

Part 1: Sunday

If you asked anybody who he was, they probably wouldn't be able to give you his name. Truth be told, he didn't go by his name much anymore, since he couldn't stand the name "Vernon". Most people knew him as that gguy with the scared mouth. He had a scar that ran an inch long aligned with his lip on his right cheek, which made him look like he had an extra-long, un-centered mouth. With a mark like that, he didn't really need a name to identify himself.

And with that scar came a reputation that defined him better than any name could. Ever since that day four years ago when he appeared out of nowhere and slaughtered a group of six raiders that had been harassing a worn-out farming town. He got his scar in that fight, barely dodging one raider's wide knife swing aimed at slicing off his face. Ever since that day, he had been a bit of a legend.

He'd wander from town to town, and if there was trouble, he'd settle it. He never asked for a reward, and he never turned anyone down who needed help. The worst he'd do would be to ask for some food and maybe a place to sleep for the night. But he never stayed in one place for long. There were seven towns (though some shanty towns came and went) along the Great Trade Ring, and he'd visit each one at least once a month, usually. He kept moving back and forth between the towns, randomly going from one to the next.

He was fairly good at his job. At almost 6'2", he definitely had the intimidation factor on his side. If that didn't work, he could crush bricks with his bare hands and had good aim with a gun. His arms and chest were still scared, though. He wasn't perfect, and neither was his armor. But once he got into a rage, he was practically unstoppable. It was like a deer, painted red, fighting with a bull.

Nobody questioned why he helped others, mostly because they were too busy enjoying his help. The few that bothered asking never got a response. Vernon started doing what he did because, at the time, somebody needed to and nobody else was stepping up to the plate. And he kept on going with it to this day.

This day was much like any other day - it was hot outside. There hadn't been many clouds around since the bombs, or large bodies of water besides the ocean, so the heat kept rising. It was unpleasant. It didn't help much that Vernon was covered from the neck down in cow skin.

The only thing that changed for Vernon on a frequent basis was where he was waking up. Not only would he travel from town to town, he'd travel from house to house. Using inns and sleeping in abandoned houses were last ditch efforts for when nobody was willing to give him shelter. Usually he had to go on a "mini quest", as he tended to call them, in order to get a free place to crash for the night. As he had just entered town the previous day - or the previous night, rather, as the sun had already set - he was forced to rent an inn for the night. His budget was tight - only the villains become rich - but it was enough to avoid sleeping outside on the dirt.

Another thing that had changed recently was Vernon's dreams. Up until a week or so ago, they had been fairly non-discript. Occasionally he would give birth to a deathclaw, or ride a nuclear shockwave with a surf board, but these were very rare occurrences. His dreams lately had been unsettling, to say the least. To say more, he had been surrounded by corpses and covered in blood, and there was an evil laugh in the background. Though he would never find the one laughing, Vernon knew that man was responsible for all of the deaths. Just looking at what had happened to the corpses, he'd instantly see how they had died, in all the gruesome detail. He hadn't slept much since those dreams, no, nightmares started. He didn't know what to make of them either.

Since he couldn't figure his dreams out easily, Vernon chose to ignore them. They were probably meaningless anyways. More importantly, they wouldn't help him keep himself fed. With that, he set out to find a place willing to haggle over jerky.

Twenty coins. That was the lowest Vernon could get the price of his breakfast down to. Jerky rarely cost more than seven, and there was usually a lot more of it. Something was up. Most likely his quest for the day.

"Hey longmouth!" somebody shouted. Longmouth was one of his more common nicknames he had. While he wasn't in love with the name, it still beat Vernon. Turning around, he saw that the voice belonged to Alex Coyne, the closest thing Harpel had to a leader. Even if it was part of the Great Trade Ring, the town was still fairly small, so there wasn't much call for a formal government. They just needed someone to settle disputes over who's brahmin was grazing in the wrong spot, and Alex could handle that.

Vernon sat down on what appeared to be a halfway comfortable chair facing the fire. There was always a fire at the center of the town (or at least a firepit), and some salvaged chairs and couches. It made for a good place to talk, to meet, or to just eat your breakfast. Alex walked up and sat down next to him. There wasn't anybody at the fire besides them, since it was still early in the morning.

"Glad I caught you. I was afraid you were going to head out today."

"I was planning on it. What do you need?" Alex had a tendency to get off track easily. The direct approach was usually narrow enough for him to stay focused on the conversation at hand.

"Well, we got a problem. With our brahmin."

"What type of problem?"

"Somebody keeps taking them. We've lost four brahmin in the past week. I don't think we can afford to lose too many more. Hell, a lot of people are getting ready to jump ship." Alex was fond of Harpel, probably more so than any other resident, which is why he was the closest thing to a leader. He'd do just about anything to keep the town together. "Do you have any idea how much Larry's going to start charging for food? I'm just glad there's so many geckos around, for once at - "

"So you want me to find out who's taking the brahmin?" Vernon interrupted, not interested in the local gecko population.

"Nah, I got a pretty good idea who's taking them. Some punk wandered into town about a day before the first brahmin was stolen. He was staying at that collapsed building at the edge of town, but when I went to ask him about the brahmin he was gone. I need you to catch him."

Vernon tore off a strip of jerky and chewed it for a few seconds, thinking. "When was the last time a brahmin was stolen?"

"Um, day before yesterday. Whoever's doing this has been hitting our herds every other day. Not too smart if you ask me. That's why I think it was that punk, he didn't look too smart. All muscle, no brains. If you ask me - "

"How much muscle?"

"He looked pretty strong. Could probably drag off a brahmin if it was acting stubborn."

"Who's he been stealing from? Anyone in particular?"

"Just Larry. It's probably just that Larry keeps his herd the furthest out. I keep telling him he shouldn't keep them on the edges of town, but does he listen?"

"Can you take me to his herd?" Vernon had a rough plan formed out in his head. Nothing much more complicated than jumping the punk when he wasn't looking, but it would probably be enough.

"Yeah, sure. I can do that. C'mon, let's go." Alex got up and walked off. Vernon put the rest of his jerky back in its bag and followed him.

It was dusk that evening. Vernon had been huddled inside Larry's herd of about ten brahmin, relying on a brahmin-skin blanket to keep his cover. If Larry's son was doing his job, he would be nearby, watching the herd. Of course, Larry was about the only one who didn't know how lazy his son really was.

Ten brahmin was a fairly high number for a small town like Harpel - the punk probably thought he could sneak out a few brahmin without anybody noticing. A good plan, except that he had been doing it a bit too long; there were originally 14 brahmin. Vernon had been waiting there for almost two hours.

With all this time, and nothing to do during it, Vernon's mind had been drifting. He found himself thinking about his dreams again, despite his inability to figure out what they meant, if anything. Somehow, the dreams seemed familiar. It could have just been that he had been having the recurring dream for so long now. Of course, the dreams were similar to that one time years ago, but Vernon doubted there was any connection. Why would he be dreaming of that incident again, when he hadn't dreamt about it since it started four years ago?

The sound of a rock being kicked brought Vernon back to reality. Somebody was coming. Under the blanket he was kneeling beneath, he double checked his gun was loaded. He was anxious to get this over with - the smell of all the brahmin and their shit was starting to get to him.

Peering up, Vernon saw a figure moving along the far edge of the herd. He couldn't make out any weapons, but the figure was definitely large. Almost as large as himself, if Vernon had to make a guess. He debated how best to handle this. Ammo was scarce, and the figure was (presumably) unarmed, so there wasn't any immediate reason to use his gun. If he caught whoever it was off guard, he would probably be able to end the fight quickly.

Vernon crouched and watched, waiting for the figure to turn his back. All he seemed to do for almost two minutes was look over the brahmin, most likely deciding which one to take. If he chose to take Vernon, that could complicate things. Well, if worst came to worst, that guy wouldn't be expecting a brahmin to be able to aim and shoot a gun.

The man took out a rope and tied it around the brahmin's neck. Vernon began moving forward slowly, making sure not to drop the blanket. The man took about a minute to finish tying his knot (there were two necks for him to tie it around, complicating his job), giving Vernon ample time to move into a proper ambushing position. The man gave the rope a few tugs, and started leading the two-headed cow away...

