

The bear stood in front of the table at the rundown flea market, his paws in his tattered hoodie, a scowl on his face that reached up to his ears and pinned them down. His belly was beyond the angry grumbling stage, and had climbed to the 'angry pouting' stage. Despite the smell of fried dough and meat from the booth around the corner, he didn't feel the hunger pangs anymore. Besides, the money in his pocket wasn't to for food.

"It's right here, for ya, if you want it," Scruffy Jack said, his paws hovering over the box for a moment.

There was a twinkle in his eye that set off alarm bells in Walf. Alarm bells he'd grown to know very well working the counter at his parent's game store over the years. But he was desperate.

"And this is one of this missing three," Walf said, forcing his ears upright into the blank 'may I help you' smile. "You certain?"

"I tell you, it's a 1987 cart," the old wolf said, looking down for a moment, then back up. "You want to jabber all damn day like that bat, or you gonna make yer move?"

The bear looked down for a moment and sighed. Closing his eyes he saw his mom and dad behind that counter in the game store. The old standby customers, some of whom had moved on or died before his parents did, around the counter chatting with the staff as they looked over the new games coming in. He saw his parents still inside talking, while a door slammed, and a large red "CLOSED" sign was plastered over the door.

Walf in that moment could almost feel himself standing outside that door staring at both of their ghosts through it, never getting a chance to see them or feel their presence again. His breath caught in his throat for a bit, and the bear twisted his ears and looked down and pretended he was searching for his wallet as he tried to hide the tears. "Let's see it," He said at last.

"That bat sure knows howta talk," Scruffy said as he pulled out a metal box with a lock on it. "But he cain't see so well at times I wreckin him bein a bat an all." He worked the lock on the ancient rusty gray box. "But, I did show him this and he seen alright, then." And the top popped off.

The old wolf reached inside, his ears bolt upright in it's own customer service smile that didn't quite match that disturbing twinkle, as he reached inside the box and handed it to Walf.

Walf was desperate, so desperate to save the one thing his parents had left him that he was standing in the middle of God's own blight upon the Earth: Dragon Egg Flea Market. So desperate in fact, he ignored the badly printed inkjet label on the box in front of him and still reached out and opened it. Desperate enough that his heart began to race with poisonous hope.

The old wolf stood back, his tail swaying in the lazy wag it had when he thought he had a sucker on the hook. His ears was pointed forward in a grin that tugged at the corner of his muzzle as he said, "well?"

Walf's paws almost shook as he pulled the box open carefully. His ears were twisted back into the grimace that was on his muzzle. It was entirely possible that the cart was real. That the old wolf who's hide had more than one scar from a disgruntled customer, had stumbled upon the real thing. The cart didn't have an official box after all. Perhaps he printed his own out of an unused pizza box for show?

As the cart slid free of its corrugated prison, it took Walf less than three seconds to evaluate it. "Fake," he said, tossing it back on the table.

"Be careful with the merchandise," chastised the old wolf, his ears and tail now showing shock and surprise. "And what do you mean, 'fake'? I got a letter of authenticity and everythin."

Walf sighed as he pinched his nose, a snarl forming on his muzzle. "The Nullz 1987 Sword and Fantasy Championship cartridge has a printed label like this one. But the back does not have the original care label printed on every other cartridge. It's spot has been left blank. The screws are not standard steel screws like in your cart, but solid gold. Which makes sense, because the championship cartridge is GOLD."

He pounded the table for emphasis as the old wolf glared at him. The snarl on the old wolf's muzzle matching the twist of his ears. "And," Walf continued, "I bet this was worth some money before, some idiot," he paused for a moment, and glared at Scruffy Jack.

"I outta,"

"Idiot, I say," Walf snarled, "decided to spray paint this standard competition cart gold and re-brand it. Like new, that cart would have been worth two hundred. Now that it's defaced? Twenty bucks."

the old wolf took a swipe at him as he snarled, "You bastard, disparagin my name, my reputation?! Get away, you mangy mongrel, before I bite your hide! I oughta call the law on you, have you arrested for slander, you...you broke bastard! Ain't my fault you lost your store blind asshole!"

