She pulled out the switch knife she kept strapped to her calf and used it to pry up the old tile. Beneath was the messenger bag, heavy with bundles of caps.

-Hugo-

Clover adjusted in her uncomfortable, little chair and pulled her bag onto her lap protectively. "There is a, uh, trading hub on the outer edge of the city where a lot of caravans like to stop and gather. I asked around to see who was willing to take me on as dead weight. I felt good about Mila's caravan, because, well," Clover shrugged, "she was a woman. She wouldn't hire on any men she couldn't trust, right?" "Did she know your situation?" "No. I think she could tell I was in some kind of trouble but didn't ask about it. Spent damn near half my caps up front to buy a spot on one of the wagons, with the promise of the other half when I got here."

-Clover-

Mila was a dark woman with a shaved head. Her toned bare arms broadcast to Clover that she relied on her own strength as much as her men, who were busy loading up the two wagons. The goods were meant for the 'New Settlements.' People looking to start anew in the middle of nowhere, far away from the old world cities and their nuclear war baggage. "These bottle caps rep

your own stash?" Mila asked. "No."

"Good. Home-sourced water tends to be too irradiated for my comfort, anyway. Des! When y'all've finished up here, I needja to take these caps and get us more water from the municipal pump."

One of the men nodded as he strained to lift his corner of a crate. Clover followed the woman's gaze and realized one of the men was a ghoul. It was a shock. She hadn't seen one for so long, they'd begun to occupy the same space in her mind as other mythological creatures, like unicorns with their single horns and cows with their single heads. The sight of the walking corpse had a morbid hold over her as he worked separately from the other men, moving around incredibly heavy-looking sacks and crates the others had to coordinate together to lift. He was more covered than everyone else that day, despite the heat, with his long duster jacket and bandana tied high around his throat. Maybe what she'd heard about ghouls being cold-blooded was true. Or maybe he was protecting himself from prying eyes as she'd also felt the need to do, sweating profusely through her layers of undershirt and long sleeves as she was.

He looked up and their eyes met. Well, her two met his one. His left eye was hidden behind a dirty rag that looped around his bare, burn-scarred head. She looked away.

-Hugo- "How many folks were on her crew?" "Four, and then her." "And your friend was one of them." "He wasn't my friend yet. I was pretty terrified of him in the beginning, actually." "What makes him so scary?" "Oh, um...." The question seemed to catch her off guard. "He just kept to himself a lot. Didn't even talk with Mila unless he absolutely had to. Took a while to warm up to him." Clover's attention had turned inward for a time before she took a long breath and seemed to return to the present. Her eyes drifted to the untouched bottle of beer standing among the empties on the table. Hugo rolled his eyes internally and set the bottle in front of her. She hesitated a second before taking a swig.

-Clover- She thought of those early, awkward nights around the campfire. One of the men, Harv, would cook up a little something hot for the group. Usually, a critter shot along the way, paired with a round of the jealously guarded, pre-war packaged affairs; InstaMash or a can of Pork n' Beans. Everyone except for Garreth would get to partake. When he did eat, it was the raw leavings Harv couldn't use in the stew; bones, entrails, and other less savory organs. Clover found it difficult to eat with him in sight and would sit angled away from him on the far side of the campfire. The men had a good jeer when they realized the ghoul was making her squeamish before quickly forgetting her again.

-Hugo- Clover continued. "All the men pretty much ignored I even existed, which I was perfectly happy with. I spent the entire time just sort of going over and over my last memories with my husband; sometimes my earliest memories, which hurt more.

"The caravan made it the first several days with no problems. We'd been takin' an old world road, pretty broken up but easier than the brushland. It would occasionally pass us through an empty ghost town, and in one of 'em, some junky raiders set a trap.

-Clover- The sun had been beating down relentlessly all morning. Insects shrilled from their hidden places in the scraggly trees and bushes. It made the air feel hotter, somehow, and it made her head itch under her baseball cap. It embarrassed her how clearly she was unprepared to be out there, but what could she do now?

The brahmin pulling each heavily laden wagon could not be pushed to move any faster. Prodding

by the drivers would only draw out a bellow of protest from the dual bovine heads, so everyone had resigned themselves to the slower pace.

Mila was taking her turn steering the lead wagon. Harv steered Clover's wagon. One man walked to either side of their little caravan with the ghoul trailing behind, rifles resting against shoulders, pipe pistols tucked away in belts and holsters. All the men had paired down to sweaty, bare torsos. All except for the ghoul, who was the only one still fully covered. The first crack of gunshot went almost unnoticed. A stray, disembodied pop and ricochet whose meaning was lost in the heatwaves. The second shot got a little more attention when it punched into one of the throats of the brahmin pulling the lead wagon. "Fuck!" Mila shouted.

The men went on alert but the shot could have come from any window of the two-story, brick buildings that surrounded them. Another shot and the lead brahmin's second throat ruptured. Both heads of the poor animal attempted another bellow but only a sad gurgling could be heard as it lurched sideways. It took the wagon with it and Mila dropped to the road as it turned on its side. "Harv!" Mila barked, "Get that wagon the fuck out of here!" "Got it, boss!" Clover nearly fell off the wagon as it lurched forward. Still, the brahmin couldn't pick up much speed pulling the heavy load, and a flurry of bullets sprayed the crates around her. She cursed and tried to make herself as small as possible in the back of the wagon. A metallic clacking came from the pavement which meant nothing to Clover until Garreth shouted. "GRENADE!" A second metallic clacking could be heard and Clover scrambled to dive off. She hadn't time to prepare and hit the asphalt hard. Someone grabbed her by her collar and dragged her on her back. Panicked and choking, she struggled until she recognized the tail of the ghoul's duster. It swept over her as the first grenade exploded. Then the second.

She could feel the concussive heat wave through the leather. Then her protection pulled away as fine splinters of wood continued to rain down. The road was a chaos of bullets popping and whizzing through the air. Emaciated men and women with leather, scrap metal, and... were those car parts, strapped to themselves for protection, came pouring out of the buildings and swarmed toward the wagons. She felt Garreth lean in close again. "Stay low and stay close."

His voice croaked pure gravel and thunder, and it wreaked of death, but she could not have been more thankful for it. He pulled her to her feet and she clung to him as he maneuvered them both away to the nearest building for cover. The voices of Mila and her men calling out to each other mingled with the crazed whooping and hollering of the raiders. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" "This one's mine!" "Des! Fall back!" "Boom boom, baby!" "Someone grab Harv!" "I need cover fire!" "Shit! He's dead!" All the while, Garreth's rifle rang out. Despite their numbers, these were not disciplined fighters, and the raiders had dwindled to just under a dozen. Half the remaining were focused on righting the overturned wagon while the other half gave them cover. Mila and the rest of her crew were shooting from the doorway and windows of a nearby storefront.

Garreth was systematically picking them off, forgotten from their kitty-corner position. Until he wasn't, and then both Garreth and Clover were scrambling for cover again as the raiders' attention turned their way. He held an arm out to pin her protectively against the wall. The spray of bullets sent chunks of brick flying. They suddenly eased off, and they heard Mila's voice calling out. "Fuck it! It's not worth it... Let 'em go." After it was all over, there was finger-pointing. Who should have been on watch? Who wasn't making their shots? By some unspoken agreement, all the fingers settled on Garreth.

"We lost the wagon because of you. You ran off while the rest of us was fighting for our lives." "I was safeguarding the girl. We agreed to deliver her safe, along with the goods." "Well, there ain't no delivery now, you stupid, fucking ghoul! And that shit was worth like twenty times what she was

payin'. You get it?" "Not to mention Harv's fuckin' dead." "Shut up! All of you!" Mila hugged her arm to herself as she kicked at the remains of the destroyed wagon. Her head was bloodied with a nick running along one temple. "We don't got the time for bitchin' and moanin'. Those assholes'll come back at any time to pick over th'rest of this." The two remaining men were sullen and the ghoul unreadable as they watched Mila quietly assess their predicament.

"Fuck." She turned to them. "This is a loss, boys. We gotta head back." "What?" Clover asked, startled. "The wagon's a bust, both brahmin are dead. Pick up what you think you can stand to carry; prioritize the water." The men didn't argue but grumbled as they pulled themselves up. "No, I can't go back." Mila tore away some canvas from a destroyed sack and began dressing the wound on her arm. "No choice. We don't got the supplies to make it, let alone sell." Clover felt panic rising. "But I PAID you!" Mila sighed and gently felt at her head before rubbing her face.

"Look, I know, girl, but shit happens." "I'm not going back." "What are you talkin' about?" "I paid you half up front. We got what, a third of the way? Give me my caps back in water and I'll-" "You can't be serious," Mila exclaimed, "you'll die on your own out here." Clover was struggling to keep her voice steady, but tears were watering her vision. God dammit, how did it all turn sideways so quickly? "I don't got a choice! The contract is broken, just let me take what's left of my caps in water and I won't be your responsibility anymore." "Do you even have any kind of weapon?" "I got my knife! And I," Clover looked around at the bodies strewn about the street. "I could find a gun." "You're not thinkin' this through-" "I'll fulfill the contract." Garreth cut in. The two women looked at him.

"Don't be stupid," said Mila. "I shall get her to the New Settlements for the second half of the caps as agreed upon." Mila began to protest, but he cut her off again. "You'll find it easier to hire on new men... without having to convince them to work with a ghoul." "Don't act like you're doin' me a fuckin' favor, Gare." Mila glared at him. He stared back, unflinching. After a moment she turned to Clover with a frustrated sigh. "It's up to you." Clover looked between the woman and the ghoul before settling on some middle space. "It couldn't be anyone else?" She asked meekly. The other men erupted in cruel laughter. Mila shook her head, "No. He's the only one crazy enough to volunteer for this alone." Clover's mind raced. Go back, she's dead. Go it alone, she's also likely dead. But with the ghoul? She forced herself to look at him directly.

His duster hid most of his lanky frame, but she could see the radiation-scarred hands with thickened, foggy nails just on the verge of growing into claws. His neck and face was a mottled patchwork of raw pink and a sour paleness. It was gouged with thin, raw fissures that ran down the length of his skin where it pulled and moved the most, mainly around the mouth and throat. They were so deep in places, they exposed a glimpse of muscle and bone. Like so many ghouls, his ears were nubs, and his nose had dropped off long ago, leaving only a single skeletal hole. The dirty cloth wrapped over his left eye was darkened along the bottom edge from whatever was still seeping out from that hidden wound. His other eye, however, had a gray iris and was bright with intelligence. Unlike many ghouls he somehow got to keep his eyebrows, and that gave his face something familiar to hold onto. He did not shy from her gaze. His expression wasn't angry, or hurt, but something intense while he waited for her answer. Clover couldn't place it. "Yeah, okay," she said quietly. Mila took a moment to think. "Y'all can take fifty caps of water." Garreth shook his head. "You owe her one hundred." "A small compensation for losin' a good man."

They had another silent battle of wills. Garreth nodded. "I won't need much, myself. Throw in some food for her. We'll make do."

-Hugo- "We agreed to part ways." Clover took another swig of the beer and grimaced through it. "They needed to head back, and I just couldn't do it. Mila didn't like it, but didn't argue too hard when Garreth volunteered to escort me the rest of the way." Hugo held up a hand to preemptively silence Astrid who slumped down into her chair again. "Your caravan couldn't hack it with 5 shooters. What made you think you could make it with just one?" He asked. "I got a couple of pipe pistols off a raider," Clover said defensively. "So you had one and a half shooters." "Fuck you," she said lightly, and Hugo laughed. The beer was taking quick effect on her probably dehydrated body. "At first we were focused on just gettin' some distance between us and that... bloodbath; no talk, all focus. I was still getting used to carrying as much of the water as I could tolerate along with my bag here, all in the afternoon heat, and wasn't much in the mood to gossip anyway. He was carrying the rest of the bottles as well as a large pack of supplies, and a large shank of raw beef he cut from the brahmin before we left. It wasn't until the evening time after getting a campfire going and setting that meat to cooking that he sat me down and we had a chat." Clover was slowly loosening up, so Hugo quietly smoked his cigarette and let her talk. He didn't care so much about this Garreth, but the more she talked, the more opportunity there was for her to slip, create some inconsistencies and catch her in a 'bad' lie. "He reassured me this hadn't been their first time making this trip out, so he was very familiar with the way. That was also part of the problem, he said. Their path had become predictable which is what made them vulnerable. He said he'd tried to make Mila see this, but she'd gotten too comfortable, too confident. His plan was to follow as much as possible 'country backroads,' as he put it. If we neared any town, ghost or settled, then he'd lead us around it, push our way through the brush if needed. Same if any folks approached. Better safe than sorry, he said." Astrid spoke up. "How're you so sure you could trust'm? He coulda taken you out into the waste," she mimed shooting herself in the head, "boom, boom, and taken yer money, and gone on his merry way." "Because Mila had been straight with me that whole time, and she trusted him."

-Clover- He'd stamped out the campfire once the meat was cooked. After Clover ate her fill, he ate some himself, but left a final scrap and buried it in a shallow hole, much to Clover's dismay. "You wish to awaken to a yao guai sniffing around because he smells the barbecue?" He rasped. "No," she said sullenly. She'd heard stories of the massive, hairless bears. "This shall draw anything hungry away from us." They walked a ways away before he announced that this was where they'd rest for the night. He flattened the scratchy grass between some bushes just off to the side of the road. When she didn't immediately hunker down, he wordlessly removed his duster jacket, revealing his stained button-down shirt, and laid it on the ground. He made a simple gesture, lie down here or don't, before lowering himself to a seated position next to it. Clover dropped her bag and pistols and sat on the jacket. By that time the sun had dipped behind the horizon. The ghoul seemed to fade into the background as the light dwindled. Every once in a while, she would catch a glint off his good eye. "Are you sure this is safe? Camping so close to the road?" "It's not assured, but the animals tend to avoid a human road when they can help it, and when we don't tempt them with enticing smells." "Wh-what about other people?" "Well, you're in luck." He said, somewhat condescending. "I don't require much sleep, so I'll keep watch at night. Tomorrow we will take a siesta during the hottest part of the day. That's when you will keep watch." They were both silent for a while. Clover was still irked by his tone. She couldn't help but be reminded of Rowan, who had a habit of making her feel stupid or naive when he thought he needed to explain something to her. She bit her tongue, however. She needed this man's protection, and popping off at the mouth would probably ruin that.

"I guess I'll try to get some sleep then." She moved to make her messenger bag her pillow. "One more thing," he said with his low rasp.

She stopped and sat up straight. "Yeah?" "You need to stop crying." She was confused. "I'm not crying." "I mean during the day. You've been... nonstop while riding the wagon." Clover was shocked, but of course, he'd been walking behind her all those days. She felt a pang of embarrassment. Why had it not occurred to her that he'd notice? He continued. "You're dehydrating yourself, and you'll be expending a great deal of energy throughout the heat of the day now. We lack the water to keep you sufficiently hydrated the entire journey." "I... I just lost my husband." She looked to the ground as her eyes teared up and heard him sigh. The floodgates opened. "What am I s'posed to do?"

"Don't," Garreth held up a hand to ward off her tears. "Dear god." She buried her face in her hands and whimpered pathetically, "It's been a rough week." "I gathered." He shifted uncomfortably.

"Rather, I don't doubt you've endured hard times." "So what, you want me to be dead inside?"