...there! The man turned his back, and in a flash Vernon was up and charging straight for him. He plowed full force into the man, knocking him straight onto the ground. Vernon fell to the ground as well and rolled over top of the man - apparently he charged a bit *too* hard - before regaining his balance. The man was out cold.

"That went well," Vernon thought to himself. Aside from the fact that his shoulder was now killing him, he came through that encounter fine. Not waiting for the man to come around, Vernon took the rope from around the brahmin's neck and tied up the man's hands. The brahmin wandered back towards its grazing area, with the rest of the herd.

"Ugh," the man said as he slowly came to. Vernon pulled at the rope on his arms.

"C'mon, get up." The man slowly got to his feet, with Vernon pulling him up the rest of the way once he his feet were touching the ground.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing? You Goddamn thief!"

"What are you talking about?"

"What sort of a pussy ambushes a man while he's taking care of his herd."

"I know who's herd this is. It's Larry's, and you owe me the 13 coins he jacked up his jerky price because of *you*."

"Damnit," the man muttered, realizing his charade was failing. They walked off towards the center of town. Along the way, the man caught a glimpse of Vernon's face.

"Heheh," he laughed.

"What's funny?"

"You're that guy, the one with the lopsided mouth."

"Gee, what tipped you off?" The people gathered at the center fireplace came towards them, as soon as they were in sight.

"RW's been looking for you." Vernon thought about that for half a second, and then stopped dead in his tracks.

"W-What did you say?"

"RW's been looking. For *you*." Alex and half a dozen other villagers reached the two. Vernon continued to stare at the man, not believing what he just heard.

"Hey, great job longmouth," Alex said. "I told you it was that punk." Larry, who was among the other half-dozen people, walked up and punched the man in the gut.

"F-Fuck," he muttered as he collapsed.

"Don't faint yet, I still owe you for three other brahmin!"

"Hey, ease up Larry," said Alex, stepping in between the two. "We got a rope on that tree by your house for this thing. C'mon, let's get going." The villagers lifted the man back to his feet, and half pushed half dragged him off.

"I'll see you in hell lopsided boy!" he shouted as he was carried off. "I'll see you *rea*/soon!"

"...RW?" Vernon asked, rhetorically. "There's no way." How could RW have...it didn't make any sense. He'd think about it in the morning, he decided, and walked off to the local water hole. He had more important things to worry about right now, most pressing the fact that he still reeked of brahmin shit.

But RW...there was no way. It was impossible.

Part 2: Monday

But RW...there was no way. It was impossible.
He was supposed to be...

Vernon didn't get any sleep that night. He knew that if he did, the nightmares would come back again. And they would be worse this time. He didn't have any proof of this, but he *knew*. That laughing would be stronger. He might even be able to smell what happened this time. And he would wake up screaming again, his heart pounding, and his face white as death.

All because of that man...because of RW.

He was used to not sleeping. It was a useful skill to have for those times when falling asleep probably meant dying. His wasn't a safe job, but somebody should do it. That was how he looked at it - people needed somebody they could look up to, or rely on. Vernon just had the misfortune of being the right guy at the right time for the job.

The first rays of sunlight crept out from over the horizon. That was what he had been waiting for. Traveling at night was a really bad idea most of the time, and he wanted to get out of this town as soon as he could. He needed more information. There were only two people he knew who might have some - the first one was undoubtably hanging from Larry's tree right now. He would have asked the punk, but he was too busy being in shock. The second one was at least two days' travel away, on the other side of the Great Trading Ring.

The dried out dirt of the wastes took on a brownish-gold hue as the sun started climbing up into the sky. Vernon double checked his backpack (stims, jerky, ammo, and coins, all there), and then headed out.

Doris was the third largest city in the Great Trading Ring. It was probably also the most avoided. The only reason it was included in the GTR was that it had things that other towns weren't ready to offer so openly - drugs, whores, slaves, and most importantly guns & ammunition. If you wanted any of those, there was no place like Doris. Most people suspected that, whoever Doris was, she had been a whore.

This was the town Vernon visited the least. He wasn't the most liked person around Doris, maybe even the opposite. The only time he ever came there was when he knew somebody there needed his type of help (rare), or he was searching for a missing person and thought they had wound up there (much less rare). This time, he was here to call in a favor.

RW. Vernon suspected he knew how that punk knew RW. According to some stories he had heard, there was a man in Doris who was organizing all the brahmin rustlers in the area. It could be a very profitable business, if it weren't for the fact that only fools would get into it. Killing or stealing a brahmin was treated as bad (or worse in some areas) as killing a human. If you were caught, you were dead.

According to the stories, this guy was doing a pretty good job. It was getting harder and harder to catch brahmin thieves, and sometimes brahmin herders didn't even notice one or two of their herd was missing until they went to sell. The punk probably knew that Larry's herd was unguarded most of the time, due to his good-for-nothing son, which meant he was more than likely working for this guy. Vernon was pretty sure that guy was RW.

Of course, that still didn't explain how RW was still alive. But Vernon would worry about that *after* he killed him.

The makeshift bell-alarm on the door, made up of a few tin cans on strings, rang out as Vernon walked into Steven's shop. Steven offered drugs, medicine, and occasionally animal bits, but above all else, he peddled information. Steven had a nack for overhearing things, as well as "employees" who shared what they heard.

"Steve, are you here?" Vernon asked, walking up to the chicken wire that separated Steven's desk from his more unruly customers. He was nowhere in sight. *Probably in the basement.*

"Who the hell sent you?" a gun pointed at the back of Vernon's head asked.

"Hey, calm down Steve, it's me. Widesmile." The gun at the back of Vernon's head was replaced with a fist on the top of it.

"You idiot! Steve is dead, you killed him, remember? My name is Thomas!!" Steve walked out from behind Vernon, towards his desk behind the wire.

"Oh yeah, sorry," Vernon mumbled as he rubbed his head. "Think you can close early? I need to call in that favor you owe me."

Steve sighed, and walked back over towards the door. "Yeah, sure. Wouldn't want any customers hear you messing up my name I guess." He took a key out of his pocket and locked the door. Vernon hung up the make-shift curtains (really rugs hung over sticks that would be laid on nails to cover windows) as Steve walked back to his desk.

"Make this quick, all right?" he said, sitting down. "I'm supposed to be getting a major 'shipment' today."

"No problem." Vernon sat down in front of the desk, on the other side of the chicken wire. "I need to know about that guy organizing the brahmin ranchers."

"What do you want to know about him for?"

Vernon paused, trying to find a way to word his answer. "If he's who I think he is, up until yesterday I thought I had killed him."

"And if he isn't?"

"Then I might as well deal with him while I'm here anyways. I've been getting more and more jobs guarding brahmin lately, and the smell's starting to get on my nerves."

"Okay, so what do you need to know about him?"

"Two things. One, where he is, and two, what his name is."

"You don't even know his *name*? How do you think you killed a guy if you don't even know his name?"

"Are his initials 'RW'?"

"RW? Um...his last name's William, I'm pretty sure."

Vernon sighed. "Well, then he's probably who I think he is."

"When did you supposedly kill him anyways?"

"...a while ago. A *long* while ago. I don't know what he's still doing breathing."

"Huh. Anyways, I've heard that there's something going on at the spotted owl with some brahmin rustlers. Could be something else, but I doubt it. You know where to find the place?"

"Yeah, I've gone there once before."

"Okay, good. Now get out. Every time I see you, my arm starts aching again."

"Hey, would you have preferred to been shot in the head? It got those guys to stop looking for you."

"Ha, I wish. Thank you anonymous customer, don't come again, and *don't* call me Steve again."

"Yeah sure 'Thomas'. I'll see you around."

The Spotted Owl was a bar/mini-casino near the center of Doris. The bar was on top, and the craps tables and half-broken slots were down in the basement. There was a small room for a second floor, more of an attic, where the owner, Tyler Grubb, operated from. He was a small-time thug, probably running the place on the behalf of one of the major figures in Doris.

According to some of the hookers Vernon questioned in the area, there were rumors of a second basement

floating around. It seemed a good a place to start searching from as any.

