

At last, today was the day. The day that mattered the most to all nine of the men currently cramped inside a tiny conference room, huddled around a small glass table, with barely enough space to accommodate all of them, somewhere in the middle of the desert. Not because today in *particular* was of any grand importance, but because all the days before it seemed to gradually lack *any* to speak of.

It wasn't always like this, and in the spare time they had before the event that was about to take place, a few of the nine mercenaries began to let their minds wander back to the old times of war: a time where they fought other mercenaries – suspiciously similar to themselves in appearance – tooth and nail, for dominance and control over several plots of land. As inconsequential as those singular plots may have been, they all were a piece of a larger picture: once enough land was controlled, you had a sense of power. You had a sense of *accomplishment*. Of course, it wasn't *their* land to hold, but they were only human – one could forgive them for the pride they felt in their duties. The important thing was, every day felt different; like a new challenge – with tangible, measurable results.

Today, in the loose sense of the word – though it had lasted, at present, for ten years and counting – land was only *protected*, as hordes of robots began to rain down from the skies, in tanks and planes alike, in presumably endless numbers, all for the goal of destroying one branch of a hat factory's empire. Bizarrely, this had the same degree of scope as the mercenaries' previous occupations: there were branches of Mann Co. all across the world, and for nine men alone, it seemed like a daunting enough challenge, in theory. However, robots are nothing, if not predictable. Day after day, wave after wave, no matter where they were stationed, it all began to feel like the same fight – and for *what*? So that *one, singular branch* of a corporate empire would remain standing, until the robots began the same strike all over again tomorrow? They were, of course, handsomely paid; the robots themselves *ran* on money-to-burn, after all; and perhaps, the men shouldn't have cared, but at least a *few* of them began to miss it – the rush, the highs of the old day's war.

This had come to the boss's attention of late – the result of tensions exploding between the more eccentric ones of the bunch, and a poor subordinate named Mr. Reddy. The men didn't exactly *have* an appointment with Saxton Hale today, but a few of them made it clear to the receptionist that they were *about* to. The problem had become too large to ignore, and if Hale would like to *keep* the men on his payroll, it was time, after these ten long years, for a *renegotiation*.

“And so, you'll have it!” boasted Hale, standing proudly at the front of the room; which wasn't very far from the table, all things considered. The room was barely wide enough to contain the table, Hale, and the rather slender man behind him, Mr. Bidwell. The only one with a proper suit in the room, Bidwell was what Hale would often refer to as “one of the eggheads,” which meant it was *his* job to deal with the feedback – this was *his* problem – Hale didn't want anything to *do* with it, but he was *certainly* about to take credit for the invention that Bidwell was presenting, in his outstretched arms.

“You will give us...drinking glass?” pondered Heavy, resting his head in one of his arms, as he stared at the off-color, yet otherwise standard-issue canteen; as though any such thing could possibly be considered *compensation*. It was almost insulting to him. “We *have* this.”

“Ah, but you don't have *this* one!” Bidwell exclaimed, pointing a finger at the collective group at the table, continuing his speech. “This one is *unique*. You aren't supposed to drink from it, you see – in fact, we are legally required to advise you **not** to even **consider** drinking from it.”

“So it's...a *useless* drinking glass.” chimed in the Engineer, standing up from his seat, and preparing to walk out of the room. “I think we'll pass,” he stated with a sigh, turning towards his peers at the table, and motioning for their response.

The rest of the men agreed in their own sorts of ways: some nodded, the Spy held his head in the palm of his hand, and Demoman seemed to have been asleep the whole time – but the rest of them knew, he wouldn't have agreed with it either. Eight of the nine men were about to leave the meeting, seventy seconds after it had began.

“It is ***not*** a *useless drinking glass*.” Bidwell spat out, which was typically unlike his sort of demeanor, as Saxton Hale moved to block the door, and crossed his arms. “It is a *trophy*! You wanted recognition, didn't you? *Well!* Here it is: a stylish, *solid pyrite*, symbol of magnificence!”

“I *like* it!” The Soldier was the first to sit back down; he hadn't understood a *few* of those words, but a trophy *was* a trophy, and for a man who created his own medals out of bottle caps some thirty years ago, this seemed to be more than enough to convince him.

