



Fallout Equestria: Guise of Chaos

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Synopsis:

Life in the wasteland can be hard. Ripple, one time raider and all around bad pony, finds himself with nothing but a couple of weapons, no memory, and a massive head wound. Not satisfied with a life that gets him shot and left for dead, he tries to be a better pony with the second chance he's been given and make the wasteland a better place.

Chapter 1: Head Wounds

The rain came down, one of the few constants in life. Hardship, pain, killing. Rain. Always the rain. It hurt more today than usual and I lifted a hoof to my forehead. Thinking back, I didn't know where I was, what had happened, or what day it was.

Who I was.

My hoof came back covered in my own blood. I had the feeling that this was not a new occurrence, but no particular moments came to mind. I knew I'd been shot, stabbed, burned, run the gamut of injuries in the wasteland. I didn't know where, when or why.

Pulling myself shakily up, I stood and leaned against a burnt tree, dead and baked. Looking into a puddle at my feet, I saw a ragged and beaten stallion staring back at me with bright green eyes. White coat showing through blood soaked bandages and wrappings, a dark gray mane shot through with streaks of blue. The wrappings made me look like a monster I had read about long ago, in my innocent days in the Stable.

Stable 87.

Ah, I was from a Stable, at least if the voice in my head could be trusting. If I was, I wasn't some greenhorn fresh out of the safety of controlled shelter, naive to the world and full of good intentions. At least, I hadn't been. Checking myself over with a medical acumen that felt gained through years of struggle and fighting, removing bullets and treating burns, I ran through a checklist. All my limbs intact, check. Horn intact, check. Skin still there, mostly.

The one thing that seemed off was the rough burn starting at my muzzle and running up to my left ear. Bloody, burnt down to the skull in sections. It made me look horrifying, like someone had torn the middle out of a picture of my face. I grimaced and went back to my checklist.

Name. What was my name. Looking back, my cutie mark shone out from beneath a dirty bandage, rippling waves as if on water.

Ripple. Rip. Two Kick.

I think my name is Ripple. Ripple sounds right. The two kick part I wasn't sure about.

My barding was damaged, barely clinging to my beaten and bruised body. The armor plates on it were rusted and worn, covered in scratches and what I could only describe as battle damage. Holstered at my side was a lever action shotgun, a shiny piece of metal and wood in a field of cracked, bloodied leather.

Broken, my 12 gauge shotgun and closest friend.

My shotgun's name was Broken and I hoped that it had gained this name in jest more than in practice. A tightness around my hind hooves drew my attention and I saw the two coverings there, each sporting a set of tubes. Plates covered my rear hooves, both for armor and function, in surprisingly good condition in comparison to everything else I wore. Reaching out with my telekinesis, I opened one of the tubes out of curiosity. A shotgun shell nestled within. Checking on the others, I only had the one shell. My mind wrapped around the workings of the twin weapons and I smiled. These fired a shell into anypony I kicked.

Nasty.

So much fun.

I was a fighter. Not some doctor traveling the wastes, helping ponies and bettering lives. Not some technically centered pony repairing junk across the land. I was built to hurt. Those were survival skills, just icing on the cake.

Now why was I lying in a puddle in the middle of a field with nothing but worn gear, a nasty head wound and no idea how I had gotten here?

Check your PipBuck, provided you haven't forgotten how.

Now I could feel that only one of my limbs was unencumbered, rear legs sporting the kicking weapons and a device on my front right leg. A worn device, but one that looked rather sturdy.. Lifting the chunk of metal and rubber to where I could better see it, I nudged a switch on the side. Date. Time. Location. My notes section was.... disturbingly blank. Map just showed the area about me, no prior information. If I was indeed a tested and worn survivor, why did my PipBuck have all the information a foal would? Had it been tampered with?

Could anypony even do that? If they did, it was probably right before they shot me in the face.

But why?