Inside, the bar was filled. As with just about anyplace in Doris, the locals here didn't look pleasant. Fortunately, most of them were too busy with their drinks, conversations, and/or brawls to pay Vernon any attention. Vernon had a reputation in this town as a guy who hurt business, and being recognized was the last thing he wanted right now. There was a sign in the shape of an arrow with "Casino" written on it, pointing down a set of stairs. Vernon made his way over to it, trying to draw as little attention as possible.

The mini-casino was almost as packed as the bar upstairs, so Vernon didn't stand out much. Even better, it was dimly lit everywhere but over the tables. Vernon walked up to one, staying close enough to look like he was watching the game, while standing just outside the light.

He scanned the area. Along the wall to each of his sides, there were slot machines. The wall behind him was just posters and the staircase back up. And the far wall was bare. There were craps tables all along the center of the room, but there was no sign of another set of stairs, or a door...

What the? For a moment, it seemed as if the wall rippled a bit. That was...unlikely, to say the least. Vernon made his way around to the other side of the room, avoiding drawing any attention to himself as he went. After a moment of observing the slots as he walked past them, as any gambler looking for "the lucky one" might, he arrived at the wall.

There didn't seem to be anything special about this wall, though the dim light did make it hard to investigate. Vernon tested the wall's solidity, only to find that when his hand touched it, there was nothing solid about it. This part of the "wall" was really just a curtain, colored just like the rest of the wall. Behind it, there was a small room with a staircase leading down. *Bingo*. Vernon slipped past the curtain, and descended the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door, left slightly ajar. Vernon scanned the room through the small opening. There were three people, two of them standing in front of a desk, the other one sitting behind it. Lacking a better approach, Vernon took out his gun and threw open the door. He fired at the two that were standing before they even finished turning around, sending them to the floor. Then, he ran up to the desk and, before the person sitting had a chance to react, placed his gun on the man's forehead.

"Are you RW?"

"I don't know anything! I just do the paperwork!" the man shouted. Vernon slammed his fist into the man's face, knocking him backwards out of his chair.

"Shut up and answer fast." He didn't know how much attention he had attracted with his shooting, and a man screaming practically on the point of hysteria wouldn't help him much. "Where is RW?"

"I'll tell you whatever you want, just *don't shoot me!!*" Vernon smiled, unnaturally large with his scar. It was not the sort of sight that gave confidence to the person on the receiving end.

"That's right. You will."

Part 3: Tuesday

"I'll tell you whatever you want, just *don't shoot me!!*"

Vernon smiled. "That's right. You will."

Vernon didn't know what time it was, except that it was most likely tomorrow, technically. The paper-pusher knew more than he had expected, and his nervous stuttering didn't help speed things up any. From the time Vernon smiled to five minutes ago, the paper boy had yammered off literally *everything* he knew about the cattle rustling operation.

"Thomas, the guy in Rigil, he's definitely gay. RW keeps him in either Rigil or South Bluff, because he has that sort of accent. He usually carries a riffle, but sometimes he uses a pistol - "

"Who the hell cares?! Just tell me where RW is!!"

Ugh. Every time Vernon threatened the paper-pusher (the only thing he *didn't* say was what his name was), he just started talking faster, and he never changed to the topic Vernon wanted. After about an hour of that, Vernon had enough. After ranting about how much the bullet hurt and how hard it was going to be for him to walk with his girl Jenna RW hired her three months ago as a doctor she's good at that I'll have to go see her now and she'll yell at me for not taking care of myself OW why'd you shoot me again, he finally started talking about RW.

After learning RW's location, hair color, favorite food, and nicknames for his gun, Vernon told the paper pusher to shut up, that was all he needed. He thought briefly about knocking the guy out cold to pay him back for all that wasted time, but the paper pusher actually fainted half a second later. His face was a deep shade of blue.

Vernon turned around and checked the other two people who had been in the room. One of them was definitely dead - there was a bullet lodged directly into his heart, a lucky shot (for Vernon) - while the other one was out cold from a shot to the hip. He would probably live, but more importantly, he would probably stay quiet while Vernon slipped out.

Just as Vernon was about to walk back up the stairs, he remembered his manners. It was impolite to leave

good ammo laying around, weighing down the dead. Satisfied that he had respected the dead in his own way, Vernon made his way up the stairs.

He slid the curtain aside slightly, looking over the mini-casino. There was nobody there. *Probably closing time.* Vernon walked out into the room, his gun drawn and ready. He crept up to the stairs, scanning the room every step he took. There definitely wasn't anybody else there. *It better be closing time.*

Vernon ascended the second set of stairs slowly, avoiding the spots he remembered creaked on his way down. He raised his head cautiously, his eyes just a half-inch above the floor. There wasn't anybody else up here either. That was suspicious. A casino shutting down, he could believe. Most people don't have unlimited funds anyways. But a bar that closed *this* early? Either Vernon's guess of the time was wrong (unlikely), or something was definitely going on. It didn't ease his mind much when he realized that the lights were still on.

Vernon rushed up to ground level, his gun pointed out into the room every step he took sideways over to the wall. This felt like a trap, the perfect ambush to get rid of a major thorn in everybody's respective side in Doris. It was probably safer for them this way, rather than making all that noise rushing downstairs and *then* killing him. So, where were they? Crouching down, Vernon hurried over to the bar, using it as a shield.

Time to make some noise. Vernon picked up a bottle from underneath the bar counter, and, after making sure it wasn't anything good, tossed it up into the air and over the bar. The bottle crashed down into the ground, smashing into tiny pieces, and making plenty of noise. Immediately following the crash, Vernon heard two different gun shots, both from opposite sides of the room. One was from the side opposite him, while the other one was closer - it sounded like it was coming from the other side of the bar. To Vernon's left, the bar wrapped around to meet the wall behind him - that was where the second gunman was.

Vernon carefully crawled over to the far end of the bar, breathing as quietly as he could. He reached the other end almost without a sound. The second shooter was on the other side of the bar, he could hear him breathing heavily. Nervously. Good, he should be.

Quickly, Vernon stood up and pointed his gun down to where the second gunman was crouching. Looking up, he let out a nervous gasp, before Vernon shot him twice in the face. As he ducked back down a split second later, the first gunman started shooting at where he had stood, along with a third one from roughly the same location as the first.

The shots stopped, and were replaced with the faint sound of footsteps. Somebody was walking over to the bar, probably planning to do the same thing Vernon did to the second gunman. It was time to move. Underneath the counter, where he grabbed the bottle from before, there was a gap large enough for him to fit into. Thanking whoever drank away this space for him, Vernon quickly crawled into it.

BAM BAM BAM! Three shots rang out from almost directly overhead, hitting where Vernon was crouched two seconds ago. The first gunman (or the third) shouted across the room, "Did you get him?".

"Shh!" said nearby shooter. It didn't sound like he was facing the wall behind the bar anymore, so Vernon rolled out, stood up, and fired at the man's back twice before he could turn around. The first (or third) gunman fired back, breaking bottles on the wall with his bullets. Glass rained down as Vernon scurried, crouched down, across the bar to the far side.

Silently, he stuck his head out from the side of the bar and scanned the room again. He found the first (or third) shooter across the room, behind a table with the chairs set upside down on top of it. Vernon aimed carefully at the man's foot - the only part he could see clearly - and fired twice. The man hollered, and Vernon ran out, shooting three more times in that general area. The man cried out again, and then went silent.

Vernon crawled up to where the man had positioned himself and aimed his gun at the doorway. "We got 'im!" he shouted. "It's clear!" Another man walked in.

"Where is he?" he asked, entering with his gun not drawn.

"Idiot," Vernon mumbled to himself before standing up and firing his remaining three bullets at the man. Each one struck him in the chest, sending him to the ground, dead. Hopefully that was the last of them. Vernon picked up the gun formerly belonging to the corpse beside him and pointed it at the doorway. Thirty seconds passed...a minute...two...and nobody came. It looked clear.

Not wasting any time, Vernon reloaded his own gun as quickly as he could, as well as the one he had just adopted with the spare ammo on the corpse's person. There were also two stimpacks and a bag of about 20 coins. Vernon thought briefly about looting the other corpses, but decided it probably wasn't worth risking being shot over.

Standing up, Vernon lifted one of the chairs off the table and hurled it into the window behind him. The window shattered, and Vernon leapt out into the streets half a second later. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he started running. He left the Spotted Owl behind him, then the block, and then almost half the city. Vernon stopped to catch his breath, and looked over his shoulder. There was nobody following him, at least that he could tell were following him.