Clover realized what she'd said to the ghoul only moments after the words left her lips, and decided she didn't care. He let her cry to herself for some time after that. All she wanted to was to bury herself in Rowan, and feel his arms hold tight around her again. Even after unfinished arguments left them furious and exhausted with each other, she could rely on him slinging a protective arm over her as they slept. "This world," he started, "it doesn't give a fig about people and their problems. It's a hostile place hell bent on killing itself. You're in danger of dying from any hundred reasons, and not because it's out to get you, merely as collateral damage." He was quiet for another moment, and she could feel him watching her, not in an uncomfortable way, but like a doctor assessing his patient. "You've lost a lot; your husband, your home, your life as it was... you're on the run." Clover's heart leapt to her throat. It wasn't a question.

"You're hiding from death right now," he continued. "I can protect you from a lot of things, but the heat of the day isn't one of them. Don't give this world any hint of where you can be got. Save your tears for when you can afford them." She grit her teeth as if she could cut off the tears by flexing every muscle in her face. "I'm so stupid. I'm so... mad at him. I hate him so much! This is all his fault, but.... Then tell me how to kill this." She looked at the ghoul. The gathering shadows of the evening blurred and softened his scarred, gruesome features. "Why don't we just walk at night?" She suggested. "It'll be cooler, and we'll be harder to see." Garreth sighed heavily again, and it rumbled in his chest. "There are more fearsome things that hunt at night. And... my eye. It doesn't see so well in the dark. My hearing is in much better shape, but I'm likely to miss something while on the move. It's safer if we stay in place and I listen for noises I know aren't ours." Clover mulled over that unhappily. "I'm not saying it'll be easy, but," he said, "it won't be forever." The gentleness in his tone brought yet another wave of tears. "I'll try." Then with an audible strain of patience he croaked, "Just go to sleep." Clover lay her head down on the lumpy messenger bag. It was a long while before she got her crying under control. She found she then wasn't sleepy, and lay there for what felt like another hour in the hopes exhaustion would set in. Looking up, Garreth was a silhouette outlined by a blanket of stars as he sat and watched over her, his rifle laid across his lap. "Are you an old-world ghoul?" She whispered. When he didn't respond right away, she felt another flash of embarrassment. "Is that a rude question?" "Quite alright." He cut in. "Most people don't care enough to ask." She waited for him to continue but felt the silence stretch on. "Sooo...." "Yes." "I thought so," she said smugly. "Swell. What gave me away?" She thought about it. "I don't know. You don't talk like regular folks, I guess. So, you saw the bombs drop?" Another long pause. "Felt them, the shock waves, and heard them like thunder. Then we saw the clouds blooming beyond the trees." "You weren't in the city when it happened?" "We were camping, not too far out

of the city. It was a bit chilly for it, but I thought it would be nice to, to give them all one final weekend, to get away before the end... of the year, I suppose." "Camping? Like living out in the wastes on purpose?" "They weren't the wastes then. Simply nature." "It wasn't dangerous?" "It could be dangerous. Most animals, though, dangerous or otherwise, wanted to be left alone as much as you did... for the most part." "So, surviving out here is old hat for ya, huh? Been doin' it forever." "You could say that." "Who were you campin' with?" "What?" "You said you wanted to give them all one final weekend. Was that your family?" There was another long silence. "I was a Scouts leader." "What were Scouts?" "Kids. I'd teach them survival, and teamwork, patriotism and the like." He trailed off. "So y'all all turned into ghouls?" "No." "Oh... how many-" "Just me." Fuck. She really blundered into that one. "This is the first time in my whole life I've been out in the wasteland. I been on my own since my mom died when I was just a kid. Thought I had survival figured out, but it's a whole new game out here, isn't it? Maybe you could teach me some?" "Stop with the questions!" He barked suddenly. Then with a more controlled tone, "You're paying for my protection, not my... company. I need to be listening for danger." Fuck, fuck, fuck. There was no saving this. Clover admitted defeat and gave up on the conversation. She started shifting into a more comfortable position when he spoke up again. "I'll teach you what I can, so long as it doesn't slow us down."

Clover slept fitfully. She found herself adjusting constantly as limbs went numb or joints ached. Every once in a while, she'd peek up at Garreth, just to assure herself he was still there. It wasn't until near morning that Clover finally fell into a deep enough sleep to dream. On some level, she knew it was a dream, but holding on to that knowledge was slippery. She was in the warehouse office, rummaging through her trashed home. She was looking for something but couldn't quite remember what it was. She kept searching, however, hoping she would recognize it when she saw it.

A body suddenly loomed over her. It was Rowan. He was alive again. No. He was ghoulished, with dead, cracked skin. A dirty rag was tied around the crushed side of his head. He was still bloodied and battered all over, but he was standing in front of her, and yelling. Not just yelling, he was hysterical, unintelligible, spittle flying.

Clover held out her hands, both to calm him and keep him at arm's length, but he was inconsolable. She somehow understood he was blaming her for what happened to him. Why hadn't she stopped him?! How could she just run away and leave him like this?!

Grenades flew into view, and Clover followed their origins to find the office's wall of windows had been replaced with the broken, empty storefront windows Mila and her gang had been shooting from during the raider attack. She ran to the edge of the windows to find the shadowed figures with their flashlights tossing up grenades from the production floor. Rowan had been too loud and drawn them back. She scrambled to find the grenades and chuck them out of the windows before their time was up. All the while, Rowan howled and wailed over her, shoving furniture and debris in her way. She couldn't take it anymore. "STOP IT! STOP IT! You're gonna get us killed! THIS IS YOUR FAULT! YOUR FAULT!" Rowan lunged forward, bringing his face uncomfortably close to hers. He'd gone feral. Maybe he'd been feral the whole time. She screamed. "You're dreaming, girl! Wake up!"

He was shaking her, and she screamed again as she viciously fought her way out of his grasp. Only once she had gained some space between them did she realize he was not pursuing her. It was Garreth's ghoul face she was seeing now, not Rowan's. His bandage over the opposite eye. He was crouched a few feet away now, watching her with that intense look again. Was it disappointment? Resignation? Patience? He had a veil obscuring his expression, but she knew it wasn't good.

As Clover got her breathing under control and her mind dragged itself from the dream to the surface, she realized what had happened. She was on the road, out in the wastes, and the sky was beginning to lighten with dawn. "You can't wake me up like that! I was, I was havin' a nightmare." He watched her for another moment before standing and stretching. "You should get yourself in order." She ached all over. It wasn't just from sleeping on the ground, but the tumble from the wagon, and the hours of walking yesterday catching up with her. She felt ancient and derelict. The start of their first real day of travel gave Clover serious second thoughts to her plan. The heat had been brutal enough when she'd only been riding on the back of the wagon. After years of a more or less sedentary life in the city, walking loaded down with water and her bag had her back and shoulders protesting immediately.

The landscape crawled by unchanged, hour after hour in the heat waves. Stunted trees and shrubs were already skeletal to conserve energy during the lengthy summer of the wasteland. She relied on Garreth's vigilance of their surroundings as they walked, while she let her eyes gaze down, unseeing at his heels as he walked ahead of her. After a while, she would think, surely THIS is the hottest part of the day. They should be stopping soon, but no. When she gave in and asked for a break, he scoffed that it was still morning, but he allowed for it.

"You can relieve yourself behind those bushes. I'll find some shade for you to take a rest. Have some water, but try to pace yourself."

Garreth only allowed a few minutes for her to sit and sip at her water as he stood silently over her. He pulled her to her feet at her insistence, and she had a new appreciation of his strength as he did this easily while also burdened with his load. That first day, he hadn't bothered to teach her anything. She wouldn't have had the presence of mind to retain any of it, anyway. By the time Garreth finally announced it was time for his afternoon rest, she felt dazed. The pavement was too hot to rest on, so they settled on a cluster of trees a few dozen feet away. Their branches still held few brittle leaves but crossed densely enough for Garreth to hang his duster from them and offer some semblance of shade.

He stretched out on the dry grass, dropped his broad-brimmed hat over his face, and promptly started snoring.

Clover could not have been more jealous. She guzzled an entire bottle while he wasn't watching, then regretted it as her stomach ached from the sudden stretching. She gingerly pulled out one of the pipe pistols she'd tied to her thigh and looked them over. She checked the loose bullets in her pocket, the caps she had still bundled within her bag. Her head itched like crazy from the sweat and she pulled off her cap to fan herself and let her head breathe for a bit.

The ghoul had also removed his button down shirt to dry in the wind, and wore only an undershirt with a pair of dusty canvas pants, so his arms were on full display as he slept. They had the same blotched look of rawness and sickly paleness to them, the same tears and fissures. A blurry, faded tattoo still lingered on his shoulder, some kind of stylized bird. She guessed it meant he'd been a soldier before the bombs dropped. Rowan always talked big about joining the Gunners, the closest thing to a real military outfit they knew of besides the ever-alooof Brotherhood of Steel. Then he'd blame Clover as the reason he had to stay. He couldn't leave her all alone, she was helpless without his protection and too stupid to act in self-preservation. Every time he threatened to join the Gunners, she half resented and half believed him. Now she wasn't so sure Rowan was wrong when he said she couldn't make it without him. Her eyes ached as tears threatened again. She pressed her palms hard into them and cursed herself. That was a mistake. The heat and the constant drilling of the insects around her had a lulling effect. She was startled awake before she realized she'd fallen asleep. Her heart thudded in her chest as she squinted through the bright

sunlight, looking around wildly to make sure they were still safe. Luckily, Garreth was still asleep, so she didn't have to admit to failing at the one thing he asked her to do. She reached over at her bundle of water bottles to open a new one when what her eyes had taken for a small boulder unraveled into a baby radscorpion. Clover froze. The radscorpion, roughly the size of a cat, had joined them in the shade while they both slept, curling up between her bag and Garreth's hand. "G-Gare? Garreth?" She barely whispered. "Garreth?" She squeaked. He grumbled and he shifted, causing the crusty radscorpion to flare out its claws and stinger threateningly with a renewed series of hissing. "Don't move!" She gasped. He must have heard the fear in her voice and lay still, hat still over his face. She could barely breathe out, "There's a radscorpion. By your hand." "I hear it," his voice came muffled. "It's, it's a baby but still pretty fuckin' huge. What do I do?" "Is it close to you?" "No, I'm sitting cross-legged-" As she spoke, the ghoul sat up and lunged for the radscorpion blindly in one motion. He grabbed it at the base of its tail and it struck at his forearm easily. Clover screamed as he calmly slid his grip to the end of the tail, bludgeoned it against the trunk of the tree a few times, and then flung the giant bug a good 50 feet away from them. "OH MY GOD! IT STUNG YOU!" She cried. He calmly raised his arm and flexed as he checked the sting mark.

Clover flinched. "This isn't my fault! I swear! It just crept up all silent like and suddenly was there! I'm so sorry!" "Quite alright," he said. "That venom won't do much." "You're sure?" He rubbed at the spot and looked over at her. "I said it's alright." She flinched again. "Does it hurt?" She asked meekly. He shrugged, still watching her. "You don't feel pain?" "Oh, I can feel pain. The nerves, they, they're constantly dying and healing, you see. A backhanded blessing of being a ghoul. Most of the time it's like... a layer of numbness, like my skin is a second suit I'm trying to feel through. Other times, it's like every nerve is on fire." Clover tensed up involuntarily as he climbed to his feet, but watched as he only shrugged back into his button-down and duster he pulled off the branches. "Then why is your eye still bleedin'?" She asked. "It's not so bad anymore. Some wounds take longer to mend than others. Some cease healing altogether, and the body simply works around it." "I heard, look, I know folks say stupid, untrue things all the time, so I could be wrong, but I heard radiation heals ghouls? 'Stead of hurtin' them?" "It could. It could also," he seemed to struggle with his wording, "degrade... other things further. The ghoul will keep going, but the man is left behind." She was afraid to say it, seemed rude, but her curiosity got the better of her. "You mean like your mind? Goin' feral?" He continued to focus on his arm. "It'll happen to all of us ghouls eventually. I'm not keen on speeding up the process, is all." He looked down at her. "You can relax. I will not hurt you." Clover was suddenly aware she was still tense and put a conscious effort into relaxing her shoulders. "M'sorry." She mumbled. "You needn't be so skittish around me. I won't turn feral on you. That's still some time away for me." "It's nothin' to do with you." She said a little too sharply. He took a breath, then shook his head. "Whatever you say."

-Hugo- Hugo yawned. "So it was smooth sailing until the slavers then?" "For the most part?" Clover shrugged. "It took me nearly that entire first week to not feel like I was fighting for my life every step of the way. Made it difficult to, uh, stay vigilant. Fortunately, I could rely on Garreth for that. He'd move us off the road before I was even aware we were approaching anyone. He also stayed true to his word. He showed me what he could about surviving the wastes. Showed me how to spot animal tracks. Showed me how the plant life around us wasn't all dead, and how to find stuff that was still edible; roots... shrooms... berries... stuff I took for granted at the market." She was about to continue but stopped suddenly. Hugo watched as she seemed to weigh her choices in her mind. He looked over at his crew. Astrid was listening intently, ever his right-hand man; ready to pounce

on the next inconsistency. Zeke seemed content to continue to people-watch, perhaps half listening for entertainment. Finally, he was impressed with Palmer's ability to sleep in any situation or position.

-Clover- She hadn't questioned it at first when he insisted they save the old world food for her. She thought maybe he didn't like the reminder of his former life, or maybe after a couple of centuries he was just sick of it. Or maybe.... "Do you? Do ghouls? Prefer the raw animal stuff to regular food?" "Not especially." "But that's all you ate from Harv." "Mila's budget was always a tight one, running the caravan as it was. I was expected to eat the food that the others couldn't, raw or that'd gone rotten." "That's awful!" "Sense of taste for most ghouls is almost non-existent. My healing makes it so I can consume things smoothskins couldn't survive on." He shrugged. "It didn't hurt me any, so it made sense to save the good food for those who needed it." "I still can't believe Mila would treat you that way. I thought she liked you. She called you a good man." "Mila liked me, so far as I was useful to her. The radiation we've trapped in us as ghouls also sustains as much as it breaks us down, I suppose. What she could save in manpower and having to feed it meant more to spread amongst the crew in caps." "It just doesn't seem decent. You shouldn't be expected to get the worst of things just 'cause you can tolerate it." "Lay off her." He said sharply. "It was my choice, too." Clover cringed. She'd pushed it too far. She thought she was only defending him, but clearly, there was more to their relationship than what she'd seen in those few days. She let it drop.