Confident now that I could move without getting a face full of ground, I limped out of the field, heading towards a broken down sky carriage stop. Cover was better than an empty field, the light ticking I just realized I'd been hearing compounding that. The field was radioactive, probably due to the rain.

The rain's radioactive. The mountains above had been balefired in the war. Did you really forget all this?

Neighwhere? The war? I knew more than I knew, as much as that hurt to think about. The shot to the face had taken the page of an encyclopedia labeled 'Ripple' and shredded it to confetti. I was reading the scraps as they drifted by, a short flurry of memories and images. Also my shredded self could apparently make allusions like nopony's business.

As I reached the cover of the stop, a small flash of yellow and pink shone through a pile of trash. I picked at it with my horn, my telekinesis striking me as much weaker than my body was used to. Pushing aside 200 year old trash, I found a box adorned with triplet butterflies. Part of me knew what that meant and I reached out, hoping it was not locked.

Celestia was apparently smiling on me today. The box popped open, no lock or even resistance, as though it had wanted to open. Opening it fully, I rummaged through, looking for anything that would heal me. My face. My burn. My memory.

A bottle of purple fluid stood out to me. Healing potion. Pure ambrosia. Popping the top, I slammed the contents and sighed lightly, a feeling of wellness spreading through me. I could feel the bleeding from my face stemming, though the sharp pain remained.

I had weapons but no extra ammunition, no supplies, no idea. Putting the small bottle in a tattered pocket, I sat to take a few extra moments out of the rain. Though rejuvenated, I still felt beaten. Like my muscles themselves didn't feel like putting any effort. My body ached for something I didn't have and I looked eagerly forward to when I could remember what that was.

Voices. At least three voices accompanied by the sound of hooves walking down the street. Instinctively, I took cover, putting the wall between them and myself.

“Hate said he'd be just laying there, easy pickings. Don't think anypony could survive a shot to the head like Hate said he'd done, not even Kick, but there's good caps in making sure.” Peeking at them through a hole, I saw three filthy ponies wielding two baseball bats and a shotgun, heading down the road

towards the field. I had little doubt that they were after my supposed corpse.

Hate. Hate. Hate. Hate. Hate.

The name kept ringing in my head. I knew Hate, but I didn't know who he was. Now I had a name to attach to the hole in my head, though. These three were going to lead me back to Hate and I could return the favor of taking off his face. As the three grew closer, I crouched, ready to leap. I had one shotgun shell in one of my weapons, but still I felt that I would be able to take them down in close combat.

As the trio walked past the stop, I sprang, throwing myself into their midst. I aimed a kick with my rear legs at the pony wielding the shotgun, my hooves connecting with the side of his head. I'd taken care to not trigger the shell in its chamber, but the result was still impressive. The side of his head sort of caved in with a sickening crunch, dropping him like a sack of apples, blood leaking from his eyes and ear.

The other two began turning on me as I sent another kick into the side of the second, a mare. I could feel ribs give way, shredding organs as they went all the way through, punching out through the opposite side. I paused for just a second, apparently not knowing my own strength.

You're still weak. You need more strength.

This time, the voice wasn't mine and the added pause hurt. A baseball bat smacked into my spine, sending a lightning bolt of pain shooting through my body. I kicked out instinctively with a front hoof, hitting him in the leg and forcing it in a direction it didn't want to travel. He cried out in pain, dropping the baseball bat clenched in his teeth as he did so. I didn't know how he'd been talking so clearly with it in his mouth, but that didn't matter.

I slid the baseball bat away from him and lifted his fallen comrade's shotgun with a glow of steel gray magic. The barrel pressed into his ear, his eyes darting to focus on mine as tears streamed from them. His leg breaking had only been the start of a bad day for him.

“Where is Hate?”

I could have asked who Hate was. Could have asked who I was. Could have asked why I'd been shot. I just wanted to know where the fucker that capped me was so I could bring it back to him tenfold. The rage in my eyes told the broken buck he had better start talking or I'd keep breaking.