He collapsed against the side of a building, letting his heart catch up with the rest of his body. As he did, he looked himself over. He had cut his arm on some of the left-over glass from the window, but it was nothing serious. Other than that, he didn't seem to have anything wrong with him.

Vernon dug through his backpack, and took out his pouch of jerky. *I should have gotten a few bottles* he lamented as he chewed his dry meat. Oh well. He preferred water anyways, especially out in the dry and hot wastes. Alcohol didn't do much good out there for quenching thirst. He'd have to trade for some water later on.

After finishing his jerky, Vernon decided he had rested enough. He had to get moving to South Bluff. RW

was there, if that paper-pusher was to be believed. Fortunately, it wasn't far. Going counterclockwise, it was the next town along the Great Trading Ring. It was only a few hours travel from Doris. Even if it was still dark, he was leaving immediately. RW could always leave South Bluff. Vernon got back to his feet, checking for pursuers one last time before setting out.

From South Bluff's name, one could guess two things about the town. It was to the south (only Rigil was further south), and it was atop a bluff. This one had been formed by one of the old rivers. That river was barely a creek now, but before the war, it had been a major source of water. Now, any source of water larger than a puddle was a major source of water.

Unlike its neighbor to the northwest, South Bluff was a fairly calm town. Most of its residents were gecko hunters or farmers. But there weren't many brahmin in town. Most of them were used for pulling heavy farming equipment like plows or wagons. There were few people in South Bluff he raised them for food.

What RW was doing here, Vernon didn't know. That didn't concern him. All that mattered was that he was here. Now, it was just a matter of finding him.

The only thing the paper-pusher mentioned about RW that Vernon didn't already know was that he had grown a beard, and was starting to gray up top. Other than that, Vernon already knew what RW looked like. As for where he was, there were three possibilities as far as Vernon was concerned. One, he was at a hotel. (*Man, I need to get some sleep soon*) Two, he was at a bar (*Still gotta pick up that water*). Three, he was out scoping brahmin, performing recon.

Jerry Gamrat was Vernon's major ally in South Bluff. He was a well-liked kid who Vernon helped out once in the past with some raider problems. In fact, now that Vernon thought about it, that was when he had gotten his signature long-mouth scar. Jerry was probably at least 20 by now, but he still acted like a kid a lot of the time. He knew a lot of what was going down in South Bluff, and was always on top of the local gossip.

His house, a post-war brick-and-mud construction, was only a short walk away from where Vernon entered South Bluff. Jerry was outside, tending to his wheat crop. The local river-turn-creek made this a good place to do farming. South Bluff was one of the few towns in the Great Trading Ring that could get by solely on farming.

"Hey Jerry!" Vernon shouted, walking up.

Jerry looked up at Vernon and squinted. The sun was going down, and it was behind Vernon. It took a moment to recognize him. "Hey, scarmouth! When did you get here?" Jerry rushed up and shook Vernon's hand.

"Just a few minutes ago."

"Sheesh, man, you look like shit. What's going on?"

"Haven't really slept in about two days. I've been busy." Normally, Vernon would have wasted an hour or two talking with Jerry, but presently, he was on a mission. "Hey, I need to ask you a question."

"Yeah, sure. What?"

"I'm looking for a guy, and I need to find him soon. I think he might be in town. You know of anybody showing up called RW?"

"RW? Um..."

"Big guy, almost as big as me, has a beard, carries a shotgun, wears a leather jacket over leather armor?"

"Maybe...yeah, I think I saw a guy like that show up a few days ago. He pitched camp over at the east hunting grounds. Why do you want to know?"

"He's an old 'friend' of mine, and I need to return some bullets he borrowed a few years back."

"Ah. Well, be careful. He looked pretty tough."

"I will. Hell, I already killed him once, how hard can it be to kill him twice?"

"Heh. Come see me afterwards, this sounds interesting."

"Yeah, sure thing. I'll see you later Jerry."

"Yeah, see ya." Vernon waved goodbye, and walked off towards the east hunting grounds.

There he was, in front of a small tent. It was him, alright. Rogers William - RW. Dressed like he should be, with the beard and build. Vernon drew both his guns (*I should have bought a second one a long time ago*) and walked out from behind the rockpile he had been watching RW from. He probably could have sniped the bastard, but that was way to impersonal a way to settle a *very* personal matter.

RW looked up and saw the man approaching him with two guns. "What can I do for you?" he asked, getting up from his fire and taking the shotgun out of his jacket.

"I'm looking for RW."

"What do you want with RW?" One of the things the paper-pusher mentioned was that RW had a habit of referring to himself in the third person. *Bastard probably thinks he's royalty* Vernon mused.

"I think you know."

"NO, I don't know. A lot of people want something with RW, I can't keep track of all of them. You're gonna have to give me a name." Vernon thought briefly about asking RW how he was still alive, but that didn't seem important. He wasn't alive, he was a dead man living on four years borrowed time.

"Try Vernon and Ramir Town. Does that ring any bells?" RW thought briefly, but then shook his head.

"Afraid not. Nothing personal, we've just been pissing off a whole lot of people lately. It's getting hard for me to keep track of all of them." *And there's the royal "we". Somebody fetch this jackass a crown and scepter.*

"Oh well." So much for a dramatic confrontation before the bullets started flying. Vernon raised his right gun and fired twice. RW rolled out of the way and blasted his shotgun at Vernon. They were still too far away for the shotgun to be worth much, though. Two pellets hit Vernon's left arm, but he ignored them and kept going. Vernon alternated fire with his two pistols, unloading twelve bullets between the two of them at RW. A few caught Vernon's enemy in the leg, sending him to the ground just as he was about to fire again. Conveniently, his back was to Vernon. With an immobilized target, Vernon let off four more shots at RW's chest, each one hitting their mark. In less than 30 seconds, it was all over.

"Bastard," Vernon spit, collapsing. The lack of sleep was starting to catch up with him. He raised his guns and fired twice more into RW, both bullets hitting the man in the head. His skull exploded as the bullets bore through his face. It was over. RW was dead. This time, Vernon was sure of it.

It was dusk, and the stars were starting to appear. Now seemed like a good a time as any to catch some sleep, and Vernon was too drained to waste time with finding a bed. He fell back where he was, and drifted into sleep.

Part 4: Wednesday

It was over. RW was dead. This time, Vernon was sure of it.

But, if RW was dead, why were the nightmares coming back? Vernon didn't know why he was surprised - why did he expect these dreams to go away so easily? It's hard to forget something like what happend that day. Hell, it's impossible to forget what happened.

Vernon was surrounded by bodies. It was just like all the other times. The smell of rotting flesh and gunpowder was everywhere, and the air was filled with flies attracted by the stench. Above, birds circled around the mound of corpses, awaiting their chance to feast. Or waiting for the last fool still living to realize he'd be better off as a meal.

And the blood...the ground, the bodies, and Vernon himself - all of it was covered in blood. Vernon tried to wipe the blood off of his face, but his arm was covered in the stuff already. His clothes were soaked with it, even his skin beneath was covered. There couldn't be a drop left of blood left in any of those bodies, there was too much outside them.

"Hahaha." It was a simple laugh, but it made Vernon cringe. It was so heartless...so detached from everything. Vernon knew some people with truely sick senses of humor, but nobody that would ever laugh at this scene. Unless it was hysterically.

"Where are you?!" Vernon shouted, reaching for his gun. The handle was sticky with dried blood. *Isn't there anything here that's not covered in blood?!* The voice didn't respond to Vernon's question. It laughed again, louder this time. Somehow, it sounded even colder this time. Humans might be born human, but the wastes can take that away. That laugh...it was definatly the laugh of somebody who left behind human behind out in the wasteland.

Somebody came in from the wasteland the day before. He seemed just like any given traveler who had spent more than his fair share of time out there. He was covered in armor, from the neck down, and caried a riffle slung over his shoulder by a cord. And his eyes...Vernon never believed that "eyes as windows of the soul" crap, especially with this guy. Who'd build windows if there's nobody to look out through them?

The scariest part was that he couldn't be any older than 15, Vernon's age. He had never seen somebody who had obviously lost to the wastes at that young an age before. He wasn't a nice person at all, that was clear.