They couldn't waste bullets on target practice, but he insisted on teaching her how to aim and shoot her raider-improvised pipe pistols, as well as how to properly aim down the sights of his rifle 'just in case.' Showing her how to brace properly against the recoil proved awkward as he was careful to keep a generous space between them as he gave her pointers. "Folks have informed me ghouls can emit an odor as bad as a rotting corpse. My sense of smell is as poor as my sense of taste. A small consolation, but I can't trust how offensive I might be to others." "It's been over two weeks since my last bath, Garreth. I ain't smellin' so fresh, myself. I should be glad I ain't gotta worry about offendin' you, neither." He eventually relented and positioned the butt of the rifle himself against her shoulder. "Remember how that feels," he said. "Don't brace correctly and you could break your clavicle, or lose an eye." She gave him a look. "That's not how you lost your eye." He took a step back and with a mischievous expression, simply said, "No." Clover burned with curiosity, but the ghoul had been cagey about discussing his history since that first disastrous night. She held the rifle for him to take back. "Well, thank you for showin' me. I know it's weird, I'd never learned before. Rowan always said I was clumsy to be trusted with a firearm." Garreth looked thoughtful at that as he slung his rifle over his shoulder. "And for how long had you two been married?" The non-sequitur caught her off guard. "Oh, um... I'd say about fifteen years, give or take. It all gets kinda blurry, but we met real young." "Do you mind," he started awkwardly. "If I asked why? Why bother with official ties now of all times?" "I don't... understand. These are the only times I know." "And he was good to you?" The question instantly raised her hackles and her chest felt tight. "Um... why do you ask?" Garreth looked embarrassed and tried to wave away his question. "No reason. I realize that was an improper question, I apologize." "No." Clover felt an overwhelming urge to argue, to shout him down, even as he was backing off. She felt herself get carried away by the sudden rush of adrenaline. "Tell me what made you ask that." He took a step back. "I... noticed every time you speak of him, your late husband, it's of some way he derided you, your person." "And so what? They're just little snippets. You don't know the whole

story!" He held up his hands in surrender. "I don't." Clover glared at him, her heart thudding in her chest, her breathing shallow, and then she had a vision of how he must be seeing her. A suddenly half-crazed woman getting defensive when all he'd asked was had her husband been good to her. Why had that made her so angry? And why was she yelling at the one person keeping her alive out here? "I'm sorry, I...." She hid her face and turned away. "He was good to me, at times. Just as I was for him." She took a few deep breaths to calm down. "We were both on our own when we found each other. We were so young, just barely into our teens, and so alone. We got married at one of those All Faiths churches as soon as we could. We wanted to show everyone, and ourselves, that it was now us against the world. We had each other and we wouldn't be afraid anymore...." She forced herself to look back at him. "Problem was neither of us had anyone to teach us how to grow up and be adults, you know? I ain't stupid, just had to learn things the hard way. We were two kids playin' house. When things got bad, we'd take it out on each other. Not just him. I'd done my own share of the screamin'... and blows." Garreth stood before her, looking uncomfortable. "For what it's worth, I don't believe you're stupid." She tried to maintain her seriousness but the compliment threatened a smile in her. "But I am clumsy?" "Perhaps... a bit, but with practice...." Clover chuffed despite herself and looked down at her sneakers. "Yeah, that's fair."

Another day, another siesta. The day was overcast for once and heat was less oppressive, with a cooling greenish haze that blanketed everything.

Garreth now trusted her with the rifle while he napped. She rested it across her shoulder as she walked in slow circles around the single tree he found to snooze under. She was keeping watch for more rascorpions and other critters. Though a few she wouldn't mind coming across. A giant mole rat, a toddler-sized gecko, heck, she'd take a radroach to roast if it meant supplementing their dwindling food supply. Her dwindling food supply, she corrected herself. Garreth was quick to gun down dinner when the opportunity arose, but she was eager to contribute if she could. She scanned the horizon every few steps as Garreth taught her to. The land was mostly flat with just a few rolling hills. The stunted plant life was sparse and brittle, with waves of dead grasses the only sign of movement. Except, it wasn't the only movement out there. Clover stopped walking. What had caught her eye? She scanned the horizon again. Then, there it was. A swath of high grass appeared to have been pushed out at odd angles and waved counter to the wind. It was at the bottom of a long slope from where she stood but she couldn't quite get a glimpse of the cause. Whatever it was, it was big and pink, and struggling. Maybe it was a brahmin calf? She'd be more likely to adopt that than kill it for food. She glanced back at the sleeping Garreth, then scanned the horizon behind him, then considered the rifle. He'd be pissed if she left him unguarded, and doubly so if she took his only shooter. After tiptoeing the rifle back to him, she took out her two pistols and carefully walked down the slope. As she drew near and the hill leveled off, the tall grass blocked her view. There was a snuffling noise and heavy thuds, but nothing she recognized. Another glimpse revealed a pale, bald, human-shaped head. Could this be another ghoul? What if they were feral? She regripped the pipe pistols in each hand and swallowed nervously. "Uh, hey there." She said weakly. The movement halted. "I'm friendly. Are you? Are you stuck?" The head turned toward her. She cursed the tall grass that kept blocking her view. "Do ya need help?" There was a heavy slap on the ground that whipped down another chunk of grass. She could hear whoever it was dragging a great mass toward her. Finally, a face came into

view. It did seem like a ghoulish creature with the damaged skin and lack of hair. A heavy, bald brow hung over closed eyes that drooped so heavily, it was clear they never opened. This person was blind and had to have been for a long time. No wonder they got lost. Surprisingly, they did get to keep their nose, but... something wasn't right with their mouth. Another lurch forward, and the remaining blades of grass between Clover and this creature flattened down.

This was NOT a ghoulish creature. The mouth hung agape as if the lower jaw had melted into its expanded throat. Instead of seeing teeth, its mouth was filled with a bloated tongue that split into three impossibly long tentacles. They whipped about toward Clover like a snake tasting the air and feeling for vibrations. Clover had been backing away without realizing it and her heel hit a clod of earth, which sent her sprawling. She didn't scream. Maybe it was because the creature itself had remained silent. Maybe it was the tragic expression on its face that gave her hope it wasn't mindless. She looked down to see its armless human torso, bulked out and strewn with tumors. It was being dragged along by a second body attached at where the hips should have been, and was instead a second pair of shoulders. From these shoulders, massive, human arms dragged it forward, another pair of arms dragging listless behind it. A gurgling noise bubbled from inside its throat. Was it growling? Trying to talk? Clover continued to crab walk backward on her forearms and heels, loathe to let go of her pistols though still unwilling to use them; an unintended mockery of the creature's own movements.

"Wait, wait! We can be friends, right? Don't know what's happened to ya, but-" The air cracked open with a rifle shot, and the creature's head rocked back. It let out a jet of nasty, steaming, green bile that arched safely over Clover. Another crack and its head jerked in the opposite direction. It stayed upright in that position for a moment before slowly listing sideways. The girth of its lower torso prevented it from completely collapsing to the ground. Garreth came running down to her. Then he was crouched before her, pushing her cap and hair back, a look of terror in his eye as he searched her face. "Did it get you?" "Wh-what?" "DID IT GET YOU? Were you struck by any of its spit?" He was checking the fabric of her blouse, her scarf, running his hand down her arms, her pant legs. "N-no, no I don't think so?" "This is important! That shit's irradiated to all hell. A direct hit can be lethal to a smoothskin." He was trying to get control over his tone, and keep his growling voice calm. "I didn't get hit." "ARE YOU SURE! Even a few stray drops will wear you down. We don't have any fucking Radaway out here, goddammit! We need to be sure." His hands returned to her face, then her head, feeling in her hair which had been pulled loose of its knot. Clover replayed the event in her head. "Yeah, I'm okay, I'm okay. It didn't shoot anywhere near me... Garreth," she reached up and gently pulled down on his forearms, "I'm okay." Their eyes locked and he let his hands slowly drop. She watched as her words sank in and his fear faded, but it was quickly replaced by rage.

"What the HELL is wrong with you?!" He was now shaking her by her shoulders. "Go running off when I can't protect you?!" "I'm sorry!" "Only TWO things I asked of you! Stop crying, and watch my back for a COUPLE of hours!" "I know! I'm sorry!"

"WHAT were you thinking?!" She was cowering in his grip. "Dammit, girl, a CENTAUR?! What possessed you to just walk up to a blasted centaur?" "I didn't see it, Garreth, I swear to god!" She forced the words out through the thickness in her throat. "I knew there was somethin' in the grass is all." "WHY did you go alone?" "I-I don't...." Why had she gone alone? Why had she not thought to wake Garreth? She wanted to prove she wasn't helpless. Wanted to prove she was a capable adult as much as anyone. Well, she sure made a mess of that. "I don't know! Wasn't thinkin' straight." "Of course, you weren't." He shoved her away as he stood. The grass cushioned her and she lay frozen on the side of the hill. His entire body was rigid as he looked down at the creature.

Centaurs, Clover corrected her thoughts. "I saw the top of its head, and, and, and I thought that maybe it was another ghoul-" "Ghouls can be feral!" He shouted over her, but she couldn't stop. "And then I saw the rest of him, and he looked, Garreth, he looked so... s-sad. I thought... I thought..." "You thought if a ghoul could be a 'regular' person then so could this thing?" He still had his back to her. "But it WAS human once, Garreth-" "One abomination's as good as another? That's all I am to you?" "No! 'Course not, but you both got fucked up from radiation, right? I thought-" "You don't know what created this monster! I'm still human being!" "I swear to god, Garreth, the look on its face! It's like it could remember it had been a human being, a man, once. Look at it!" Garreth was looking. He was quiet for a long time. Long enough for Clover's manic sobs to calm to sniffles. "We have to go," he said quietly. "Centaurs don't usually move on their own." He turned without looking at her and started back up the slope. "Unless you're keen on making friends with super mutants." Clover continued to sit, dazed by the turn of events. She looked incredulously at the centaur slumped before her, the waving grass beyond it, and the green-hued horizon beyond that. She fucked up again, she knew that much. She realized she'd taken for granted for a while that they felt like a team because suddenly it didn't feel that way anymore. She felt very, very alone. A wave of panic thrilled through her as it occurred to her Garreth could be so angry he could be walking away now and not looking back. She scrambled to her feet. "Don't forget your pistols!" He called over his shoulder. He had allowed her to catch up to him, and they walked in silence the rest of that day.

Garreth had a small fire going that evening just off to the side of the road. They sat on opposite sides of the little camp in their continued silence while she ate Pork N' Beans out of the can. "I've been thinking," he said suddenly, "I made a mistake. I..." he took a long breath in, "I got too comfortable. Same folly I argued with Mila for doing."

Clover didn't fully understand, and still, her chest tightened. "What are you sayin'?" He pressed his lips together as if something in him was fighting to hold back the words. "You're paying me to get you safely to the settlements. Somewhere along the way I lost focus, and you nearly died because of it." "Look, that was my fault! I fucked up, I'm sorry, I-" "This is serious." His tone was cold. "You still don't... respect how much danger you're in out here. When the caravan had to turn back, you threw a full-blown tantrum like some child. You were ready to commit suicide by wasteland if I hadn't intervened." "If I was being such a fuckin' brat then why'd you insist on takin' up the contract?" He took some time to consider his next words. "For days I walked behind you. I watched you mourn inconsolably on the back of that wagon. I recognized that kind of loss. I've drowned in it. Sometimes for so long, I was convinced that that was it. That this time it would finally break me, and send me feral into the wastes. You'd think I would have learned by now..." He trailed off but refocused. "But I felt sorry for you. I worried for you because I had been you once. I wonder now... if that didn't work to distract me. Would I have spotted the raider trap for what it was if-" "Don't you put that on me!" Clover's anger surprised them both. "Rowan always did that to me. You don't get to! My sadness had nothing to do with you!" "Of course, it didn't. I wasn't even a man to you. I was a ghoul, a creature, an abomination. I may as well have been a brahmin walking behind you for all the concern you had about me being witness." Clover shook her head in feckless denial. "That's not true." They sat in a miserable silence. The evening twilight had deepened to night and the sky was choked with stars. Every scar and hollow of Garreth's face was harshly lit in stark relief by the campfire. A reminder of how she first saw him, just a medley of scars and horrors. He was the face of Death, and he had taken pity on her. What had she done since but taken it for granted? No. He was just a wounded man. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's my fault. This lesson I have to learn over and over, dealing with smoothskins. I'm always expecting too much, I fear. Not fair to

you. For as long as I've lived, you're all practically infants. You and this world were made for each other. Hell bent on self-destruction. No concern for anyone outside of yourselves." Her eyes were invaded with tears yet again, and she wiped them away angrily. "That's not fair." When he didn't respond, she felt a rage build in her again. "I'm the selfish one? I'm the one who had to swallow my heartache and my tears. And why? To save on FUCKIN' WATER, because YOU can't travel at night! And YOU get to shrug off any attempt to get to know you, but YOU get to question MY history and my marriage??" She waited but he continued to sit in silence across from her. "Fuck it, fine." She tried to sound flippant but her voice was shaky. "We only got another day or so right?" "Two. We fell behind today." "In two days then. So when we get to the New Settlements, what, I hand over the caps and we go our separate ways?" He didn't say anything. "That's what you want, right?" She insisted. "That was always the plan." Clover wanted him to look at her, but he had his broad-brimmed hat carefully positioned to hide his face. Her thoughts raced in circles. How could she fix this? What did he want from her? What did she want from him? Why was it her job to fix it? Was there even anything to fix? Rowan would always come around after a few days and forgive her. But she and Garreth were practically strangers, weren't they? This was all her fault. How could she fix this? Garreth suddenly turned his head.

She began to ask, "What is-" "Shh-" He hopped up to a crouched position just as they heard a man's voice come from down the road "Well, looky what we got here." Four men walked out of the darkness. They wore variations of leather road gear. The speaker was a man who wore a handlebar mustache that joined into mutton chop sideburns, and a sleeveless leather duster. He grinned with arms extended widely.

Garreth cursed under his breath and moved closer to Clover to position himself between her and them. The men casually drew out pistols. "Whoa there," Handlebar said, "let's all stay calm now. No need for violence. Wouldn't wanna damage the goods, now would we?"

The other men snickered. He swept back the tail of his leather duster and squatted to feign warming his hands by the fire.

"So what've we got... a ghou and a girl. Must be our lucky day, eh boys?"

He looked over Clover and her skin crawled. "The road ain't been kind to ya, girl, but I got a feelin' there's good stock under that grime." Before she could understand what was happening, sparks and flames from the campfire launched at the men and they all covered their faces defensively. Garreth had used his bare hands to flip the burning branches of the campfire at them, then turned and grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her backward beyond the squat trees.

"RUN!" Clover was too stunned to move after her tumble backward. As the men recovered and he turned to confront them, she snapped out of it and managed to scramble to all fours, pulling her way between the spiny branches.

-Hugo- Hugo interrupted yet another one of Clover's dead-eye'd stares into the void. "Tell me about the camp. What are we workin' with?" She blinked and looked up at him. "It's in the middle of a huge junkyard, or maybe it was an outright garbage dump once. It's hard to tell what with all the trees and bushes growin' over the grounds, kind of blandin' in the garbage with the dirt, you know? This place, though. There'd been some other dumping goin' on of some kind of glowing, nuclear sludge. And I only know that because it was pushin' it's way up from deep underground, creatin' these huge cracks. The closer I got to the Slaver camp, the greater the cracks became. Huge! Great big, jagged ditches with the stuff glowin' at the bottom." "Fissure might work better," Astrid offered. "Or crevice, or should it be crevasse?" Zeke said. Hugo shot them a look before turning back to Clover. "Go on." "At some point, the woods just stop, and the land looks like it was

scraped flat for like a hundred yards in all directions. At the center is the Slaver camp. The cracks all kind of naturally come together and get the deepest there. It looked like they took some of the junk cars and dropped them in certain cracks to block them off, then dug out others to make one big moat that circled the entire camp."

Hugo tried to envision this. "The radiation levels must be insane." Something in Clover's expression told Hugo this was the first time she'd considered this. "Couldn't be good, that's for sure." Palmer lifted his head suddenly and took a deep breath. "Whoa, enjoy your nap, there?" Hugo said. "No." He yawned. The woman sighed in frustration. "Look, is there anything else you need to know to make your decision? They've had him for days now." Hugo stamped out his second cigarette and looked over at his crew. They all looked back. "Yeah, okay, why not." Zeke nodded enthusiastically while Palmer raised a lackluster fist in the air. "Hooray," Astrid said flatly. Hugo leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "Now let's sort out the caps situation." The crew groaned.

-Clover- Clover had followed them for quite a ways before she'd reached the sharp edge of the woods. She held back, blinking at the halo of light emanating from the center of the camp. She could just barely make out a giant, scrappy cage structure in the middle of a circle of ancient RV's and camper trailers. She could make out the figures of the four slavers walking Garreth toward the edge of the glowing moat. His coat and hat were missing and his hands were bound before him. She could hear voices, but not what they were saying.