“He was passing through Neighwhere! I don't know where he was headed, he only stopped long enough to hire me and mine to deal with 'ya. Come on Two Kick, you know me, it was just money! Nothin' personal.”

I paused yet again. I knew him? My eyes darted to his flank. A baseball bat and a ball. I grunted and jammed the barrel in further. He cried out. “Come on! We grew up together! It was always just a game, playful competition! Nothing to kill your own over.” I.... could not remember this pony. Had I killed my family? Friends? Playful rivals?

“Yeah.... I'm drawing a blank. Remind me who you are.” Nice job. Play it up like he's just beneath my notice. Not like I couldn't even remember my whole name. Nope. He honestly looked hurt when I said that, but he was still a pony who had taken money to either make sure I was dead or finish the job. Not what I'd call a friend.

“It's me, Outfield. Come on, Two Kick, drop the gun. You already killed Homerun and Strike.” The similarly baseball themed mare and the mustard buck with a bowling pin mark. “Look, I'll just head on and forget this happened. I'll avoid ya whenever I sees ya. No harm, no foul.”

Outfield. Name was NOT ringing any bells, but still I played on the side of mercy and removed the ammunition from the weapon with a series of pumps on the action. He stood shakily as I placed the

pilfered shells into Broken, the weapon accepting each almost hungrily. I tried to keep the weapon focused on him, but my magic was strained. I was exhausted. More so than it felt I should be.

I lowered the weapon and put it in its holster. Outfield visibly eased up and began looking around. He nodded shakily to me and quickly trotted off, leaving me with his fallen friends. My fallen friends? This was getting old fast and it had only been fifteen minutes, tops.

I began looting through the bodies, hoping to get it over with before I felt any guilt. They'd tried to kill me, taking what was theirs as reparation just seemed natural. Like I'd grown up with it. In Strike's bag I found twenty shells. 12 gauge. Beautiful. Another potion, something labeled 'Med-X' and a knife that looked like it was carved from a chunk of glass. The Med-X looked familiar and I found that it helped dull the pain in my face as I took the drug..

The second bag, that of the fallen Homerun, was caught on something until I realized that it was the broken ribs I had sent through her body. Part of me felt that it was an earth pony, not a unicorn like myself, that should be able to put out that much raw power. I shook the bag loose and opened it. My eyes immediately went to pair of needles with a crudely drawn red rabbit on each. I pulled out one and before I'd even thought about it I had injected it into my side.

Need it. Want it. Crave it.

The effect was immediate. The world slowed down a bit. I could count the rain drops. I could kick a hole in a mountain. I could be shot by the biggest gun in the world and keep going. Oh yeah. This is what I needed. I heard the cheering of a crowd, felt blood soaking my sides, felt the rush of victory. Holy shit was this stuff good. The ache was gone. I was a God, and Alicorn crammed into a unicorns body, a Dragon in pony flesh.

I was the baddest motherfucker in all of the Wasteland.

As blood lust's luck would have it, Outfield had been a traitorous snake. He came at me from behind, limping badly and swinging a jagged shard of metal. The blade hit me in the neck, cutting deep but not hitting anything vital. His weapon stuck there as I grinned maniacally at him. His eyes opened wide and he saw the emptied needle. He managed to squeak out one word before I hit him in the throat, crushing his windpipe. My second blow went through his other leg, dropping him entirely. Then it was just stomping and kicking. A frenzy of blood and rage and bone.

My world went red as the drug really kicked in, going strong for several seconds before everything went black. As the lights went out, I thought of the word he'd said.

“Stampede.”

Awesome.

I woke for the second time this day staring up into the rain. Looking to my sides I found two corpses and a puddle of slowly diluting red filtering out of a nasty lump. I lifted myself, finding I was weaker than ever. The Stampede had been great, but I hadn't been strong enough to take it. I walked slowly to Homerun's body, wobbling slightly as I did so. I tried to lift the pack from her body but I was too weak magically, so I grabbed it in my mouth and threw it over my back.