Vernon figured he was just the hardened, gruff, asshole type. And he was. And more. Vernon had to learn a new catagory for people who had lost to the wastes. It was a hell of a way to learn.

"Where the hell are you?!" Vernon shouted, charging forward. The voice's source wasn't in this direction. He never was. But at least if he ran forward, he wouldn't have to see those bodies - they had been human just a few hours before, friends of his. It was magic. Here's a group of living, breathing humans, people, and now, with a flick of my wrist, ta da! A pile of flesh, no longer the humans they were.

"Hahahaha." No sign of sympathy, remorse, or just plain giving a shit. If anything, it was almost happy. Vernon stopped - he remembered what was going to happen next. What always happened next.

That laughing bastard walked up from out of nowhere, as calm as day, with another body over his shoulder. He always had that one body on his shoulder when he'd show up. He threw it down on the ground, but the body didn't have a face. It didn't even have blood. It was like it wasn't even a real corpse.

And then, something was wrong with his hand. Scratch that - there was something wrong with the hand attached to his right arm, but it wasn't his hand. Not anymore. If it was his hand, he'd be able to control it. If it was his hand, he'd be able to point the gun in it at that bastard's chest and blow his inerds out. Like he did that one time.

What's to believe? That man fired at Vernon, hitting him in the shoulder. It was the first time Vernon had ever been shot, and it hurt more than anything he had ever felt. Fortunately, the adrenaline blocked most of it out. Vernon aimed right at that fucker's lack-of-a-heart and then he was wandering into South Bluff, far away from that place. Far away from that time. Raiders were ahead, and a knife caught him by suprise on the lip. And his new job, his new *life*, began.

But wait, there was something else. He was no longer himself at South Bluff, he was his other self back home. Himself inside himself, watching another himself that he was no longer inside. He held the gun in his hand again, but his hand wouldn't move. The himself he wasn't in anymore, lacking a pilot, froze up, his arm pointing at that man's chest for nothing now. Three bullets pierced hisself's chest, and the bastard laughed. The other himself fell down while he himself screamed. He screamed, and he didn't know why, but he felt angry. Beyond angry. He was angry at that man, at that other himself, but especially at he himself. That fucking bastard laughed again.

And he couldn't do a thing!!

What was that? The dream was never like that before. Vernon shook himself back away from the dream within a dream, and focused on the man before him. But he was gone. He had disapeared, somewhere. Vernon looked down at that corpse that wasn't real (though none of this was real, in a sense), and wasn't sure why he was surprised. That body was now the other himself, the one that he himself was pulled away from just before he killed that man. The one that man killed instead. The dream was never like this before.

But that first time, how did that man disapear? Vernon was about to shoot him, and then he was wandering into South Bluff for the first time. He had his gun, the weapon he had never needed to use before, pointed right at that man's empty chest, and then he was barely dodging the raider's knife in time. What happened? Did that man die? Did he escape?

All Vernon knew was that, somehow, he hadn't died. So, then, that man must have. But he came back. How the hell did he come back?! If Vernon didn't shoot him, why didn't he shoot Vernon? It made no sense, no sense at all. If he died, he shouldn't have come back. If he didn't die, Vernon should have. What other possibilities were there?

And somehow, that man came back. That punk was his messenger, shattering Vernon's beliefs. That man had come back. Vernon aimed right at that fucker's lack-of-a-heart and - and then he was wandering into South Bluff. And that man had come back.

He couldn't come back. But he did. To hell with it, then! If he wants to die a second time, then let him. As far as Vernon cared, he could come back as many times as he wanted. Dying once only took away one of those bodies from the mound. That bastard would have to die a thousand times to clear the mound. And then once more for that other himself he caried over his shoulder.

And so he was sent away again. Vernon aimed at that bastards skull and shattered it. He broke into pieces, and the pieces turned into smoke. They faded away. Like they had never been there at all. All that was left was a faceless memory, a man without an identity.

So, then, how could he be that man that lost to the wastes? Even if he had no heart, he had a face. But not this one. That one disapeared, and Vernon was at South Bluff & his other himself was shot by that man at the same time. But this one was definitely dead. Unlike that one.

That one, he was still alive. He had to be. He had to die a thousand times more, and then once more after that. His messenger would appear again, and shatter the beliefs. The beliefs that Vernon had actually killed that man. How can a man without a face, who shatters and turns into smoke, be a man who had a face four years ago, and did not shatter & turn to smoke?

The messenger would appear again. The messenger wouldn't shatter or turn to smoke. He would be tied to a tree, and then Vernon would be in Doris, looking for the one the messenger spoke of. Vernon was about to shoot but was then in South Bluff. The messenger was about to be hung, killed, and then Vernon was in Doris.

And then, it made sense. And Vernon awoke.

Vernon stared up at the sky, and realized it was now Jerry's roof. For a momment, he thought he was still dreaming. But the roof remained a roof. He was awake now. And he knew. He had been after the wrong guy. The one he wanted was back in Harpel, and probably not hanging from a tree like he was supposed to. RW never did know when to die.

Part 5: Thursday

He had been after the wrong guy. The one he wanted was back in Harpel, and probably not hanging from a tree like he was supposed to. RW never did know when to die.

It was dawn. Vernon had slept through almost all of yesterday, waking up only once for a few minutes. *Must have been more tired than I thought.* Normally, when this happened, Vernon dropped out of his hero business for a bit and spent a week doing nothing much. It didn't seem right for a hero to take a vacation, but Vernon usually reminded himself he had only half-volunteered for the job. A little break now and then didn't seem that unreasonable.

But right now, he needed to keep moving. Damn that paper-pusher; why'd he have to talk so fast? He had mentioned something about RW's partner. How he looked a bit like RW. How he had gone out with RW to South Bluff. But he had also mentioned everything from RW's foot size to who was actually wearing a wig. It was hard to keep track of it all.

RW was still out there. In Harpel. And most likely, he was the only one *left* in Harpel. Everybody else would have either skipped town, or have been killed after he broke free. He must have been having a lot of fun if he overlooked killing Vernon. After all, RW liked to take his time.

Just like he did with all those people that day.

Nobody knew where that man who showed up earlier that day came from. Most travelers to Tral fell into one of two categories - people who were lost, or people who were wanderers by nature. There was little in Tral for either type, except for the bar with the few beds in back that served as an occasional inn.

There wasn't much trading with Tral, since it was too far from the Great Trading Ring to be profitable. Also, Tral was a self-sustaining community - whatever they produced, they used. The only time they'd trade was when they needed medical supplies or farming equipment. For these reasons, the number of people who visited Tral on a monthly basis could be counted on one hand, with up to six fingers to spare (depending on whose hand it was).

Vernon didn't have much to do that day - the brahmin needed feeding, and he needed to find a way to fix his fence. But other than that, there was nothing worth doing. So, like some of the others, he decided to head down to the bar to see the visitor. It was the closest thing to entertainment they had, talking with outsiders.

When he got there, though, he realized this man wasn't the type to tell them any stories. He was too busy throwing punches at Sam, one of the townspeople. Unfortunately for him, Sam was no push over, especially for somebody so young (the man looked 16 at most). A crowd had gathered around the fight - after all, this was the closest thing they had to entertainment, even if the stranger wasn't very talkative.

"What's going on?" Vernon asked as he walked in.

A friend of his, Redge, turned away from the fight momentarily. "That guy stepped in some brahmin shit, so he started throwing rocks at them. Sam saw his bruised-up brahmin and got pissed. Go figure."

"Who's the guy?" The man charged Sam, pushing his shoulder into Sam's chest. He went flying backwards, but was stopped by the people behind him. Sam rushed back in.

"I thought he said his name was Rogers...something," stated Ken, another one of Vernon's friends.

"Rogers William," added Redge. Sam slammed his fist into the Rogers's stomach. Even through his leather armor, the blow knocked the wind out of him. He fell to the ground, temporarily stunned.

"Yeah, go Sam!" somebody shouted from the crowd.

"Don't stop there!" yelled another. "Smash his skull in!"

While everybody was busy cheering on Sam, Rogers rolled over onto his stomach and pulled out something from his pocket. Most of the others were too busy celebrating to notice, but Vernon saw what was happening. Rogers was injecting something into his arm, some sort of chem. His eyes opened wide, and he got back to his feet. Judging by how quickly he recovered, it was some sort of booster drug.