“There, you see?” Bidwell said, letting a slightly relieved sigh of his own slip out. “Now, we have prepared a great deal of these, in a vast array of colors; all yours for the taking!”

The rest of the men each began to sit back down, and all of them eventually agreed to the new deal: in addition to their current agreement, they would each receive, a few times a year, their choice of a few of these fascinating new trinkets. All was well, and the grind continued for a few more invasions, until a *new* situation came to light a few years down the road.

“Bidwell,” Hale began, walking to the conference room, a tad earlier than he had in the previous meeting, so as to discuss some private matters, “how *did* you manage to mass-produce those knickknacks?”

“It's all on the cheap, sir,” Bidwell reassured him, walking down the hall, a few steps ahead, “we've had those canteens in the warehouse down the road for *ages* now. If you recall, Reddy thought we would manage to acquire *dozens* of men to aid our cause—”

“And we wound up with *these* nine idiots for *years on end*,” Hale concluded, stopping in his tracks. “We've had our backs against the wall for what seems like an **eternity**, Bidwell—” Hale slammed his fist into the wall, creating a rather large hole to illustrate his point, “—and *now*, there's a *problem* with those little toys? What do they want *now*, a *plaque*? Your parking space?”

“Well, you see, sir,” Bidwell spoke in a lower tone than usual, his head hung low, “we, um, we painted them all with paint containing dangerously high levels of *lead*.”

“*Bidwell.*” At this stage, Hale was beginning to grow impatient, though he sat as calmly as he could, in one of the conference room chairs, swung around to face Bidwell at the front. “We *already* give them *water* with dangerously high levels of lead. What could *this* possibly do to hinder us any farther?”

“It isn't *them* we're worried about, Mr. Hale.” Bidwell motioned out the window, as Hale stood up to look outside. “It's the warehouse.”

The large, wide building that had stood outside, with a clear view from the conference room window, was no longer there. In its place, there was merely a hole, equally as wide – though, no one could tell, at this stage, how deep.

“The *canteens*, sir. The toxic waste barrels you had *insisted* we store them in have eaten through the floor; and, I’m afraid, taken the canteens *with* them.”

“We had no other space I cared to use, Bidwell. Next time, we store these sorts of things in your office, as I had requested.”

“The primary concern at the moment,” Bidwell reiterated, motioning two outstretched hands downward, “is what the mercenaries are liable to *do*, when they find out that—”

“There’s no more canteens?” the Soldier wept, standing at the door behind them. It was all he could do to prevent himself from falling on his knees and bawling out his eyes, right then and there. “But...we can get *more*, right? And we’ll all be heroes? Just like you’d said?”

“I’m afraid not.” Bidwell slowly began to walk behind Hale, who was stout enough for *two* of him to have been adequately protected. “Those were our only spare supplies. To acquire more of them would cost more than the company is willing to spend on, well, *frivolities* of this nature; not to mention on such short notice.”

“Then you’d best get the company to reconsider.” said the Engineer, as he, alongside the rest of Hale’s hired crew began to file into the room, “If y’all don’t believe our services are worth payin’ for, we can render ‘em for *free*.”

“Wh—what’s that supposed to mean?” Bidwell stammered, inching closer to the window. “Is that a *threat*? We can have you *terminated* for that!”

“We already *are*.” whispered the Sniper, extending a contract out from the shadows of his peers, as he leaned against the frame of the door. The Pyro wordlessly cackled as they lit the paper aflame. The Sniper let the paper go, and its ashes drifted silently to the floor.

“Yeah! We got a ***new*** boss!” the Scout threw his arm forward, pointing his aluminum baseball bat at Hale with one hand, while pointing up towards the conference room’s intercom on the wall above them with the other.

At that moment, as if on cue, the intercom crackled to life, as Saxton Hale crossed his arms and lowered his head. He knew what was to happen, as a new voice spoke brazenly through the intercom. It was a much older voice, barely clinging to the life it had left in it. But it was someone Hale knew very well.

"Attention, Mann Co. employees! I, **Gray Mann**, am the *new* CEO of Mann Co.! And I order you to get Hale *out of my property*!"