A feline mother shopping with her kitten at another table didn't turn around, but she pulled her child closer, her ear swiveling as if searching for trouble. "Sorry," Walf grumbled as he walked by her, the curses of the old wolf chasing him down further down the isle.

The gray, darkening skies began to match his spirits. That cart, as long of a shot as it was, was his only shot at saving his parent's store. His last chance at protecting the only place in the world he ever called home. Just like the dragon of legend, only no angel was there to give him any golden eggs. *Should have known better than to trust anything from here*, he thought.

The price a 1987 Nullz Sword and Fantasy Championship cart would fetch him would have been more than enough. He could have paid off the rent in mom and dad's store, and keep the doors open for another couple years at least. He could have paid off the back rent he owed for the small apartment above the store and finally be able to stop sleeping in the storage room. Maybe even he could have finally get his rust bucket truck repaired, if not replaced with something slightly newer. It would be enough for him to live for once instead of just struggle to survive.

But as Walf passed table after table, slowly, his paws clenched into fists inside his hoodie, his ears pinned in anger and desperation, he remembered how futile of a desire that was for one such as him. For any local who could not escape. Struggle, even at the stores height was all he had known, after all. *It's all I'll ever know*, he thought bleakly. *No angel cares about the affairs of a bear.*

It was as if the land itself had been blighted. Scraggily, brown weeds pushed up around tables and at the edges of the gravel lot. Thin, blighted trees offered little shade against the heat. A heat which was a constant for their little town. The thin stream that gave up that nugget so long ago that changed the life of one dragon pooled and congealed beside the flea market itself. It's contents so polluted that no one dared to venture into it anymore. The only prospecting people did now was on those tables. *It's hard to believe*, Walf thought as he passed the tables filled with used wares and cheap scams, *that a dragon was able to find a golden nugget all the way out here.*

In truth, it was as if the land itself had pulled every bit of goodness out of itself and the people upon it to birth that dragon his nugget. Now the people who lived there were either like Walf and used up, or worn and hard, filled with thorns and anger like Scruffy Jack. Whose only pleasure in life came from scamming and hurting others. The bigger the scam, the more pain he caused, the more pleasure he gained. "Old dragon took the last bit of goodness from the silt, and left us with the scraps," Walf grumbled, as he pressed towards the back. He looked towards the sky, in desperation, fighting the tears in his eyes.

"Oh now, I wouldn't say that, sugah."

Walf looked down saw an old mare sitting in the corner, her gnarled hands resting upon a cane. Each finger curled around it, the thicker nails that horses were known for a thick yellow color. Her skin was old, wrinkled. Like someone had balled up a sheet of paper so many times it had turned to tissue.

She smiled, showing off her yellow, gnarled stumps that existed in the grey swamp of her maw. "Don't you know that dragon found his nugget right here? Out prospectin, he was. A scent of desperation about'em. As if the very world would swallow'em up if'n he couldn't find what he was lookin for."

"Well ma'am," Walf said. "There hasn't been gold in that river for many, many years. Even the tourists stopped panning the stream there, behind ya. Now this place is not good for nothing except, well,"

"Rippin people off," she asked, arching an eyebrow above her thick sun glasses. Her ear twisted around in a smirk as she did so, leaning forward.

Walf looked down at her table. It was junk like the rest of'em. Old electronic equipment scratched and marred from claws and hooved nails used and abused over years and decades. CDs filled with music no one had even recognized anymore and enough scratches to make some of them almost see-through. "Some are," Walf said finally. "I usually don't talk to them."

She smirked. "So, you're saying that I'm not," she said.

"Well," Walf replied. "I usually don't talk to people trying to rip me off."

The old horse cracked a laugh, and Walf then could have sworn he saw a fly buzz out of her mouth. "I talked to you, sugah. You're just too damn polite to tell me to buzz off!"

Walf blushed, his round ears twisting back a moment as he shoved his paws into the pockets of his hoodie.

"Oh, now, don't get bashful, it's true," she said. "You won't tell a blind old horse that she's got junk. You can't tell a blind old horse that she's wasting your time and to buzz off, either. Your heart is much too kind for that."

"Well," Walf said, "I don't think you're wasting my time, ma'am. But you may want to be careful, cause it looks like it'll rain soon."