"Watch out!" Vernon shouted as the Rogers grabbed Sam from behind. Sam, taken by surprise, didn't have time to react as Rogers pulled him to the ground and smashed his fist into Sam's face, causing it to bleed.

"Aghh!" Sam shouted. Rogers, now smiling madly, was about to punch Sam again before his arm was grabbed in mid-air by Vernon. He pulled Rogers away, though the man's chem injection and natural strength made it difficult. It took Rogers a few seconds to finally break free of Vernon's grip (something most people in Tral weren't able to do, despite Vernon only being around 15), but by that time Sam was back on his feet.

The others, seeing Vernon interrupt the until-then private fight, decided to get in, approaching RW threateningly. Seeing this, Rogers wisely decided to back down. To his credit, though, he did so in the most subtle way possible.

"Feh," he spat out, dusting himself off. "I'll let you off easy this time. Have fun breathing through your nose." He walked towards the door. The crowd between him and his destination parted, glad to see the troublemaker

leave. Sam decided not to pursue the fight further, opting to clog his nose-bleed with his shirt sleeve.

RW stopped at the door. "Oh, and if you or any of your cows fuck around with me again, I'll kill this whole goddamn town. Got that?" Looking over from Sam to RW, Vernon noticed that Rogers now had a shotgun drawn and casually laid across his shoulder. And with that said, he walked out.

"Just stay the hell away from my brahmin!" Sam shouted back. With the entertainment completed, most of the townspeople dispersed back to where they had been before the brawl broke out. Only Vernon, Sam, and a few others were still in the bar.

"You alright?" Vernon asked.

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I don't think it's broken."

"So, he went after your brahmin just because he stepped in some crap?"

"Seriously unbalanced guy," Sam muttered.

According to others who had checked up on him, Rogers William left town not long after his fight. Nobody bothered to follow after him. Like most outsiders in Tral, he would likely just keep moving on, leaving the small town behind. Life continued as usual in Tral, with the exception of a bloody nose and a few bruised brahmin.

By the end of the day, Vernon still hadn't bothered to finish that fence. If his mother was still around, she would have nagged him all day to finish it. Sometimes, that was the only way things got done with him. The only exception was after the fire, and even then that was a poor version of an exception. Vernon could have sworn he heard her shouting at him, "*Well, don't leave these bodies lying around all day. They're attracting flies! Start digging a hole for crying out loud! Stop wasting time crying, and clear this rubble out! Get back here and cover up this hole, what sort of lazy boy digs a grave and doesn't bother covering it up!? I swear, if your father hadn't taken the dirt nap already, he would have knocked you senseless over this sort of crap!*"

It was strange way to deal with the situation, but it worked. Vernon took over where his parents had left off in just two days, and the brahmin only missed a few meals. He always did have strange ways of dealing with things. They worked, though, and that was what mattered.

The sun had gone down. Vernon figured the fence could wait for another day - those brahmin were as lazy as he was, they weren't going anywhere. He decided to call it a night.

They were dead. All those people, they were dead. There were parts of them everywhere, scattered all across the ground. Arms, legs, heads, organs, pieces of their faces...it was terrible. Sam, Redge, Tom, Ken, Jullie, Alice, Mark, and more. They were all **dead**. The first time Vernon saw them, he threw up. And the second time. He didn't bother looking at them a third time.

All that was left was just enough to identify who they had been. Vernon recognized each and every one of them, despite how mangled they were. These were people he had known for years, his neighbors, friends. It was too much to take in so early in the morning. So Vernon decided to check into the matter again, after passing out for a while.

"This is terrible." Voices.

"Who did this?"

"Who do you think? It had to have been that man." There were others here now.

"Oh gawd."

"Disgusting." Vernon opened his eyes, slowly. The sky was growing orange - the sun must already be setting. *Was I out of it the whole day?*

"Hey, Vernon's not dead!"

"I told you that already, he had a pulse." He got to his feet, slowly, making sure to keep his eyes away from where the others had gathered. He knew what was over there already; he didn't want to see it again.

"You okay Vernon?" Even if others were talking to him, there was no way in hell he was looking over there again.

"I'm fine," he muttered, even though it was a lie. Just remembering what had happened, he felt like he was going to puke again.

"We've got to find him." They were arguing now. Vernon still didn't look again.

"No way, I'm not messing with that guy. Look what he did here!"

"He caught them in their sleep!"

"He still looks like a twisted fuck. I'm out."

"Me too."

"Are we just gonna let him get away with this?!"

"You go after him then."

Vernon got up and walked off towards his house. He didn't need to hear this argument. He already knew who would be going. He didn't like the idea - he had never fought with anybody before, and he had only practiced with a gun, never used one.

But hell, at the very least, he was there first. He remembered all those arguments he had had with Redge and Jullie and the others as a child. "I was here first!" "No, I was!" It all seemed to revolve around that. First one there got the prize. "I saw it first!" "You did not!" Of all the shit luck.

Even worse, his gun was right where he'd thought it be. And the suit of leather armor his father had found on a corpse and decided to keep years ago fit perfectly. It was a stupid idea, just going up and putting a bullet in-between Rogers's eyes. But he was mad. Beyond that, even. All those people were dead, and the ones who were left were too busy arguing to do anything.

Great, hero by process of elimination. Of all the rotten shit luck.

They were still arguing when Vernon got back. "Where the hell's Rogers William?" he asked, loud enough to drown out all the others. They looked at him, dressed like he had never been before. And that look in his eyes...

"Are you going to..."

"Where is he?!"

"I saw him heading south from the bar earlier today." Vernon nodded, and headed in that direction. The others looked at him concerned, but didn't bother following him.

And just as the sun was ready to sink below the horizon, he found him. Rogers William. RW. The twisted fuck was toying with another body, ripping off the arms. Vernon didn't recognize the corpse. *Probably just another wanderer.*

"Hey you!!" Vernon shouted, raising his gun. Rogers looked up, with a sick twisted grin plastered all over his face. He already had his shotgun ready. They stood there, Vernon with his gun pointed at Rogers, and Rogers with his shotgun drawn at his side, for ten seconds. Then twenty. Then thirty. Then South Bluff appeared over the horizon.

"Finally," a travel-weary Vernon muttered. He had never gone more than two or three miles away from Tral on his own before, and his feet were killing him. He was also out of water, and food, and only had 12 extra bullets. But at least now civilization was in sight. It was time to get to work. Might as well roll with the hero bit for a while, and see where it goes.

Damn it Vernon thought as he kept trudging forward (he had been walking non-stop since leaving South Bluff). Why could he never remember his fight with RW? Everything before it was permanently etched into his memory, so why couldn't he remember?!

He had been asking himself that for almost four years now. Up until four days ago, he had just assumed he killed that fucker, and went back to work. He didn't waste time thinking about it much now either - RW was going to be dead by tomorrow anyways.

He probably wouldn't reach Harpel until sometime tomorrow, he estimated. Just his luck, he'd have to camp out in the wastes tonight. He wouldn't be able to keep this pace up without some sleep soon anyways. And most likely, the dreams would come again. There would be bodies, laughter, and a skipped-over fight, as usual. Tomorrow, though, they would stop. He was going to laugh right back at RW before finally killing him. And then, maybe, he could finally get some rest.

Part 6: Friday

Tomorrow, though, they would stop. He was going to laugh right back at RW before finally killing him. And then, maybe, he could finally get some rest.

Upon re-entering Harpel for the second time that week, the first thing Vernon noticed was that he had been right. Everybody who had lived here had either fled, or been killed. There were, fortunately, few bodies to see. They were scattered across the firepit in the center of the town, presumably where most of the fighting had taken place. Harpel had never had much trouble with raiders or critters, so most people there hadn't been very good with weapons. Even the brahmin guards - most of them at least - were there simply to look tough, rather than to fight off any real threats.

Too bad Vernon thought as he looked the bodies over. He wasn't one to waste time crying over people he didn't know, but he did feel something. Guilt, he guessed. If he had actually killed RW that day, this wouldn't have happened. It was some small consolation that he hadn't known that RW was still alive, but it didn't do anybody here much good.