Their backs were to her, however, and she got a crazy idea to make a run at them. Just as she stood, Garreth, who had been turned to face the slavers, seemed to look directly at her. She realized the floodlights from the camp easily lit her up. He gave a subtle shake of his head, no, which made her hesitate. In that moment, one of the men shoved his chest and he fell backward into the moat. Clover quickly hid among the trees again as the laughing slavers turned and followed the edge to a drawbridge. It lowered on its own as if activated remotely, and as they crossed, a great, vicious chorus of howls and snarls rose up from the moat itself. They had feral ghouls trapped down there. She knelt there a long time, not sure what to do. She felt trapped in place. It was the factory floor all over again, watching as faceless thugs rifled through her home. If she got near that moat, the ferals would see her and alert the camp. She could only hope Garreth was safe with them as a fellow ghoul. She needed help. What could Clover do but make things worse? How many of those ferals started out as normal ghouls when first dropped into that moat? It was decided. It still took almost another hour before she could convince herself it was safe to move. Safe enough with the floodlights, and yards and yards of land to cross with nothing to hide behind. There had been voices and movement from within, but no one who left the ring of trailers or peered beyond it. Clover's heart threatened to beat right out of her ribcage as she stepped out of the safety of the treeline and onto the bare, scraped earth. She took small, shaky steps, her eyes desperately scanning the trailers for movement and human shapes.

About two-thirds of the way to the moat, she lost her nerve and decided it was time to start crawling. As she drew closer, she lowered further to a belly crawl. It was then she noticed the texture of the ground had a strange consistency to it with bleached newspaper, broken plastic, and thick chunks of glass mixed in among it. She'd crawled directly to where Garreth had been pushed over and her fingers found the edge. She took a few deep breaths, gave a prayer, and slowly inched her way forward. The cracked open earth-turned moat was much deeper than she'd realized. The walls had been artificially smoothed over, and a film of what she guessed to be concrete layered over that. The ghouls would have no purchase to claw their way out on their own. She'd nearly exposed her entire face over the edge before seeing her first ghoul. She saw only

about half a dozen in either direction. Their dazed, twitching bodies were underlit by the sickly glow of the sludge which they were all forced to stand knee-deep in. A burning, metallic smell invaded Clover's sinuses and she felt a wave of dizziness roll over her. Good thing she was already lying down, though knew it wouldn't be safe to dally. Her eyes teared as she searched over the figures below her, straining to recognize Garreth. Almost all were bald with tattered clothing, and some even fully nude, with their grotesque bodies on full display. Then she spotted him. The only ghoul squatting against the inner wall. His head down, his elbows resting on his knees. His hands were free now, and his button-down was in shambles. She slid away from the edge and repositioned herself to find him about 15 ft directly below her. Clover felt around for a pebble to toss at him, but found instead only clumps of dirt and bits of plastic. Maybe not substantial enough, and might also make too much noise when it landed. The thought of tossing down a cap or two briefly crossed her mind, but the metal ringing out may get too much attention from the ferals. She felt around some more and found she was on a small plateau of semi-shredded books. Maybe she could tear strips of paper from those? The paper was too stuck together from centuries of soaked up rain and then dried in the sun while still protected between hardcover jackets. She managed to meticulously pull tiny chunks off until she had a hand full of confetti. That would surely fall silently. She held it out in both hands and slowly released it to give him time to notice.

It worked. As soon as the first few flakes landed in front of him he looked up to see her. She waved. He scowled. She held down a hand to him. He didn't move at first, and then only shook his head. She threw her hand out again, assuming he hadn't seen or understood her gesture. He could reach her, maybe, if he jumped and kicked off the wall, possibly, it could work. Garreth stood and waded through the sludge until he was directly under her. "Go." He whispered. Clover froze, uncertain. When she opened her mouth to whisper back, he held up his hands and shushed her. "They won't react to my voice but they WILL react to yours. You have to go." She shook her head. "I want you to go." He whispered again. He couldn't be serious. He must have hit his head, or the sludge was screwing with his thinking. If he just reached for her, they could make this work. She could save him. Clover worded voicelessly and slowly so he could read her lips. "What. About. You." He looked behind as if he could see beyond the wall into the slaver camp, then at the ghouls standing farther down the way to either side. "It was only a matter of time." He breathed. "I'm... done for, Clover. I'm ready to be done. You need to leave." "I. Need. You." She strained her arm down, and he swam in her vision. Damned tears again. "You can make it the rest of the way on your own." "I. Can't." "You have to. It's... quite alright. I had no plans after getting you to the New Settlements. Let me end this cursed life with some meaning, by saving yours." She sniffled and the nearest feral's head whipped her direction. "Now go!" He whispered harshly.

She wanted to be stubborn and stay; force him to join her, to protect her, but the feral let out a raspy hiss and she bolted. When she'd returned to the now-destroyed camp, her pistols, and Garreth's rifle were unsurprisingly missing. They'd both been so distracted by their own petty troubles, their weapons had been set down forgotten. By some fluke, however, Clover's messenger bag had been overlooked, as was Garreth's duster, which must have been pulled off in the tussle. She tied the duster to a tree to be her marker. She tried to pull away to set off down the road but her hands wouldn't let go of the jacket. Feeling silly, she nonetheless stepped up to the tree and hugged the jacket. She'd be back.

Clover had to trust she could be safe on her own until she made it to the closest settlement. She ran as much as she could, exhaustion and dehydration be damned. That worked until night became day and the heat kicked in. She was down to her last bottle of water in her bag and only just realized she'd lost her baseball cap in her escape. She'll have to make it work, she told herself.

She'll have to make it to the settlement. They'll have water there. Clover was nearly delirious when the first signs of settlers appeared in the distance the next evening; some light pollution, the bubbling of people chatter. The road was widened with large, friendly, hand-painted signs pointing to helpful services for newcomers. She was refilling her one bottle at the city's well when she overheard the gossip in the line behind her. Something about a disastrous rescue mission that ended with an all out battle between one of the New Settlements and a cult.

-Hugo- Despite Clover's protests, Hugo insisted everyone rest before heading out, including herself. The hangovers were enough of a risk, no reason to add exhaustion. Late the next morning, he sent Palmer with Clover's piddling down payment of caps to the clinic to get some supplies.

"Bad news, boss," Palmer said as he returned. "Thanks to our little incident, there is no Radaway nor Stimpak to be found in any of the New Settlements. They'd all sent what they could to Endurance. The Doc said they'd sent a courier for an emergency shipment from the closest city, but there's no telling how many days out that'll be to arrive." Hugo took this in while lighting a fresh cigarette. "Any good news?" "I got a couple bottles of Rad-X?" The old man brightened up. "That's more like it. Prevention is key, Palmer, my boy." The crew headed out in high spirits. They walked at a brisk pace and Hugo was impressed that Clover was able to keep up without any trouble. He'd half assumed Zeke would need to let go of his litany of firearms to give the woman room to piggyback.

After his good night's rest, Palmer was full of nervous energy regarding their new client. "Now, feel free to tell me to fuck right off, but Clover isn't your real name, correct?" She adjusted the strap of her messenger bag and shrugged. "Suppose it isn't." "No, no, that's good, actually. Really smart for a woman in your situation. Definitely, do not tell me your real name, not that you were going to, but in case you were tempted. It just struck me as this classic name, so I was curious where it came from." "I... didn't have a lot of time to think one up? I guess I wanted to change my luck, and thought of the four-leaf clover." "You ever seen one?" "I've seen this old ad painted on the side of a building. It had a four-leaf clover. Never seen one in real life though." "Probably died in the fallout," Palmer said cheerfully. "Yeah," Hugo agreed grimly. "This world is probably not too hospitable for such things anymore."

Their first night out in the waste, Zeke and Astrid cuddled up on one side of the fire. Hugo was going to have to keep an eye on those two, start mentally preparing for them to break away to settle down. He and Palmer debated tactics on the other side to give them space. If Clover's accounting of distance was correct, they would probably want to get to digesting some Rad-X before high noon the next day. Palmer screwed up his face in concern. "I'd still feel a lot better about this if we had at least a few Stimpaks in case things went sideways." "What do you mean sideways?" Clover asked as she hugged herself tightly by the fire.

Hugo and Palmer both looked at her quizzically. Hugo said, "I thought our reputation preceded us." "I want the stealthy, thoughtful side of your reputation." Hugo shrugged. "We'll try our best."

"What happened... to that Mayor's son? Do you know?" He hesitated. "He was found dead in the aftermath. Rumor has it he was killed by the Mayor, himself. His own father." A bitterness collected in Hugo's mouth remembering his final conversation with the vile man. No remorse. He'd been out for vengeance against his kin for daring to slip out from under his control, and he got it.

"Thankfully, I don't see how we could come to a repeat of that." It was early the next afternoon when she led them off the road. "Are you sure it's this way?" Hugo asked. She reached for the heavy duster jacket hanging from a tree.

"Oh." She gently folded the coat and tucked it into her bag as she looked around. "This way." They followed what looked to have been little more than an animal trail. A few times she'd stop to get her bearings. Astrid turned her back and mumbled under her breath to Zeke. "Tell me she didn't just forget the fuckin' way." "Gimme a sec, it was nighttime when I came through here before." After some time ancient vehicles cropped up among the trees, often with the skeletal trunks and branches growing directly out of their open hoods and roofs. They could hear the generators in the distance before the brush and cars cleared out. They saw the woods' edge and Hugo pointed them to a hill a quarter of the way around that appeared to have once been a stack of cars, now tied together with the roots of stunted trees, as well as weeds that had managed to take hold in the sifting dirt that settled there. He led them up this precarious hill and they lay flat on their bellies across the hoods and roofs of these old clunkers. It was as she described it. The land had been cleared and scraped bare of all vegetation and rusting vehicles. At the center of the small camp was a huge, metal cage crudely welded together out of stray car parts, sheet metal, and reams of woven fencing. A sad, lethargic group of people huddled within it. The cage was surrounded by several trailers in various states of repair. A station wagon-sized generator chugged away at the far end of the camp with thick cables webbed out to each trailer. The real eye-catcher was the deep man-made ditch that circled the entire circumference of the camp. Figures could just be seen standing, swaying in place at the bottom. Even in the afternoon sunlight, a faint green glow could be seen glimmering and splashing around their legs. Palmer pulled out a pair of binoculars. "What do they got in there? Are those people?" "Ghouls," Hugo whispered. "But... why?" Zeke asked. Hugo motioned for the binoculars "If they're feral, which I'm inclined to believe they are, then they'll act as guard dogs. You see how they shaved down the land a bit comin' up to the lip of the moat from the outside? Not enough to let them climb out, but any human that approaches from the outside will set 'em off. And then there's the convenient threat of 'em to keep the slaves in line. Probably disposal as well." Palmer squinted at the scene below them. "Jeezus, there's gotta be a hundred of them in there. Explains why I'm seein' no human guards around." Hugo nodded. "They're feelin' real comfortable with their moat-o-ghouls doin' all the work." Astrid pointed, "They got a drawbridge of sorts over there. You think we can get it to lower from this side?" "We'd need cover from the ghouls walkin' up to it." Hugo offered the binoculars to Clover. "See if you spot your man in the cage. We'll need to move fast once we're in." She propped herself up on her elbows as she took it from him. He sat back and considered their options while she searched the area below. Palmer seemed to follow his thoughts. "We'll go in at night, obviously." "They'll still see you by the lights they got powered in the camp," Clover said. "Camouflage?" Palmer offered. Astrid pulled at a branch, "these bushes got nothin' to hide behind." Hugo eyed the drawbridge the slavers were using. "Maybe we can bring over our own bridge. Drag over a station wagon or a truck bed or somethin'." Astrid groaned. "So we gotta spend an extra day out here?" Hugo shrugged, "I'm open to ideas." He looked back down at the slaver camp, considering. He noticed Clover was still searching with the binoculars, but they weren't aimed at the cage. "Oh my fuckin' god," he said. "Your Garreth's a ghoul." Clover looked up guiltily. Astrid nudged Zeke, "called it." "Dammit! That's five caps I owe you." One look from Hugo silenced them. Clover rolled to a seated position and held her hands up. "Should it matter?" "Hell, yes it matters if you're lyin' to my face." "You made a crack about abominations when we first spoke, but the rumors told me you don't just blunder into things without giving it thought, and that... you... took in new information and actually considered it. I thought, the important thing was that this was my friend you were helping me with, and this would be weighed first before you found out WHAT he is." "For all you know, he could be a goddamned, mindless Glowing One by now. Chew your face off

as soon as look atcha.” Something in her demeanor shifted from passive to the tension of a cornered animal. “That’s my business to worry about,” she hissed suddenly. “He saved my life, and I still need to repay him. What does him being a ghoul change here?” Hugo wanted to yell but self-preservation kept his voice down to a harsh whisper. He gestured down at the slaver camp. “And how the hell did you think we’d pull off a sneaky approach here with him IN the moat of ghouls?” She floundered. “Fuck if I know! That’s why I hired you!” Zeke grinned. “I can use my missile launcher.” “What?” Clover asked. “What?” Hugo repeated. Zeke pointed at the scene below. “Knock walls out.” “Zeke, babe, we’re tryin’ ta be sneaky, here,” Astrid whispered. “This place is built on a dump. The ground is soft. If I hit just the inner wall, the ghouls will have a ramp. They’ll distract and or kill the slavers, while the rest of us pick them off from up here. The slaves will be safe in their cage. See? Easy peasy.” “What if Garreth’s close by when you shoot the missiles? You won’t be able to tell him from the others.” Zeke shrugged. “I’ll be really careful, and then we wait to deal with the ghouls after.” Hugo cut in, “It’s not half bad. Let’s keep that on the back burner, in case I can’t come up with somethin’ better.”

He could not. The day had stretched into late afternoon and now that sneaking in was looking less and less like an option, they were in danger of starting a fight that would bleed into the night. Damn this woman and her evasiveness. He should just turn this outfit around and report the slaver camp back at the New Settlements. Let her figure out her perverted obsession with this abomination before the cavalry arrives. This could still be a trap. Hugo eyed the woman lying on her belly next to him. She was still scanning the moat with Palmer’s binoculars. If she had lied just to lure them in, capping it off with ‘my friend’s actually a ghoul’ would be a truly dumb move. No. This, unfortunately, was legit.

Did he care? This woman came to them for help under some false pretenses, but had she been wrong to assume he’d let his prejudices get in the way? He didn’t like that he’d been so predictable by a stranger. If she’d hired him to save a giant molerat that had somehow saved her life, would he have had this visceral a reaction? The sun was quickly approaching the horizon behind them, and they only had so much time before the slavers would begin filtering out of the mobile homes. Astrid stretched. “So, how we doin’ this, boss?” Hugo sighed heavily, “We’re goin’ with Zeke’s idea.” “What?” Palmer asked incredulously. “Yes!” Zeke whispered. Hugo turned to Clover. “You have any issue with that?” “I haven’t seen him this whole entire time. He’s gotta be on the other side, right?” “I’ll be real careful,” Zeke repeated. “Zeke, I want you to take out their bridge first, then focus on the wall next to it. Eat away at it until it’s gotta nice slope. Hopefully, the ferals will take it from there. If not, Plan B is to just shoot the slavers that will assuredly get drawn out by the commotion.” “But the bridge first?” “We can’t risk a slaver getting to it and escapin’.” “But then how do we get across to rescue the slaves?” “Zeke, I like that you’re thinkin’ ahead, but we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” “Yeah, but... how?” Zeke mumbled defeatedly as Astrid patted his arm. “Miss Clover, you point out your Garreth as soon as you see him.” “Why not let them go?” She asked. Palmer groaned but she persisted. “Why do ya have to kill them all? Fuck’em. Let’em run away. We don’t care ‘bout them, just Garreth.” “We ain’t here only for Garreth, now, are we? Our true reward is tied to them other captured settlers. Our soon-to-be-earned goodwill may get spoilt after a few attacks from the ferals or scorned slavers we’d let loose on the wasteland. No. We can’t do this quietly, so we kill’em all.” She looked away in frustration before glaring back at him. “Don’t forget who gave you this tip. Garreth is still priority.” Hugo looked at her incredulously. “I’m a man of my word.” She searched his face before relenting. “Now let’s get to it, we’re losing the light.” The crew readied their weapons.