The old horse shook her head. "Nah. Won't rain till I want it too. Don't worry your pretty brown head over that." She leaned forward onto the cane. "You know what happened all those years ago?"

"The dragon egg? Yes, I know the legend."

She laughed, "Egg!" She gawfawwed again for a moment, her thin matted tail whipped twice around her as she did so. "I suppose it was large enough to be an egg. He was prospect'n after the gold

rush was done. No one thought he woulda found a single thing. 'Hills are tapped out, old fool' they all told'em."

"But, the Dragon of legend," Walf said, continuing, "kept working the claim."

The old horse leaned forward, the few strands of hair left on her equine tail flipped a couple times. "Yes," she said. "No one knew why. Tell me, why'd you keep that game store open all this time? Wouldn't it have been smarter to close it down years ago when you could have sold your inventory off and made at least some profit?"

"Because," Walf bit his lip, his ears folded back. "Because," he sighed, and forced the words out. "I grew up down those isles. Mom working the register, or beating some punk who thought he was hot shit at Masgen Football or Immortal Fighters. Dad in the back with his soldering kit repairing the consoles and games. Of the kids who came in and talked to me for hours about Sword and Fantasy, or Cloud Fox, or a thousand other games. I have so many memories in that place. I can't let it die."

"They're still alive if you're still there," she said, finishing for him. "Part of them at least."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I have my ways," she said with a grin. Then the old horse sat back in the seat. "Now, the reason that dragon worked the land was for the very same thing. He worked the stream with his parents as a child when he wasn't helpin out on their farm. His mom passed and was buried on that place. His father died in that very stream. He always said that he felt gold was right below his feet."

"It took an angel to show the dragon where it was," Walf said. "So the legend goes."

"Well," the old horse said, and smirked. "Perhaps an angel. Been called worse."

She slid a box forward across the table. "I want you to have this."

"O-okay," Walf picked up the box in one hand, holding it. "What do you..."

"No, no money. You keep your money." She smiled. "You buy yourself somethin to eat. You don't eat enough as it is."

"How can you tell that," Walf asked.

"Oh, I heard your belly growlin at you from the moment you stepped through that front gate."

"So, why give this to me?"

"Because," the old horse said. She pulled off her glasses then, letting Walf see the milky whites of the thick cataracts on her eyes. But there was something else behind them. A glowing red light, full of life, love, and mischief. "Because good people are hard to come by, especially these days. Goodness and kindness should be rewarded more often than it does. With good things like love and tenderness, not scams and heartache."

Walf picked up the box, pressing a claw against the seal on it. The plain brown corrugated box itself had a familiar, yet unfamiliar quality to it. His heart raced as he traced a claw over it. "Oh no," she said. "Don't open that now. Get in that rust bucket truck of yours first. Besides," the old horse thumped her can down once. A clap of thunder rang out from the heavens. "I hear it's gonna rain, hahaha"

"Apple Mae," Walf gasped. "The angel!"

The old horse winked at him. "Now go," she said. Another peal of thunder rang out from the heavens. Loud and angry, with enough force that everyone in the flea market looked up for a moment at the sky in wonder and fear. Walf looked back down at the table and it was empty, save for a single broken cane leaning against it.

He raced towards his truck, a sheet of water chasing him the entire way. He leaned over the box, trying to protect it as his knees pumped, jumping over puddles rapidly filling. Dodging around the cat woman and her kitten. He threw the door of his truck open and slammed it shut just as the worst of the storm hit.

Others weren't so lucky, many holding their wares above their heads give them some protection from the Cadillac sized drops that were slamming the earth and filling the many potholes in the parking lot.

Walf's paws shook a second time as his claw slid across the small tape marking. It had been opened before. The box was the right shape. Could it be? Was it one of the missing three? Part of his brain expected something great and spectacular. The fabled cart, or even a golden nugget. Another part, a more sinister part used to the slings and arrows of existence in that very town expected rusty nails or a rock. The ramblings of a crazy old horse preserved in physical form. He pulled the edge of the cardboard upwards towards himself and hinged the box open.

There, sitting in sealed plastic, behind it's certificate of authenticity, was an original 1987 Nullz Sword and Fantasy Championship cartridge.