Vernon pushed those thoughts aside - *I don't have time for this sort of crap* - and refocused. There was something strange about the bodies. For RW's handiwork, the bodies were very...not torn into pieces. There were

only some skull bits from a few head shots in some of the corpses, and nothing more. It didn't seem right (though what RW did to those bodies that day didn't seem right either).

As he walked through the now-ghost town, he came across a group of about twelve brahmin. At least, that was his estimated count. It was hard to get an exact one when what you were counting looked like it had been through a meat grinder. There were brahmin legs, tails, heads (a *lot* of heads), stomach parts, all scattered across the area. Parts of the bodies had been eaten away by scavengers, and what remained was rotting under the noon-sun. The smell alone was reason enough for Vernon to rush past there. Throw in the sight, and he was already gone.

At the same time, there was a strange sense of relief. RW had definitely been here. Why he went after the brahmin more than he did the humans, Vernon didn't know. But at least he was getting closer. With any luck, RW would still be in Harpel somewhere. He just had to keep looking.

It was almost too convenient when RW stepped out from the side of a building and into the street. Of course, he did have his shotgun drawn, so maybe it wasn't all that convenient. "RW's been looking for you lopsided." It was that punk all right. Now that Vernon got a good look at him (the type with there being *light*), the punk was definitely RW.

Why the hell didn't I recognize him? Vernon thought as he drew his guns. It was natural to assume that somebody who was currently living wasn't somebody who was, theoretically at least, dead, but still. He could have saved a lot of trouble if he just shot him dead there.

"I heard you messed up my place out in Doris."

"Don't forget your partner down in South Bluff. Stupid bastard was still there waiting for you to come back." There didn't seem to be anybody else around. Of course, somebody had to have told RW what happened in Doris. But if they were still here, they weren't showing themselves. Maybe they had headed back to Doris already, and RW had decided to stay behind and wait.

RW scowled. "Oh, you're gonna have to die now. I'm gonna gut you like one of those fucking brahmin!" He raised his shotgun from his side and fired. Vernon ducked and rolled to his right at the same time, taking cover behind the building RW had come out from the other side of. He felt something sting on his left shoulder, and saw that the blast had grazed him.

"Damnit," he muttered. There wasn't time to use stims or cover it up. He heard RW running from behind the building. Vernon got back up onto his feet and rushed to the building's front, rolling inside beneath the swinging doors. He quickly crawled over to the corner to the door's right, and surveyed the room. There was one window on each wall, except for the front wall which had one on each side of the door. There wasn't a viable blindspot anywhere; every part of the room could be seen by at least one window. The only furniture was a worn-down couch. This wasn't a place one could hide in.

Creak. RW was on the front porch. He wasn't at any of the two front windows yet, and had probably come around from the same side Vernon just had, which would put him right about...there! Vernon aimed his two guns at where RW should be and fired at the poorly-made wall. The bullets ripped through after a second or two of shooting, and RW screamed in surprise and pain.

Bingo. Vernon got back on his feet and rushed through the door. RW was still too busy holding onto his leg, trying to stop the bleeding, to aim his shotgun. Vernon kicked RW's weapon out into the street, and raised a gun to point at RW's head. "It's over," he muttered. And then it hit him.

Vernon kicked RW's weapon away, and aimed his gun at RW's head. "It's over," he muttered. And then it hit him. What he had forgotten that very day, not even 12 hours ago. The real reason for why he was here, about to kill somebody for the first time in his life. And it was too much for him to handle. He fell down, as if his legs couldn't handle the truth either. And instead of firing, he just sat there, staring blankly out into space. And RW, seeing that, decided now was a good to keep living. He got to his feet and, with no small amount of pain or difficulty, began limping away from Vernon, from Tral, and eventually, from Vernon's memory.

But Vernon just sat there, stunned by the truth. And then, as he had done once already that day, he chose to forget it. He had strange ways of dealing with things, but they always worked for him. After finishing his last act of respect, Vernon set out towards the only other town he knew of, South Bluff. This hero bit, it was his job now. He needed a hero, and the only man he considered up the job had died, because he hadn't been up for the job either. Well, now he was going to have to be his own hero. He didn't have a choice.

By the time Vernon came out of his daze, RW had long since left. Harpel was empty, except for him. The only sign that others had ever even existed here were what RW had left - a blood trail, a legion of corpses, his backpack, and Vernon. Other than that, Harpel was now a ghost town entirely.

He hadn't killed RW that day. That much had been clear for almost a week, but he actually understood *why* now. This time was too similar to the time that day. And the time that day had been too similar to the time he had forgotten, earlier that same day. It was...

"I need some sleep," Vernon muttered. The sun was already going down. He could go after RW - it wouldn't

be that hard with RW's busted-up leg - but that could wait for tomorrow. Right now, he just needed some sleep. It had been a bad day all around, and he wanted to make it tomorrow (or any other day) as fast as he could.

Of course, "any other day" also included that day. The only day he didn't want to live more than today. Just his luck. It was how he remembered it...at least, how he *should* have remembered it.

The main difference was Brandon. His best friend in the whole damn world. The closest thing he had to a role model, a hero. The person he didn't even remember existed up until today.

The bar brawl took place, but instead of Sam, it was Brandon fighting. Sam was in the crowd, cheering Brandon on with the others. Brandon chased RW out of town, threatening to kill RW if he ever touched his brahmin again. RW threatened to kill the whole town. Neither would carry through. Not all the way, at least.

There was the mountain of dead bodies once again. But there was a different type of magic at work here. Instead of turning living things into piles of flesh, it was turning piles of flesh - human flesh - into brahmin. The stench remained the same, but these things that were once alive were definitely now brahmin remains.

Vernon saw the brahmin, and not humans, and threw up. And again. And then, he fainted. But his sleep was brief - Brandon shook him awake. He needed backup to take on RW. Vernon was the only other man who knew how to aim and shoot a gun in Tral. Vernon agreed, and they hunted down RW.

"It's over," said RW as Vernon would say later that day. Vernon could only watch, paralyzed with fear over Brandon, his hero, being beaten by some wandering punk. The hero wasn't supposed to die before the villain. The order of things went out the window, and Brandon's brains went out of his skull. Vernon ran. He didn't stay and fight. He didn't help. He did nothing, and then he ran.

It was too much to take. He had let his best friend die, without doing a thing to help him. He didn't know how to deal with this. How could he have just *left him there*?! There was no answer. There was only a solution. A terrible solution.

He hadn't left Brandon there. He hadn't agreed to go along with Brandon. He hadn't ever met or heard of Brandon. Reality is what you sense and remember. Brandon was no longer alive to be sensed, so without memories, he didn't exist. Every time in his life that Brandon had done something, somebody else stepped in. The part of Brandon in the bar brawl scene will be played by Sam this evening.

The only thing that nobody could successfully fill-in was the role of the hero. There was only a villain in the story now, and no one to oppose him.

And there was one final detail. Vernon no longer knew Brandon, but the others in Tral did. If he stayed there, they might remind him. And the illusion would come crashing down, and there would only be the dead hero, the surviving villain, and the coward partner. He would go to South Bluff, the only town other than Tral that he knew the location of. It was far away, in the place called the Great Trading Ring. Where Tral wasn't involved. It was perfect. Now he just needed for there to be nothing in Tral left for him, so that he would never feel the need to come back.

Brahmin became his friends. Guilt, maybe? He had already let one of his friends die, why not let them all die? Reality is memory and senses; remember the brahmin are not brahmin, they're people. Just don't sense otherwise, don't look over, and the illusion will remain. Just go back to where you were when you first saw the brahmin bits, pass out, and ignore any familiar voices and faces of dead people when you awake.

But there was still no hero to replace Brandon. RW laughed, and laughed. The twisted bastard didn't stop laughing for anything.

When Vernon awoke, he remembered no man named Brandon. He remembered his friends slaughtered, but he remembered no brahmin being killed. He remembered his entire life, except for one man, the most important person in the world to him. But the guilt had passed. Vernon had strange ways of dealing with things. They worked, though, and that was all that mattered.

And then, by accident, the rage returned. The rage he had been too busy being guilty to feel. The rage he hadn't planned on while he was removing his guilt. It made him do something very, very stupid.

It let him rationalize taking over the hero role.