Zeke, with his missile launcher propped on his shoulder, looked over to Hugo who gave him a nod. Clover and Palmer both covered their ears as the first missile let loose. It roared then whistled, leaving a tidy trail of smoke behind it. He was already reloading when it found its mark at the base of the makeshift drawbridge. The explosion was a small fireball that both blew apart the wood and sheet metal and kicked out a dry cloud of dirt. Another missile let loose before that dust settled and the inner wall of the moat beneath the former bridge blew out again.

As the third explosion joined the echoes of the first two, slavers finally started filtering out of the mobile homes.

Hugo signaled for Zeke to hold on a fourth missile.

He squinted at the damage they'd done to the wall. The green glow of the nuclear waste lit a cloud of dust that expanded in either direction of the moat. He could see through it there was a steep incline eaten into the wall... but an incline nonetheless. Would it be enough for the ghouls to climb out was the question. More slavers stumbled out into the open still pulling on a mix of leather and scrap metal armor. Some hopped ridiculously on one leg as they tried to drive a foot through the padding. Others aimed wildly at the hillside with their pistols and rifles, but being misled by the missiles' drifting smoke trail, were firing too far right of them to be a threat. A few had run over to check on the cage. They hollered incoherently at the terrified people huddled within. Most gathered around to inspect the destroyed bridge, but still no ghouls appeared.

"Shit," Palmer said. "Do we, I mean, do we start shootin'?" Hugo thought he saw shadow movement in the glowing dust. "Hold on. Let's give 'em a chance." A sizeable group had gathered around the damaged wall and were barking at each other. One brave soul kneeled at the edge to get a close look. A ghoul finally pounced from the depths of the dissipating dust cloud and dragged him into the moat. The slavers all opened fire where they stood in seeming disregard for their fellow slaver's safety. The commotion further cleared the dust to reveal several shabbily clad ghouls climbing over each other to get to the slavers. Some slavers lost their nerve at this and ran away while others stood their ground and continued shooting. The smaller bullets didn't seem to slow the scrambling ghouls as they reached the lip of the incline. More followed and though a few were shot down, they were soon swarming the slavers. A glowing trail of nuclear sludge was left on the ground as they went. "Okay," Hugo whispered. "Keep your shots precise, now. No ghouls get hit 'til Clover's is spotted." Clover, "They may not all be feral." "Let us worry 'bout that! You worry 'bout your business." The camp was an angry hive of commotion. Zeke had switched to a more subtle sniper rifle and the crew began shooting. Slavers not already grappling with a ghoul were going down from head and torso shots. Those left standing crowded closer to the slave cage and shot wildly at both the crowd of ghouls swarming them as well as at their hill. The setting sun was in their eyes, however. The few who attempted to climb their way up the walls of the cage to escape the ferals were easily picked off by Hugo's crew. Floodlights kicked on around the camp once the sun finally disappeared, throwing long, sharp shadows into the chaos. Hugo nudged Clover. "You seein' him?" She was glued to the binoculars. "No!" It wasn't long before the floodlights began falling over in the commotion, causing small explosions that sent sparks skittering through the crowd. Clover suddenly pushed herself to all fours.

Hugo barked, "What are you doing? Get down!" "His eye's no good in the dark!" Before he could react, she was half running half tumbling down the hillside. Hugo called after her. "How the hell are you gonna help??" "I need to find him!" She was running in a full sprint across the flattened earth for the destroyed bridge area.

Astrid looked to Hugo. "What do we do?" "Should we follow her?" Palmer asked. "Stay where you are," Hugo ordered. "If she somehow makes it across, I want you to shoot anything that looks like

it's gettin' too close to her." Zeke looked down the sights of his rifle. "What is she going to do, throw herself in the moat?" That appeared to be exactly what she was going to do as she leaped from the edge without hesitation. She hit the missile-crumbled incline hard and slid quickly out of sight. "Welp." Said Astrid in defeat. Palmer looked uncertain. "Should we-" "Give her a sec," Hugo warned. At least all the ghouls who'd noticed the opening had already climbed up. Clover recovered and reappeared in view before sliding down again. The incline was too steep, the dirt too loose. She took her messenger bag, tossed it up over the lip of the inner wall, then with one final push, managed to scramble her way up into the shadow of the nearest trailer. "Y'all still got eyes on her?" Hugo asked, squinting. Palmer was the first to reply. "My scope has night vision, I got her." "What's she doin'?" "She's, uh... lookin' for her bag, I think." Astrid groaned. "Not a good start." Zeke agreed. "Okay, she's got it. Now she's makin' a move between the buildings." Astrid re-aimed her rifle. "I can see her!" Ghouls had gathered around the doors of trailers hiding slavers who managed to lock themselves behind inside. Others were still crowded around the giant cage, howling as they attempted to force their way through the bars to reach the captured settlers inside. Still, others had slowed to a mindless wander, their rage having lost focus. Clover's voice pierced through the chaos as she called out Garreth's name. "Is she serious?" Palmer asked incredulously. "Shit!" "On it!" Astrid said flatly. Hugo's eyes finally landed on Clover just as a ragged figure ran up from behind and attempted to latch onto her. Astrid's rifle rang out and its head popped.

Clover spun around. Half her face was sprayed with the ghoul's dark blood, and seeing the dead ghoul at her feet, angrily waved her arms out in front of her in a big 'X' motion. Astrid scoffed. "That ungrateful...." "Just keep'er safe 'til she finds'im if you can," Hugo ordered. There was one final floodlight still standing near the giant slave cage at the center of the camp. The ghouls roiled and churned like hellish waves throwing themselves against its crosshatched bars. Clover was walking directly toward them. Another ghoul caught notice of her and lunged. This time Zeke took it out. Clover jumped but didn't do another angry "X" this time. "Woman's got no sense in her," Hugo exclaimed. A ghoul stepped in front of the floodlight and stared pointedly at Clover. It took a hesitant step toward her with its arms out to either side defensively... or in preparation to pounce. Hugo couldn't decide which, the light having reduced the figure to nothing more than a silhouette. "Keep an eye on that one in front of the light." "Is that- could that be him? The ghoul? The Garreth? I mean, her ghoul, Garreth?" Clover stopped when she noticed the ghoul. Then she moved with purpose, gaining speed with each step. "She seems pretty sure," Hugo noted. The ghoul shoved others aside as he took more steps toward her. "I don't like this," Astrid whispered. Hugo took a breath. "This is her play. Be ready in case it goes sideways." "Where are y'all lookin'?" Zeke grumbled. "I'm completely lost!" "Over there, right in front of the light," Astrid said. "My eyes! Damn night vision!" Palmer hissed. "Everyone, stay focused!" Hugo barked. Clover and the ghoul had nearly reached each other. The ghoul paused, but Clover didn't slow and threw herself at the figure with her full body. The ghoul caught her and they embraced. Astrid said, "So they're good, right?" Hugo looked over at his crew in relief. Palmer shouted. "Oh god! He's attacking her-oh, no... never mind. He's just shaking her." Hugo's eyes scrambled back over the scene to find Clover being gripped and shaken by the shoulders as the ghoul yelled at her. Astrid, "Is that... is he feral or not?" Clover strained against the ghoul's grip until she managed to pull herself against him again. This time he relented. "Yeah, I think they're fine," Hugo said. Garreth's attention was suddenly around the campsite as he gripped her defensively and pulled her out of the light and toward one of the emptied campers. "He's got the right idea. We're not quite out of the woods yet. The ghoul has been found, but there are still slavers and now ferals to clear out." "How do we tell

the ghouls apart?" Astrid asked. Hugo shrugged. "Hell if I know. Start with the twitchier ones. We'll figure it out as we go."

-Clover- Once inside, Garreth held on to Clover as he checked around the cramped mobile home. There was a thick musk from body oil, gun oil, cigar smoke, blood, and piss that all mingled into a choking cloud. It was harshly lit by yet another floodlight brought inside. The only furniture was a few rotted car seats, tire wells with planks of wood for low tables, and makeshift sleeping bags scattered about the floor. They were alone. His clothes were soaked and in shreds. Her feet were beginning to ache. She was still sobbing from their reunion and they were immediately talking over each other. "What the hell are you doing here!" Garreth shouted. "I couldn't let you-" "Stay here until I come back for you." "I won't stay in here!" Clover grabbed at what fabric she could of his sleeves. "Dammit, Clover! You'll get torn to pieces-" "You might get shot if I'm not with you-" "You shouldn't have come back!" The door unlatched and another ghoul quickly slid in. She had a narrow, feminine frame, with long wisps of hair that fell around bare shoulders like cobwebs, and clothing that was little more than a suggestion of rags. When she spoke, it came out in a delicate rasp, barely above a whisper.

"It's chaos out there. What is happening? Who is this? How did she get her collar off?" Garreth sighed. "Irena, this is Clover." She looked at Gareth in disbelief. "Clover? You mean YOUR Clover? What is going ON?" "Hi?" Clover choked out. "I have no idea," Garreth said, "but we have to figure out a way to corral the ferals." Irena hugged herself. "It's not over, yet. Slavers are shooting at us from the hills." "Those aren't slavers," Clover spoke up again. "Those are my friends." Irena looked directly at Clover now. "Your friends? They blew away the wall, then. So this is all your doing." "I hired them to rescue Garreth! We need them to see me. If they see me, I can get them to stop shooting. They just want to rescue the captured settlers." Garreth turned his attention to Irena again. "One step at a time then. Wave Clover's friends down is step one." Something about the way the two ghouls spoke to each other made Clover feel like a child being tolerated while the adults were talking. Irena said, "Don't forget the few slavers still holding out. It's likely we'll find the key to the slave collars with them." Garreth rubbed a palm across his forehead. "What a mess." Clover kept a guilty silence. This was not how she wanted this all to go down, but wasn't this always the way things shook out for her?

Irena left to make sure it was safe enough for them to move Clover back toward the edge of the camp. She leaned heavily on Garreth as they got ready to move. The ache in her feet had been quickly climbing up her legs, gaining intensity and she was starting to sweat. He looked at her with concern. "I'm fine," she said. "I just hit the wall kinda hard when I jumped across." Irena reappeared and looked between Garreth and Clover clinging to each other. "Are we ready?" Fortunately for Clover, the ferals were either preoccupied with trying to get at the people in the cage, or they'd calmed to vacant twitching wherever they stood. Clover could see a group of non-feral ghouls hiding behind the trailers, out of sight from Hugo's hill. The trio left the doorway, Clover swung her free arm over her head to hopefully get Hugo's attention. Still another ghoul nearby was shot down. Irena whimpered but would continue to reach out and gently turn the standing ferals away to sneak Clover past. When they got to the edge, Both Garreth and Irena flanked Clover while she made big motions with her arms for them to come to her. The shooting stopped and in a few minutes, the crew was standing on the opposite wall of the moat. Hugo, "How's the sit-" He was harshly shooshed by all three across the moat. Clover fanned her hand in a quiet down motion. "Don't alert the ferals." Hugo, whispering now, "So you do still have ferals about." Astrid, Zeke, and Palmer all tighten their grips on their weapons. Irena whispered, "We're

handling the situation.” Hugo cocked his head and whispered back. “What?” Garreth spoke up, “She said we’ll handle it. No more shooting.” “You’re Clover’s Garreth, then?” Clover’s hands had begun burning just as her legs were going numb. Garreth, “I suppose I am.” She compensated by leaning more heavily against Garreth and he tightened his arm around her reflexively. Hugo, “Well, check that off the list then. We want to take the captured folks back to the settlements. Are your people amenable to that?” “Easier said than done.” Irena said. “They’re all collared. It’s a miracle they weren’t triggered out of spite when we attacked.” Clover suddenly felt feverish and lightheaded. Hugo looked to his crew and then back at Clover’s group. “Lady, I’m sorry but I cannot understand you. Can’t y’all come over here to chat?” Garreth shook his head. “Not with Clover in tow, and we can’t leave her alone with ferals still about.” Clover swayed under a wave of nausea. Hugo scoffed, “Yeah, we figured. So, take care of’em, if that’s what you wanna do.” Clover doubled over and projectile vomited into the moat. Her head swam and she would have fallen in head first if Garreth hadn’t held onto her. There was a chorus of shocked whispers. Hugo, “What’s going on?” Garreth, “What’s wrong?” Astrid aimed her rifle at Garreth, “What did you do to her?” Garreth spoke directly into her ear. “Clover, talk to me.” “Not feelin’ so good,” was all she could whimper out. “She’s soaked clear through her clothing.” Irena rasped. “It’s radiation sickness,” Palmer said. “When she jumped across the moat, she slid all the way down. She must have stepped in the sludge. Check her shoes.” Garreth pulled Clover up to force her to meet his eyes. “You soaked your feet in that muck and didn’t say anything??” Clover opened her mouth to apologize but was surprised by another round of vomiting. This time it splashed down the front of Garreth. Garreth looked to Palmer. “We need RadAway.” “We only got Rad-X.” Irena’s voice floated to Clover. “Well, it’s a bit late for that.” “What’d she say?” Hugo asked. “Toss it over anyway.” Garreth managed to shout in his hushed tone. Palmer pulled a bottle of pills from his bag and tossed it over. “It’s only gonna work if she can keep’em down.” The last thing Clover remembered was chewing through a mouthful of Rad-X pills. Then she untethered.