RW was where they had last fought, though Vernon never fought RW before. He was there with what remained of Brandon, the only human he *had* killed that day. But the rage blinded him. The body was inconsequential, it was just another dead man. RW spoke a line, "This bitch stunk like a brahmin, so RW carved him like one." But all Vernon heard was rage. All that mattered was the cause of it, the cause of *all* of it ultimately. RW

They fought. And Vernon won. But RW didn't die. Just as he was going to pull the trigger, he foolishly pulled the line RW had said from deep out of his subconscious. It was just a final act of irony, to make RW realize he had truly lost. But it only worked if the speaker knew where the line came from. So Vernon remembered. He remembered everything. His illusion had lasted a few mere hours, before it fell apart. RW escaped. He fled, and Vernon was left there with alone with the body of his hero.

He did the only thing he could. The guilt was still too much. He eased it somewhat by burying Brandon's empty body. By standing in respect at the unmarked grave for a day. But when he was done, he had restored the illusion. There was nothing to remind him of Brandon. There was just a mound of dirt, which he assumed was one of RW's victims. Or RW himself. For RW had died without actually dying. Reality is senses and memory. Vernon just

skipped over the memory this time, and sensed RW no where. He had died.

And Vernon was in South Bluff before he knew it. In time, he didn't even remember the mound of dirt. He just remembered arriving in South Bluff. He chose to continue being the hero, and it was a better excuse to keep him away from Tral than everybody he knew being dead. Brandon was gone, and the hero was now Vernon. He had strange ways of dealing with things, but they worked. And that was all that mattered. He would be his own hero now, as well as that for the rest of the wastes (though he ultimately decided that the Great Trading Ring was enough). It was the only way he could ever apologize to his true hero, for not doing a thing.

Vernon awoke. And the illusion did not return. He remembered everything. His best friend. His cowardice. His reason for even taking up this shit job.

...no. Apologizing to Brandon, that wasn't the reason. That was something he couldn't do, no matter how hard he tried. He was here because, for some damn reason he had never understood, he wanted this job. Even now he didn't understand why, he only understood how it started. But he had kept this hero bit going because somebody had to do it, and he wanted to be the one. *Besides, everybody needs some dumb-ass fool they can rely on.*

As usual, Vernon wasted little time thinking about it. This was his job, end of discussion. And it was time to get back to work. Brandon could wait. There was still one more thing to take care of - RW was still out there. Even after all this, RW was still out there. It was getting old, like a bad joke. *I'm gonna track you down, and this time, you're going to die.*

Part 7: Saturday

Even after all this, RW was still out there. It was getting old, like a bad joke. *I'm gonna track you down, and this time, you're going to die.*

"What a week," muttered Vernon. He was used to walking back and forth between towns, but this past week had been murder on his legs. From Harpel to Doris to South Bluff back to Harpel, and now back to Doris. Plus his sleep schedule had been crazy, skipping days and then sleeping through entire other ones.

I need a vacation. He hadn't spoken that - his mouth was drying up. After he woke up in Harpel, the first thing he had done was get his guns and went towards Doris (again, -sigh-). Checking supplies hadn't crossed his mind; other things were taking priority. What mattered was getting to where RW was (Doris being the most likely place, or somewhere along the way) and finally killing him.

RW was supposed to have died four years ago. He didn't. Then he was supposed to have died three days ago. He did, but he still had an extra life. And then he was supposed to die yesterday, but of course he didn't. It was like he was procrastinating or something.

Yesterday had been a bad day all around. He had a whole new set of memories now, a set he wasn't in love with. Every minute Vernon wasn't thinking about survival or what he was going to do with RW's body, he was thinking of Brandon. More specifically, how and *why* Brandon died. He was only shot by one person, but there were two responsible for his death.

He just stood there and watched Brandon die. His best friend, and he just *stood there!* Vernon wasn't anything he'd consider a coward now; cautious, sure, but if he had to live through that situation again, he'd actually do something this time. That didn't change the fact that he *hadn't* done something the first time, though.

Focus, damnit! Brandon's dead, it's your fault, blah, blah, blah. Wasting time on this guilt crap won't bring him back! Get back to work already! RW wasn't far from here (at least, he couldn't be too far from here). With that busted leg, he couldn't have made it back to Doris already. Killing him wouldn't be that difficult, especially considering RW had left behind his bag full of stims and other chems he was so fond of. Forgetfulness on both sides of the dispute, go figure.

But if Vernon kept wandering around with his mind miles and years away, he was likely to get shot the minute RW noticed him (or stabbed or eaten or stung - RW wasn't the only thing out here). Kicking himself over letting Brandon down could wait until *after* the person who did the actual murder was dead.

Vernon kept going. There was plenty of daylight left to burn, and finding RW was just a matter of time.

To be more specific, it was a matter of about three hours. Vernon was roughly halfway between Doris and Harpel when he spotted a man limping in the distance. He drew his guns, but didn't fire yet. He wanted to be able to see RW's face when he died.

Silently, and cursing the complete lack of things to sneak up behind out here, he approached RW. There were a few blood-spots on the ground - it was definitely him. Coming closer, Vernon could see that RW was

dragging his leg (wrapped in what used to be his shirt) behind him, and using his shotgun as a crude cane.

He crept closer, every step calculated, every motion as silent as possible. If RW heard him, he showed no sign of it. Vernon kept one gun raised (his gun, the one he looted from that corpse just didn't seem the right one for this role) and the other one in his hand at his side. RW made no moves, other than to keep walking.

Finally, Vernon was within five feet of RW. He aimed at the back of RW's suddenly, RW whirled around and fired. Vernon turned aside, but not quickly enough to avoid being grazed on the side of his stomach. He dropped the gun in his left hand and covered the wound. Fortunately, RW's leg gave way after he turned, sending him to the ground. His hand opened from the force of impact, sending his gun rolling across the dirt.

RW reached for his dropped shotgun, but two bullets ripped into his hand before he could grip it. "FUCK!" he shouted in pain, clenching one hand in another. Vernon walked up, calm as day, and fired twice more, this time into the leg he hadn't busted yesterday. RW screamed again, but went silent when Vernon placed a gun to his head.

Vernon wasn't necessarily a superstitious person, but he didn't risk jinxing the whole situation by saying "It's over". Twice he had done that, and both times RW came out alive. Instead, he glared down at RW, his eyes full of a fearful mixture of hate and rage.

He smiled his twisted lopsided smile, a split second before he pulled the trigger. RW's skull exploded. Vernon fired twice more, for good measures, and for those two times he hadn't killed RW.

Vernon half-sat, half-fell down. Remembering that he had almost been shot, he started digging through his backpack for a stim. After searching through a pile of chems he had pilfered from RW's bag (*wonder if his shotgun will fit in here*), he found one and injected it into his side. It hurt like crazy, but the pain passed after a few seconds.

After staring at the pile of flesh that had been RW a few moments ago, Vernon reached a conclusion. This time, he was dead for good. And it only took four tries (five, if you counted the hanging, and six for Brandon's attempt). Vernon lifted RW's shotgun off the ground and slid it between his belt and his pants.

Well...now what? Vernon didn't know. Taking a long break from his job was the first idea that came to his mind, and he didn't see any reason not to go for it. After spending a few moments guessing which direction South Bluff was in, he took off.

Vernon slept that night. It was the first peaceful sleep he had in a long while. He remembered Brandon, before that day. In his waking hours, though, he would constantly remember Brandon and that bad fucking day, and how he had let his best friend down. But after a while, Vernon decided to just let all that go. He had killed RW, and he had taken over Brandon's role as the hero. There was nothing more he could do for his friend now. He never forgot Brandon, though. He just accepted what had happened, and resumed his job. It was a shit job, and somebody needed to do it. Despite his constantly complaining about it, Vernon wanted to be the one to. Over the years, and much to Vernon's surprise, others started following in his path. It was something Vernon had never expected to happen. Within ten years, there were enough of them to cover the entire Great Trading Ring. Since he wasn't quite ready to retire yet, Vernon headed out into the wastes, intending to find a new place to set up shop. He never returned to the Great Trading Ring. His story remained, though. The few that asked him it told others. About the man who wouldn't die. About the man that had been forgotten. And about the man with the scar along his mouth.