Clover’s existence became a tangle of deep aches and fever dreams. Occasionally, she could be dragged from the depths to choke down water. She soaked in her sweat, her body desperately trying to rid itself of the radiation poison the only way it could once she ran out of material to vomit. Whenever she neared the surface of awareness it was to voices, some whispered, some harshly barking. Sometimes she’d think she was in one of the slaver trailers, other times she’d be back in the old factory office. There’d always be someone watching over her. Garreth in the trailer, and Rowan in the office. When she finally awoke fully, she was lying on a dirty mattress on the floor. She didn’t recognize the room but could tell it was indeed one of the slaver trailers. The same mess was strewn about, though this time there was no floodlight. Instead, natural light fell in through the cracks in the boarded-up windows. Her head pounded, her throat burned, her arms ached, her stomach still churned, and her feet were on fire. She looked down to see an IV needle stuck into the crook of her elbow. It was fed by a tube which her eyes followed up to a clear plasma bag hung from the bayonet of Astrid’s rifle propped against the wall with “RadAway” scrawled across a strip of duct tape stuck to it. Her pants and shoes were missing. Only her feet were exposed; an angry, blistering red. Garreth’s duster was draped over her for modesty, and now her heart ached as she slid a hand over the fabric. The door on the opposite end of the trailer opened, blinding Clover until it swung closed again. As she blinked away the spots in her eyes, a figure knelt at her feet. It was Garreth who spoke. “You’re looking better.” She gave a weak laugh. “I’ll take your word for it.” He set down an old, plastic mixing bowl filled with a gritty paste and a handful of cleanish strips of cloth. Clover watched as he folded back the

duster to reveal more of her legs. Veins of irritation crawled up out of the rash and blistered skin around her feet and ankles. He picked up the first cloth and soaked it in the bowl, and she clenched her teeth in anticipation. "You missed quite a bit of excitement." He said as he lifted the rag and gently began wrapping it around her foot. She gasped at the sting of it and struggled to keep her writhing to a minimum. "Your friend Hugo is not a fan of ghouls, it seems. I'm surprised you'd convinced him to rescue us." "I'd only... h-hired him to rescue you." She relaxed a little as the stinging was replaced with a cool, numbing sensation. "Never imagined we'd take on the whole damn camp. Also, I may have... left out that you were a ghoul." Garreth nodded. "That lines up. After I made sure you were safe in here, there was quite a bit of debate regarding the fate of the captured settlers. Hugo was rather insistent that the ferals needed to be dealt with immediately before anything else were to happen. However, Irena wouldn't hear of it. She insisted the ghouls be allowed to take care of their own. We other ghouls supported her and things became somewhat tense. A compromise was reached. With the help of Hugo's crew, the ferals were led back into the ravine. A lot of yelling and hand waving." He waved his arms around in mimicry before reaching for another cloth. Clover snorted, "Y'all weren't afraid they'd jump the moat? I mean... I nearly made it. Should be an easy feat for a ghoul." "Well, you, ma'am, are incredibly lucky. Or you have a hidden talent for the long jump. You would have excelled in the Olympics had you the chance." He lifted the soaked cloth and began the delicate process of wrapping her other foot. "But no, we thought of that. A little bit of cord was strung across their path just short of the edge of the ravine. That was enough to trip them up, though Irena wasn't happy about it. Then... It took some time, but your friends managed to find the bed of a 16-wheeler somewhere in the woods. It took some coordination between ghoul and smoothskin, but we were able to drag it to the camp and push it across the moat to the damaged wall. It's quite the sturdy little bridge." "What about the slavers holdin' out inside one of the trailers?" "Oh." Garreth chuckled. "The big guy with the missile launcher made short work of them." "I SLEPT through a whole trailer blowin' up?" "Not the whole trailer. He blew down the door and they all surrendered. Hugo was rather excited at the idea of a possible bounty." Finished with foot two, he dipped another cloth and gently lifted her leg, resting her bound foot in his lap to wrap the strip around her ankle. "They set about finding the controller for the slave collars, while I preoccupied myself with finding RadAway. I had to believe even slavers wouldn't set up a camp in the middle of a nuclear waste dumping ground without keeping any on hand." "Are you sure the RadAway is even doin' anythin'?" He switched her feet on his lap and gently wound the soaked cloth around her other ankle. "The fact you're even alive is a miracle." "Why are my feet still so awful?" "The waste material itself is corrosive and will damage tissue. We ghouls weren't bothered by it because the radiation helped us heal. Without even a stimpack, you're on your own." "What happens if it gets too bad? Will I have to lose my feet?" Clover felt her chest tighten with anxiety. "We'll worry about that when the time comes." "Easy for you to say. And what about my hands?" Garreth looked up as she showed her blistered palms. He repositioned himself to kneel beside her, soaked another strip of cloth, and reached out for a hand. He examined it for a moment before gently starting the wrap on her palm. "I believe your hands will come out fine. Your feet... if the time comes to take them. I'll make sure you're cared for." She shook her head. "I always make such a mess of things, don't I? All I could think of was savin' you and now look at me." "You did. You nearly died tryin', but you saved me, and plenty of others to boot. Don't make a habit of it and you'll be fine." They were silent for a moment while he worked. When he spoke again, it was as if reluctantly. "You'll rest up here as long as you need. I ensured Irena agreed to that. Once you're fit to travel, Hugo will escort you safely to the nearest settlement. His crew is currently doing the same for the rescued settlers as we speak." "And what about you?"

He began wrapping her other hand. "I'm staying here with the others." "Maybe... I could stay, too?" He sighed as if he'd anticipated this. "You can't stay here." "Why?" "For one, you'd have to be on a constant diet of Rad-X with all this dumped waste around." "The slavers made it work." She said stubbornly. He stopped wrapping and looked at her. "This place isn't for you. The others... they want this to be a space just for ghouls." "What if-" "No." "What if we take me off the RadAway and see if the radiation doesn't ghoulify me?" "No!" He said more sternly. "You said it was a miracle I was still alive. Maybe I wasn't dyin'. Maybe I was turnin' into a ghoul. If it's true, I can stay, and I won't have to worry about losin'-" "You'll die, Clover. Most people don't ghoulify, they just die. And let's say it's true, and you become a ghoul, you don't... deserve this." He finished the wrapping and drew back. She grabbed and held his hands. "And you do?"

Garreth had been so ready to give up and lose his mind down in the sludge. A fate she knew he feared the most. She couldn't understand it. Had her mistake with the centaur hurt him so badly, or had it been the final nail in the coffin? He met her eyes. "You came from a place where it was every man for himself, but these New Settlements are coming together for a purpose. They'll take you in and embrace you where they can't embrace us. That's what you deserve." She searched his face. "I really fucked up, didn't I?" It took him a long time to reply. "You've been pretty out of it these past few days. You... when you were lucid enough to speak, you would confuse me with your dead husband. Kept calling me Rowan. Kept begging me, him, to stay. You don't truly want me around, Clover. You're confused, and it's not your fault. It's entirely understandable. You want your husband to come back. Or a husband that won't die. I can't-" They were interrupted by the trailer door opening and flooding the little room with bright light. Hugo and Palmer walked in, both squinting into the darkness. Garreth stood. "I should go." "Wait!" Clover begged. Hugo let the door close behind him. "Well, well, how's the patient doin'? Was that her voice I heard?" Garreth gathered the bowl and remaining rags. "She's on the mend." "Good. Good." Hugo said enthusiastically.

Palmer knelt to inspect the hanging bag of RadAway. "What do you say, maybe one more?" He looked up to Garreth who nodded. Palmer turned to Clover. "And how are you feelin'?" "Like shit." She said flatly. Both Hugo and Palmer erupted in laughter.

Hugo leaned against the wall as Garreth passed by. "Girl, you don't know how good it is to hear you say that." Clover watched Garreth quietly move toward the door. "I, uh, suppose I owe you the rest of my caps." Garreth paused but it was Hugo who replied. "Oh, we don't gotta worry about that right now." "No, I want to settle while we're all here- Garreth?" She said quickly as he reached for the door. "Do you know where my bag is?"

He turned and looked at her. "I'll grab it."

He left Hugo and Palmer chattering away, seemingly unaware of the miserable tension in the room. They shared news about the state of the rescued settlers; fair, if emaciated and sick from exposure to the elements. Clover was surprised to learn the two had just returned from their own quick trek to and from the nearest settlement. Support would be coming in from all over in the next few days. The room flooded with light again as Garreth returned, messenger bag in hand.

Clover focused on keeping her voice steady. "You should find two bundles of caps in there. That's all that I owe them for the rescue." He unbuttoned the flap and looked inside. "I'll, uh, have to ask for an extension on what I owe you, Garreth. But, I'll find some work in the settlements as soon as I'm able." He continued to look down into the bag. "Is it... it's still in there, isn't it?" "It's there." He reached in and pulled out the first and then second bundle wrapped in handkerchiefs, handing them off to Hugo.

- Garreth - He'd been flexing his hand open and closed slowly, watching over the ferals left to wander mindlessly in the moat, when one of the newer ghouls walked up to him. "Irena is asking for you." Garreth grunted, and the man continued on, crossing the bridge that was now reinforced with twisted tree trunks and welded sheets of metal recycled from the junkyard vehicles. Their little settlement had expanded to the flat land that surrounded the moat. Each ghoul made it a point of pride to build a place of their own; homes that were a sad mimicry of the old world, suburban, ranch homes patched together much like the bridge. Simple workshops also dotted the space, and those bustled with activity as smoothskins from the New Settlements brought in old machinery and contraptions for the ghouls to refurbish. He turned his back to it and made his way to Irena's home. A handful of the original ghouls stayed with the inner circle of trailer homes left by the slavers. Only Garreth's home, the one in which Clover had convalesced, remained unchanged. Irena's home had been expanded beyond the trailer to make room for a fully functional kitchen, storage room, and, absurdly to Garreth, a sitting room complete with curtains, a rug, and cushioned seating she'd bartered with the smoothskins to bring in. She wasn't waiting for him there, however. He found her in her bedroom, sitting at her also bartered for antique desk. A cracked, portrait mirror remained propped against the wall so their eyes could meet in its reflection. "There you are," she said without turning around. He leaned against the doorway of the tiny room as she continued to write in her ledger. "Did you call me here to supervise or...." "Sorry, had I interrupted something?" She purred. "No, I didn't think so. I was reviewing the numbers and noticed you haven't been contributing as much lately." Garreth shrugged. "My skills haven't been much called for as of late." "I want you to get with Raine and learn those turrets inside and out. Raiders have been on the rise and the settlers are keen on keeping their defenses in good repair." "Which one is Raine, again?" "He's the one I sent to get you." "Ah, your new pet." Irena stopped writing and looked up at him through the mirror again. "And I'll thank you to stop moping around out there. It's setting a poor example for the others." She returned to her numbers and Garreth was left facing his own reflection in the mirror. The ruptures in his skin were no longer raw. The exposed tissue had grayed and toughened while the rest of his skin had taken on a greenish undertone. The radiation healing had been slow going but his left eye had also rebuilt itself into a milky, white marble. He turned away. He couldn't understand how Irena could stand looking at it. She continued speaking in her breathy whispers, almost to herself. "And what is it this time? What about our thriving, little community has you so irritable? Is it the ferals again?" "I'm not happy about keeping them down there." "We've discussed this, Garreth. They didn't have a chance to make their end-of-life wishes known. We all voted and agreed the humane thing to do is not interfere. Let them live out their lives as safely as we can keep them. Your wishes for yourself have been noted. You don't have to worry. But that's not all that is bothering you is it?" "We're drawing too much attention to ourselves. It's only a matter of time before these raiders head our way. You know we won't get any support from the settlements." "We are only as safe as we are useful to these people. That is why I need you working on those turrets." "They're happy enough to use us for our old-world know-how, but I don't see any invitations for us to join them. We're too far away, too separated." "Oh...." She cooed. "This is about the girl, isn't it?" "Irena, you need to take this seriously. It may not be raiders. It may be the settlers themselves who get jealous of our success." "What's it been? A year? Since she last visited?" Garreth took a breath. "I'm

talking about being sitting ducks out here. About creating an 'us' versus 'them.' We don't want to be another Necropolis." "Don't be so dramatic. Word of the new ghoulish settlement is spreading, yes. Why, we're bringing in new blood every day. Hard workers the settlements are fool enough to send our way. We have defenses, we're building them for everyone else, for God's sake. Worse comes to worse, and we get overrun, we can force any ne'er-do-wells into the ravines. We'll make friends of them, one way or another." "You can't be serious." It was an old conversation, but this was the first time she'd so flippantly talked about forcing others into ghoulishification. They were interrupted by the front door creaking open and footsteps. It was Raine, again. "There are some smoothskins here to see Garreth." Garreth nodded. "I'll go." He was glad for the interruption and stepped around the other ghoulish to leave. "Garreth," Irena called out in her whisper and he stopped. "I was only kidding. You know that." He turned and left. Outside and across the bridge stood Hugo and his crew. The grizzled man was decked out in the usual leather armor and bandolier and was surprisingly clean-shaven with a close-cropped haircut. Palmer still looked out of place in leather armor with his bookish, if scruffy profile. Zeke towered over the group with some fresh military fatigues under a new set of metal-plated armor. His missile launcher was still strapped prominently to his back. Astrid stood scowling next to him, but something about her seemed softer, less severe despite her demeanor. Hugo smiled tightly at Garreth as he crossed the bridge. "Just the man I wanted to see." He reached out a hand. Garreth eyed it before accepting the brief handshake. "What brings you?" "Got somethin' to discuss. Is there someplace private?" Garreth led them back across the bridge to his trailer. "How's the missus? You think she's still peeved at us?" Hugo asked. "Taking all the credit for rescuing the settlers didn't endear you to Irena, no. She thinks we ghouls could have used a little of that goodwill to set up better relations with the New Settlements in the beginning." "Lookin' around, y'all seem to be pretty popular." Palmer gawked openly at their surroundings as they walked. "I can't believe how much this place has grown." "It's been a while since you four were last here," Garreth said. "Word of a new ghoulish town has spread, and folks have been eager to gather with others like themselves." "Y'all really callin' it Ghoulstown? I assumed that was just shorthand by the others." "No, Irena is hell-bent on 'rebranding' this place to Gray Haven. 'Take control of the narrative.' Don't let her hear you calling it Ghoulstown if you want to get on her good side." Astrid hesitated when they got to Garreth's door, looking sickly. "I don't know if I can go in. The air out here is barely breathable with so much rot around. I don't know if I can stand a closed space." Garreth let the words pass. The stink of ghouls wasn't news to him. "Do what you like. I have herbs drying inside." He shrugged. "It may help." The single-room trailer still had its windows boarded, but the clutter and debris had been cleared out. Only a metal crate sat to one side of the room with a few chairs around it and an unlit kerosene lantern on top. At the far end remained the mattress with a rack of various roots, fibers, and flowers hanging above it. They leached all their scents into the air like potpourri as they dried. The men all entered and turned to watch Astrid's reaction. She stood cautiously a few feet in before covering her nose and mouth. "It's worse!" She managed to grunt before running outside again. Zeke grinned. "I should look after her." He closed the door after him and the room fell into darkness. It hit Garreth as he lit the kerosene lantern. "She's pregnant." Hugo chuckled. "Was bound to happen sometime with those two." "She shouldn't be here in her state." Hugo eased himself onto one of the chairs while Palmer remained standing by the door.

"We won't be here long." Garreth sat across from him. "What's this all about?" "What else but our mutual friend? Clover." The man paused but Garreth was careful to not react. "We've spent some time in her old hometown recently. There are some very powerful folks still turnin' the place upside down over there." "Looking for her?" Hugo shrugged and reached for the pack of cigarettes behind his bandolier. "For somethin'." He held up the pack with a questioning look. Garreth gave him permission with a wave. "You sure its her? She never told you her true name." "No, but I'm clever enough to put two and two together." "No word on what that 'something' is?" The old man went through the motions of lighting his cigarette. "There are rumors but folks in the know are holdin' their cards close to their chest. Best I figured, it's some kind of old-world tech." "And they're able to tie it to Clover?" Hugo nodded. "They have a good idea. Some folks think she's already been kill't off. Far as I could tell, even those who think she's on the run don't have a clue as to where. Not yet anyway." "You think she's in danger." "They've been puttin' feelers farther and farther out. It's only a matter of time before the caravaners get pulled into it. Your old employer, for example. I believe Clover said her name was Mila? I found her still hangin' about. They will, too." Garreth got a sinking feeling. "Mila knows how to protect herself." "If you say so." He stared hard at Hugo. The man matched his gaze as he took a long drag of smoke. Garreth made sure to keep his tone steady. "What are you asking of me?" "Sheeit, boy. Don't get me wrong. I like the woman. What she lacks in forethought she more than makes up for in gumption and loyalty; but it gets her into trouble, and this is the kinda trouble there ain't no runnin' away from. The best way I can think to protect her is to take back and hand over the whozeewhazit. I guarantee these folks don't give a shit about her. They'll stop looking once they got it." "And if you happen to receive a little reward for its return, all the better. Am I right?" Hugo chuckled. "Well, you got me there. I'd be lyin' if I said my motives were purely altruistic. Don't change her circumstances, though." "So go ask her for it." "We tried! Just came back from, uh, what's it called now, Prosperity. She insisted on playin' dumb about it all. Even after I got a little...." "Aggressive." Palmer spoke up. Hugo turned his head back. "Pushy. And, well, yes, she may have kicked us out, which was unfortunate, but I'm a man of my word and I'll respect her wishes. Her house has become our home away from home, so to speak. We'll give her a few months to cool down and she'll forgive me as she's always done." Something in Garreth twinged with jealousy. "I hate to tell you, but she and I aren't on great terms at the moment, either." Hugo chuckled. "Oh, we know. I don't believe that'll be an issue. Did you know that every time we'd stop over she'd ask if we'd also stopped to visit Ghoultown?" Garreth said nothing. "I think if you were to pay her a visit, you'd be surprised by her hospitality, despite my advice." Palmer chimed in again. "That was the first time he got us all kicked out." "Just convince her to hand over whatever it is these guys are lookin' for. I know she's got it tucked away somewhere. It's for her own good."

They accompanied him on the two day walk up to Prosperity. The crew chatted amiably amongst themselves with only Hugo occasionally checking in on Garreth. He found himself glancing at Astrid occasionally with concern but her scowl when their eyes met told him she had no need for it. The road felt safer as they drew near with more traffic coming and going between the settlements. Garreth kept his hat pulled low to avoid the eyes of the strangers passing by. The hum of activity from Prosperity could be heard long before they could see it through the trees. The town had to be four times the size of Gray Haven if not more, and densely occupied. The shacks had taken on

more substance, much as they had in the ghou town. Unlike the ghouls, many buildings were being built with adobe walls. Garreth felt a pang of absurd nostalgia from his time spent farther west a century ago.

The cycle continues, he thought. We'll be dealing with tribals again in a couple of generations. The idea of interacting with the tribal grandchildren of Clover added a heavier bittersweetness to the nostalgia. A few people who passed by recognized him. Some were startled but nodded politely. Others stared hard. To be expected. He was acceptable if he stayed in his place. Now he was invading theirs. He promised himself he would say his piece as quickly as possible, then leave with enough time in the day to get some ground between him and this place before nightfall. They reached the town square with its open-air bar. A ring of vendor tents and carts now lined the outer edge with their goods and trinkets. Hugo turned to him. "We'll have to leave you here, I'm afraid. If she sees you show up with us in tow, it'll be all over for ya. Just head between those buildin's, she'll be two houses back." He pointed with the cigarette as he sat at the nearest table. "It'll be one of the older shacks with some plants hangin' from the porch coverin'." Garreth approached cautiously, uncertain of his reception after a year of no contact. It was a dilemma he had created, believing it was for her own good. Even after their conversation and Hugo had taken her to Prosperity, Clover insisted on returning about once a month, ostensibly to pay him an installment of what she owed. He'd dreaded her visits, as it was painfully clear to himself and others that they were the only thing he looked forward to. He realized he may have overcompensated in his endeavor to starve whatever she may have had to hold onto him. The house was as Hugo had described it. Slightly bigger than he'd expected to accommodate multiple rooms, but more haphazard in construction than the newer buildings he'd seen in the town. Some flowers and grasses were hanging in bundles from the small porch roof. She needed to spread them out more, give them room to breathe and dry out, but it was heartening to see her still putting into practice what she'd learned from him. Garreth knocked on the door, clearly one recovered from an old world building somewhere. As he waited it occurred to him that it was still early afternoon and she may not be home. He was weighing the options of returning to Hugo or waiting on the porch when the door suddenly opened. A bright and fresh-faced Clover greeted him with a polite smile, then stopped and looked at him curiously. She was still dressing in a layered, plaid shirt with jeans and sneakers, though clean and soft from regular wash. He'd never seen her when not exhausted from her radiation affliction, or from traveling, and the energy she exuded simply standing before him made him feel out of place. He'd been right to push her away. To make her come here. Her expression turned from curiosity to surprise, and he took a step back and struggled to find his words. "Garreth?" She said slowly. He nodded. "I... hope I'm not interrupting." He could feel her eyes as they searched about his face. Had he changed so much in a year he was unrecognizable now? She gasped and her face lit up. "Your eye grew back!"

He blinked. "Oh, well... yes." She took an excited step forward. "That's amazing! Does it work at all? Can you see anything?" "Not much, some light and shadow." "Garreth! That's incredible! Can you come in? It's not too dark in here is it?" She stepped back and he peered into the room behind her. It was the main room for activity and cooking, with a covered, metal barrel at the the center for a stove. The walls were lined with shelves and tables, and every surface had an unfinished project on it. Large, curtained windows dimmed the room but allowed enough light through to see everything. "It's fine." He followed her in as she apologized for the mess, explaining they were all little jobs she was doing for caps: the heaps of half-sewn fabric were to cover a few vendor stalls, devices mid-disassembly with wires hanging out would get her a few caps for their components, fibers being woven into rope were commissioned by the mayor for one of the communal farms,

piles of bullet casings being separated by shape and size to be sold to those who have the equipment to make ammo out of them again.

"I used to share this place with a few others, but they all paired up pretty quick and got their own homes built to start families. Now, what with Hugo being Hugo, the goodwill of Prosperity has started fadin' a bit not two years later, and there's talk of me takin' on more permanent roommates here instead of keepin' them open for the crew's visits." "Looks like you've made a place for yourself here. Made yourself useful to these people." It was meant to sound encouraging, but to Garreth's own ears, it echoed bitterly of his last conversation with Irena. Clover looked around, hugging her elbows. "It keeps me busy. No one thing brings in a lot of caps but every little bit helps. It can be a lot, though, all the folks around here. They've been real nice and all, but... I'm still not used to so many around at once, all wantin' somethin' from me. It gets overwhelmin'. Back where I came from, you didn't talk to nobody you didn't have to. There were some folks who grouped up but... none that were welcomin' to us. Anyway, I like these little jobs because I can hide away and do them on my own, you know?" "Sounds like a good problem to have."

She shrugged. "And how are things down at Ghoultown?" "Gray Haven." "Fuck! That's right. Don't tell Irena. She already hates me enough." "She doesn't hate you," he said reflexively. Clover shot him a look but said nothing. "Things are going well. More ghouls are showing up every week. Word has gotten around that we can fix a lot of old-world machinery which brings in the caps. Irena is thrilled." They were both standing awkwardly by the stove at the center of the room. "So," Clover started hesitantly. "Dare I ask why you finally chose to visit? I thought... you made it pretty clear you weren't interested in me comin' around anymore." "That's not. I said it wasn't in your best interest... I got a visit from Hugo and his crew." She sighed in disgust. "Ugh, I should have known. Called you in to do his dirty work, huh?" She walked over to a bench that was tucked up to the disassembly table. She plopped down facing him, arms still crossed. "Well, what did he tell you?" "That the people you ran from are still looking for you, and that you have what it is they're looking for. What they killed your husband for." "Did he tell you he's only after the bounty on it?" "No, but I surmised it. It wouldn't just be a bounty on whatever the thing is, you realize. I guarantee there's a price on your head, too." She was quiet for a moment. "Regardless. I don't got what he's after. I never did." Garreth shifted his stance, considering his next move. "I believe... when you first ran, and got yourself a spot on Mila's caravan, you honestly had no idea why you were running. All you knew was that your husband had been killed, and you could be next." He paused, and she waited. "Because if you had known anything, you would not have asked me to hand off the caps from your bag to Hugo. Not with those tech schematics poking through the seam of the inner lining." He watched this information sink into Clover and she gave a small nod. "That damn linin' pullin' apart. I'd wondered when that had started." She leaned forward and spoke carefully. "Let's say I do know what you're talkin' about. I would still have no idea what it is. I'm not smart enough, nor anyone involved here, I'd imagine. If anyone were to get a hold of it that could understand it, it could mean something very good or very bad for everyone out here in the wastes, 'pending on who that was. Do you see what I'm sayin'?" Garreth said nothing. "FUCK those people. They killed the only person I had in the world, they are not worthy and they would only use it to fuck over everyone else. They do NOT get to have it, no matter the bounty, or the safety it would buy me." "How far do you think you can trust Hugo to sit on this?" "He's got his callous moments, Garreth, but I believe overall... he's not a bad person. More importantly, he's not stupid. Hugo wouldn't pull anythin' in Prosperity, and I have to believe he wouldn't do anythin' to put me in danger." Garreth struggled. "Even good people can change with the slightest pressure on the right weakness." "When Hugo came to you about askin' me for the-the tech, did you tell him you'd already seen it?" "No." "Why?" "To give

you the chance to come clean.” “But I haven’t done anythin’ wrong. I think you know givin’ it back to them ain’t the right thing to do; but you also don’t like me bein’ in danger, so if it were MY decision to hand it over, all the better, right?” Garreth opened his mouth to defend himself but Clover continued. “If I were to give it to anyone, it would be to the Followers of the Apocalypse.” “The Followers?” “They came through a few months back? Heard about the New Settlements and sent a few emissaries to advise on the farmin’ and medical trainin’ and such. Of all the groups I’ve seen come through, they seem like good people. Did they not stop by Ghou-ray Haven?” “They tried. Irena and the other ghouls weren’t very welcoming. Sentiment was that we had enough experience on our own and didn’t need help from smoothskins less than a quarter our own age. So, are you saying they have it?” “No. They moved on before I could decide. You know.” She looked down at her feet. “I almost asked about joinin’ them?”

The idea of Clover disappearing without a word shook Garreth. He had assumed she’d always be in Prosperity. What had he expected when he pushed her away? He should be happy she’d found people who resonated with her. Why should it hurt so much to imagine her farther away if he was going to keep his distance regardless? So much for the tribal grandkids. “Why didn’t you? Join them, I mean.” Was all he allowed himself to ask. She looked up at him for a long moment. “I just... wasn’t ready to leave, I guess. Chickened out. I thought about the Brotherhood of Steel, too; but assumin’ I could even find them, they’d just take the schematics and hide them away. And what good would that do?” They stood for another awkward moment. Garreth didn’t know what to say. He was still reeling from the knowledge that she could choose to leave, that she would choose to leave him behind. Was this how he made her feel? Clover spoke up again. “You’ve worked with them? The Followers?” He shrugged. “I have run into them on occasion.” “But you never joined them.” Garreth thought about it. “They have their flaws. The group is made up of people, after all. What they’re trying to do, though, it all seems like so much work destined to fail. To remind everyone of the perils of war and hate, how it got us to this mess. It’s honorable, I’ll give them that, to teach what they know to keep folks going out here. I suppose I chickened out as well. You could still find them,” he continued. “When you’re ready. They’ve spread out from the West Coast. Simply head in that direction. You’re sure to run into them eventually.” She nodded a little somberly. “That’s what they said, too.” There was another quiet moment before she said, “Can I show you something? It’s just over the hill from here. One of the Followers checked it out with me.” “What about Hugo?” “He can wait.” She said snidely. She led him out of the house and he followed her through the winding, narrow path between the homes. Garreth would duck and hide his face behind the brim of his hat every time they passed by a fellow settler. Once they reached the edge of the homes, the path stretched further into the crop of stunted trees that blanketed the hill in front of them. It veered off around the base of the hill but Clover led him off the path through the trees. “Don’t worry, we’re just takin’ a shortcut.” He could start to see it when they reached the top of the hill. It was an old-world house, two stories, built of brick and mortar. The roof sagged and caved into gaping holes in several areas. The upstairs windows were choked with dust but mostly intact. As they drew closer, he could see the ground-floor windows were all destroyed, and faded hints of graffiti covered the walls.

“This place was abandoned even before the bombs.” He said. Clover looked at him, grinning. “There’s been no asphalt we could find leadin’ to it. Must’ve always been a dirt road. Whoever built this place did it with solitude in mind.” The land flattened out for an acre in every direction, and Garreth grew cautious as they grew closer. Clover noticed. “Don’t worry, this whole area’s been checked out. No one’s in there. Some folks tried to gut it for material, but decided it wasn’t worth it.” She led him around to the front of the house. The empty, darkened windows and missing door

gaped sadly at them. He looked to her questioningly. "Come on," she said with a grin. Inside was emptiness. What was left of the inner walls had shreds of grayed wallpaper clinging to them. The room that had been the kitchen still had a few cabinets standing, but the sink and any appliances had long been removed. The stairs leading up to the second story were mostly demolished, but daylight came streaming through it from a giant hole in the collapsed roof. "One of the Followers said he was studying engineering. He said this house had good bones, and could probably be fixed up pretty easily with a little help." "So, what are your plans for this place?" Garreth asked. "Well." She hugged herself again, leaning against the door frame of the kitchen. "Like I said, living in the center of Prosperity, it's been a lot to deal with all at once. I figured, if I could come out here, I could get a little space to breathe. And maybe," she faltered, "you wouldn't mind comin' to visit me sometimes. You know, away from the 'smoothskins'." "It's dangerous to be alone this far out from the protection of the settlement." "I wouldn't be alone when you visit, and when I allow Hugo to visit again with his people. I could get some animals." "The other settlers may grow jealous of you havin' this place all to yourself." Clover shook her head. "No one wants this place. They've all become weirdly superstitious out here. It's seen as bad luck to live in an old-world house. It's contrary to the spirit of the New Settlements." She looked directly at him. "What else you got?" "What?" "Give me more reasons this is a bad idea. All the things to avoid sayin' you don't wanna be around me." "Clover-" Her words suddenly spilled out of her. "I know to an old-world ghoul like you, I'm just some stupid kid, but I am not a child. I have, in fact, been a full-blown adult for a long while now. I know my mind. I know how I feel about things, and you. I was pretty messed up when we met, and you were just protectin' yourself as I dealt with it. I still saw how miserable you were every time I came back to Ghoultown to pay you the caps I owed. I thought at first that it was me, but I think now you're just miserable, and weirdly, that's what you want to be. I DON'T understand it. And I don't know how to prove to you that I'm not tryin' to use you to replace Rowan. I want you around because I want YOU around. I've missed you. I think you've missed me, too. So, stop givin' bullshit reasons to avoid me. You don't want to be around, you tell me that." She paused for a moment, as if to give Garreth a chance to respond, but then continued. "I figure you and I can be happy here, or we can find the Followers of the Apocalypse together, or, or I can go find them on my own and hope to find a kinship with them, like I've felt with you. I just know I don't wanna be on my own anymore. I feel choked to death by people in Prosperity, but I'm still alone." Garreth was stunned by the torrent that washed over him and the unexpected insight left him without words of his own. He realized had been viewing her as a stupid kid. Someone who couldn't be trusted to make decisions for herself. Not knowing what else to do, he lifted his right hand and held it out in front of him. As they watched, the muscles gave a slight ripple and his wrist involuntarily wrenched at an odd angle. Clover looked up and there was confusion in her eyes. Garreth continued to hold out his arm. "When I'm mindful of it, I can control it; but this is not something that will go away. I'm not going to die from this. I'm going to lose my mind. I could degrade slowly, in which case you would have to decide how far is too far to risk before I turn feral. Or... I could turn without warning, and I can't... I couldn't...." Clover took his hand in both of hers. "Is that all?" She said gently. "I'll be putting you in danger." "We can reinforce the doors for me to hide behind, get some guns tucked around so they're always at hand." "You shouldn't have to take on this kind of responsibility." He protested. "You should head West. You should find the Followers." "Is that what you really want? You wouldn't want to come with me?" She suggested. Garreth saw his life stretch out before him, Clover at his side, working as one of the Followers. Teaching, training, pushing, arguing with people to get them to see the truth of this existence. To endlessly work to change it. To continue on, even as Clover and the other Followers fell to time. To endure that hope and risk losing it again. It was all

too bright, too powerful. Another atom bomb, now lodged in his ribcage, waiting to be triggered. "No." He said. "You really want me to leave you here?" She asked.

He should let her go. She would safely disappear to the West Coast, far away from the people who'd made her a widow. Garreth's hand was still clutched in Clover's. Her grip was tight; whether to help him control the spasms, to ensure he could feel it through his deadened nerves, or because she was clinging to him like buoy in a storm, he couldn't tell. He met her eyes as she waited for his answer. He saw a man reflected in those eyes. "No." He admitted. "I don't."

- Hugo - They were on their final leg of the journey back to Prosperity, and Hugo was feeling every step of it. They'd been away for a few months, this time on an extended and successful bounty retrieval. He thought Zeke staying home with the toddler would cause Hugo to miss the extra muscle and firepower, but he needn't have worried with Astrid picking up the slack. Surprisingly, Hugo hadn't realized how often he relied on Zeke's hair-brained ideas to get them out of situations. They'd have to chat about that when they returned. Still, it would be several more days before their family reunion farther down the road. For now, Hugo, Astrid, and Palmer were all looking forward to a nice long refresh at Clover and Garreth's. Hugo had been disappointed about the lack of cooperation from the two regarding the assumed old-world tech he knew she had. Well, hell, maybe she didn't. After months of stonewalling and cold shoulders from them, Hugo knew when to cut his losses. The reward was no guarantee anyway. Likely, he would have had to negotiate hard simply to avoid getting taken out in the process of a handover.

It didn't stop him from trying to talk sense into the woman when he learned the ghoul would have a permanent room in the new house once it was finished getting fixed up. "Think of your standing with the others in Prosperity," he'd said. "Ghoul town hasn't been makin' friends as of late with their high fees and standoffish behavior. Now you're gonna separate yourself from them to live with one?" "I'm movin' out to the house regardless, with him or alone, it don't matter." "That's not how they'll see it." "Well, fuck'em." She'd shrugged. "Think of the smell, woman! You want the smell of rottin' meat permeatin' the house?" "He doesn't smell like that." She'd said incredulously. "Darlin', everyone knows a ghoul smells like death. They can't help it." "He doesn't smell like death anymore." She'd insisted. "Ever since the rescue. It changed him. Have you seen his new eye? Well, he doesn't smell like death anymore. He... he's like what comes after death. Like the dirt when you dig down deep where the water still holds, and the grubs still live." "So, like a grave." Hugo had joked. "If you want to get all poetic about it." She'd grinned. "I think that happens to a lot of ghouls, and no one gets close enough to notice. So don't you worry your pretty, little head about anyone stinkin' up your free lodgin's when you come to town." "That's not what I-" But she was laughing too hard for his argument to hold. In a last-ditch effort, he'd sought out Garreth to see if he could be talked into some sense. "You're gonna alienate her from her people." Garreth had nodded, stoic as always. "We discussed that at length. She didn't come to this decision blind, you know. I tried to argue, myself. How life with me around would make things harder for her with the other smoothskins." He'd looked away, gripping his arm in a way Hugo interpreted as controlled frustration. "I can't give her a child. She'll have no family to grow old with as long as she's with me. All she'll have is the company of this grumpy, sad, old man." "You could choose to stay away," Hugo had offered. "Choose a better life for her." The ghoul squinted at him. "No way Clover lets anyone make decisions for her. I thought you had some sense." He

continued on more seriously. "I don't believe I'm long for this world, anyhow. Another topic we sorted out. Once I'm gone, she'll be free to pursue the Followers. 'Til then, she's content to spend what time I have left here with me. Insists on it even." It was clear to Hugo, the ghoul was not unhappy about it all. Fine. He'd said his piece. When Clover was ready to forgive him again, he'd promised to keep his opinions to himself. Approaching Prosperity, Hugo noted the junk, perimeter barriers that had previously been thrown up had finally been replaced with high adobe walls. Turrets chugged along to either side of the gateway. It was an unfortunate sign of the increasing paranoia about the presence of raiders. Walking through the town, there was a strange anxiety in the air. Folks still joked and laughed in the town square with its tent pole bar and ring of market stalls, but it was a little too loud. It rang as forced in Hugo's ears. He glanced back at his companions and they both seemed to feel it as well. He was happy to leave it all behind as they passed through the back gate and followed the path that wound around the hill. He'd breathe a sigh of relief when the house was in sight. It wasn't long before they could hear the delightful sound of the featherless chickens clucking away like a babbling brook. As they approached the first line of wooden fencing, the small family of brahmin approached. The mama Clover purchased from the communal farm during Hugo's last visit had dropped her calf, and they both bellowed at the crew as they walked by. Astrid held out a hand and both pairs of heads jostled for attention from her. She laughed at their antics but continued on with Hugo and Palmer.

They were then greeted by the mongrel Clover had insisted on rescuing. The poor pup with its raw, hairless skin and vicious-looking face had been shunned by the settlers after a failed raider attack saw it abandoned by those who managed to retreat. It crawled up to Hugo submissively and whimpered until it was on its back at his feet begging for belly rubs, which he knelt to oblige. Well, this was new. Usually, the pup shied away from anyone other than Clover and Garreth. "What's goin' on, pup? You ain't gettin' enough attention at home?" Palmer pulled out his pistol. "Something ain't right, boss." His eyes were trained on the open doorway of the brick home only 50 feet or so away now. Astrid heaved the minigun around to hold in front of her. "Is that blood?" Hugo stood. The door frame did indeed have a spray of blood on it. On the ground was a crumpled figure. "Oh, fuck me." He pulled the rifle off his back and they cautiously stepped forward. The mongrel jumped up and crept behind them, still whimpering. Palmer whispered, "Do you think he turned?" "Likely," Hugo replied. He hoped against hope the person in the doorway would somehow not be Clover. The pool of blood around the body was dark and extensive, but it was thankfully, a man. Palmer bent down to check him. When he was rolled over, his jacket fell open to reveal raider leathers. "He's been dead about a day." He whispered. "And he's been shot. I'm seeing only holes, no tears or teeth marks." Hugo looked around. "The settlers had to have heard it. Did no one come to check on them?" They stepped over the body into the front area Clover had set up to be the dining room. The mongrel continued whimpering from the front door but refused to come in. There was another spray of blood along the wall next to the table and they focused on that until they found another body. Astrid was the first to recognize it. "Oh no." It was Clover. She lay on her back, her eyes open, and blood staining her mouth and throat. Many dots of blood seeped through the clothing that covered her torso. Palmer knelt again. "Buckshot." He said with a strained voice. "She... bled into her lungs, I think." "How long ago," Hugo asked. Palmer gently lifted one of her hands. "About a day, again." "Secure the area."

They separated and systematically checked through each room on the ground floor. Astrid found the next raider. "Boss? You'll want to take a look at this." Hugo and Palmer both arrived to find a corpse torn apart. Undeniable bite marks around missing chunks of flesh, and an arm ripped from socket. "Palmer," Hugo began. "This couldn't have been the mongrel, could it?" "I don't think so, boss." They found one other body slumped in a corner of the kitchen. This one eviscerated from throat to groin. Palmer looked around nervously. "I think we may still have a feral Garreth to worry about." Hugo nodded. "This very well coulda broken him. Proceed with caution. If we have to take him down, we will. I'm not losing any sleep over the death of these assholes, though." The crew continued their search. Hugo noted the steel plating on either side of all the doors and doorframes. Heavy, iron-hinged door jams were attached to either side to allow Clover a way to bar Garreth on the other side, regardless of which side it was. The pair had taken such precautions against Garreth's strength, only to be taken down by regular men. Suddenly, a weak voice called out from upstairs. It was male, and not one Hugo recognized. It was immediately followed by horrendous, methodical pounding. "Hey! Anybody! I... I need help!"

THUD. The three converged silently at the bottom of the refurbished staircase. Hugo led the way, all weapons trained up, ready for an ambush. The pounding continued, and Hugo thought he could hear muffled growling behind it. "I got it... I got it trapped behind this door. I lost a lot of blood." The voice continued lethargically. THUD. The hallway stretched ahead of the stairs, ending with a large, naked window that let the afternoon light stream in. Hugo was the first to make eye contact with the man. He was young and stringy, perhaps barely out of his teens. He was also soaked from the neck down in his own blood. "Hey! Please-please help me! We were attacked... by a ghoul." THUD. The metal plating of the door he slumped against was bowed in the center. Hugo continued to hold his rifle on the young man as his crew fanned out at the top of the stairs and checked the other two rooms. "I got'm. Shod it in the fuckin' face." The young man laughed feebly. "Blinded it. Tricked it into th' bathroom. Y'gotta send for help."

THUD. "Who shot the woman?" Hugo asked. "Wh-what?" THUD. "Who. Shot. Our. Friend." Hugo asked again. Any pretense of pleading dropped from the man's face, replaced by a wry grimace. "Fuck." THUD. Standing only a few feet away now, Hugo assessed the man's injuries. A claw mark gouged from his collar bone down into his chest, and one arm laid across his lap, limply; a deep set of teeth marks showing Garreth had tried to bite a chunk out of him but was interrupted.

Palmer and Astrid returned to the central hallway and fell in behind him.

"Tell me what happened here," Hugo said.

"Fuck, man. We heard this bitch lived out here alone. We-"

THUD. "Didn't think the rumors about a pet ghoul were true." He continued. "Were you sent here?" Hugo asked. "Were you sent here to find her?" The man loosely wobbled his head in a no. "Man, we weren't gonna hurt her. Juss gonna have a little fun n' be on our way. Then she had to get all shooky with the shotgun."

THUD. "Couldn't let that go. Then this fuggin' feral ghoul come outta... nowhere." The young man was fading. His blood loss was finally catching up with him. "C'mon, man. Y'can' lemme die like this. From a fuggin' ghoul?" Hugo stood there a long moment. Listening to the methodical thumping that jolted the door behind the dying raider. Astrid stepped closer to Hugo. "What do we do?" "Watch him. I'll be right back." "No, hey...

c'mon, man..." The young man whined. Hugo went downstairs and made his way to Clover's body. Slinging the rifle over his back, he knelt and gently scooped her up. He returned up the stairs with her cradled against him and discovered the young raider had died in his absence, his body fully slumped over. "I want y'all to move him away from the door." Astrid was hesitant. "You're not gonna do what I think you're gonna do." "Just do it." They obliged and Palmer waited by the still thudding door. Hugo called out. "Garreth! It's me, Hugo!"

THUD.

"They're all dead!" He continued. "I'm here with Clover! We're gonna unjam the door! I... I'm gonna trust you haven't gone feral. You come out and I give you my word you'll be unharmed." There was one final THUD, and then silence. Hugo looked between his crew before he nodded to Palmer. Astrid spoke up nervously, her heavy minigun at the ready. "You sure about this, boss?" "We owe it to her to give him a chance." With another nod from Hugo, Palmer released the door jam and hustled to a spot along the wall close by. They waited for what seemed like ages before they heard the first creak of the door opening. It pulled inward, and a deep, ragged breath could be heard coming from the shadowed doorway. The afternoon sunlight constricted Hugo's vision and Garreth was silhouetted as he slowly limped out. It was the floodlight at the slaver camp all over again. The ghoul appeared exhausted as he stood, with muscle twitches that rippled up his arm and shoulder. He seemed to be taking in the trio. Hugo lifted Clover slightly, as an offering or an apology, he wasn't sure. Garreth took notice and stepped forward. Astrid and Palmer both adjusted their stances in preparation. As the ghoul moved closer, and away from the window, Hugo took note that he was drenched in blood. Much of it had dried to a sticky brown. A spray of buckshot holes freckled the ghoul's face and neck, and while his good eye was swollen and stained, he was still able to see. Garreth's breathing remained harsh and guttural as he approached Hugo. He stopped just within arm's reach, the ghoul's eye locked on the dead woman. He haltingly reached to take her from Hugo. The man didn't resist and held still as he was relieved of his burden. Garreth's full attention remained on Clover's face as he hugged her to him and stepped back. He sank to his knees before them, and Hugo could feel his crew relax. No one knew what to do next. Garreth rested Clover across his lap and was in the process of moving strands of hair from her face. "Who were they?" The ghoul asked. Hugo answered. "We don't know." "Were they after the tech?" "No. They were nobodies. Just lookin' to make trouble." Something in Garreth collapsed and he folded over her, his head buried in the crook of her neck. He was silent except for the ragged breathing, and his entire body shivered. "Shoot me." Hugo looked to his crew to confirm they'd heard it, too. "I won't do that." Hugo had been prepared to kill a feral ghoul, not this. Garreth lifted his head to look down on Clover again. "I don't want this world that kills the goodness in it." "I don't blame you, but I ain't no murderer." "This is all my fault." Hugo kneeled to meet Garreth's eyes. "I told you, they weren't here for no old-world tech. It was just wrong place, wrong time." "Collateral damage." The ghoul croaked. Hugo wasn't sure what Garreth meant, but it seemed to put a stop to the death wishing, so he let it go.

Hugo coordinated with his little crew so that he and Astrid removed the raider bodies far from the house to be turned in for potential bounties later. They then washed away the blood as best they could. It occurred to Astrid that the animals had not been fed in the last day or so and set about taking care of their needs. Meanwhile, Palmer treated Garreth's already healing wounds before

helping him prepare Clover's body for burial. When Garreth was ready, he led them all to a small dirt hill at the far corner of the fenced land. He pulled a half-hidden cover from the dirt to reveal an empty gravesite. "I dug this believing it would be for me, to reduce my burden on her after I was gone." They all took a corner of the sheet Clover had been laid out on to lower her down. All of the dried herbs and flowers they'd had hanging in the kitchen were tucked around her.

Garreth broke the silence. "I thought... my penance in this hell had finally come to an end, but I only brought it on her." "Penance?" Hugo asked. "The world warred and conspired to destroy itself and we all did nothing. When the bombs dropped, I thought, finally, this is how it ends, this is what we deserve. But it didn't end, and we continued on as ghouls, and I thought, this is it... this is what we deserve. Watching humanity, the grandchildren of our grandchildren suffer and victimize each other." Something snapped in Hugo. "And you thought just living through hell with us was penance enough?" "Fuck penance! You should have sought atonement. How many more Clovers have to die out in the wastes before you set things right?" Garreth continued to stare down at Clover. "What could I do?" "What have you tried?" Hugo countered. Palmer put a hand on Hugo's shoulder. "Boss, that's enough." "Yeah," Astrid added. "Now's not the time... Hugo!" That snapped Hugo out of it. He looked around with a flush of frustration and embarrassment.

Astrid, and Palmer each said a few words, but no one could remember what they were when they looked back on it. They all took turns shoveling dirt over Clover until the grave was a soft mound. The mongrel paced and sniffed around the edge of the grave, whimpering. A post was pounded into the earth. A short plank with a clover carved into it was nailed at the top, and Clover's messenger bag slung over it. It was well into the night when they'd finished and everyone was exhausted. At Hugo's suggestion, they all returned to the house to sleep, with the promise that he and his crew would take the raiders to the settlement and try to assess what was to be done next. Garreth stayed out at the grave a good while longer, staring at the hanging bag, and whoever stood watch through the night kept an eye on him until he eventually came in on his own. Hugo had been on final watch but was awoken by Palmer just before dawn. He was getting too old for this kind of strain, he thought. "Garreth's gone." Palmer pointed to a blue, torn corner of a schematics page on the dining room table. Scrawled on it, "Please find a home for the animals." Hugo stormed out the front door in disbelief as if he'd catch the ghoul in the act of leaving. The three spread out and searched the grounds in case the ghoul had decided to harm himself on the premises. Hugo made his way directly to Clover's grave. No Garreth, but her messenger bag was missing. Palmer and Astrid met up with him to confirm no Garreth. "The mongrel is also missing," Palmer noted. "Then there's a chance he's still out there," Astrid said. "And he's just runnin' away." Hugo looked out to the twisted, stunted trees that surrounded the house, and the sky beyond it to the West, still deep in twilight that early morning. He examined the corner of the blue schematics paper in his hand, and reached for the crumpled old-world pack of cigarettes hiding behind his bandolier. "Could be."

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