I saw the second dose and picked it up gingerly before putting it in my new bag. I picked up what supplies of Strike's I had scattered about and put them in the bag before clearing what was left. Outfield's bag could only be barely made out in the pile I had left of him and I was sure anything of value had been destroyed in my attack. My brutality.

I had no idea where to go from here and decided that where the three had come from was as good a

direction as any. Maybe I'd luck out. Find Neighwhere. Hate. Get revenge. Not like I had anything better to do. It felt that after I had taken the stampede, my driving burn for vengeance was lessened, if only slightly.

I started walking.

As I walked, I looked through the rest of Homerun's things. Several rolls of magical bandages looked rather alluring for some reason. I assumed that since I'd woken up swathed in the stuff I may have a bit of an issue with them, but I had to admit, the thought of myself wrapped all up was pretty cool. Mysterious and dangerous at the same time. A pony nopony would fuck with.

I'd wait for a break in the rain before I did any bandaging though, if my magic would even allow for it. I felt worse than before. All I needed was food, sleep and maybe a nice mare or two. Some more Stampede also would feel good. Neighwhere just felt like the place to find those things. I hoped again I was going in the right direction.

As I walked, I could only ask myself questions. Nothing new, just the classics. Who, why, what, where, when? I'd figured out how. Hate had shot me with an energy weapon or something. No bullet would do the damage done and as I passed broken windows, catching glances of myself in their reflection, I realized that the wound was probably permanent. It'd scar up rough, never heal.

Between bouts of question pondering and staring at my face, I would take Broken from its place at my side and fiddle with it. Considering the sorry condition that Homerun's shotgun had been in, I counted myself lucky to have a weapon free of rust with parts that moved without complaint. The weapon was seemingly too complicated for an earth pony anyways, I couldn't figure out how to hold it in my mouth and operate the lever in any way that would be conducive to not getting killed.. It seemed custom built for the telekinetic prowess of my kind.

Once I had given the weapon a once, twice and thrice over, I went back to my PipBuck every couple of minutes, mostly to take a breather. I was hurting and out of energy, but I couldn't just lay down and wait for another group to stumble across me. In the PipBuck, most of the sections were still empty, but I found that it had taken account of everything I had looted. Various meds and the descriptors. Ammunition, 12 gauge and assorted small arms. About a dozen caps. Healing bandages. A map.

A map?

Wait.

I pulled open the bag and rummaged through, finding a crudely drawn map. On it were a few locations. Neighwhere, with 87 written crudely next to it. Maremack Airbase. Hornsmith. A small beep drew my attention back to the PipBuck It had filled itself in. I was standing just east of the mark for Hornsmith, which must have been a decent town in its time. Now it was ruins. To the west lay Neighwhere.

"Good job. You're not just a weight on my arm, are you?" The PipBuck sat there. I shrugged and went back to messing with the various options and switches. A few pulled to me, like I should definitely get to know them. Old me would have used them, it seemed to say.

Eyes Forward Sparkle. Nothing happened. Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell. The world slowed to a crawl, more than when I'd had the Stampede flowing through my veins, though I still wasn't sure if that was an expected part of the drug or just my overtaxed system reacting negatively to it. I could focus more when I had SATS running. I'd keep this in mind for my next shootout.

Turning north, I noticed a little red mark at the corner of my vision. Brain damage or was I bleeding again. I wiped at my eye to get whatever it was out, which probably saved my life and definitely saved my eye. My PipBuck threw off sparks as a pistol round ricocheted off of it, fired from my left. The red

mark I now saw was corresponding with a blue mare aiming a pistol at me, yelling something at me. She was muffled and I realized that blood had crusted in my ear on that side.

I rolled as another shot rang out, putting a solid looking bench between me and her. I called out to her over the rain,” Look lady. I'm not having a great day and I'm not at the top of my game. Can you stop shooting at me. I don't know if I want to kill another pony without checking something first.” As I said it I recalled that it was pretty much what Outfield had said a minute before he tried to saw off my head. Outfield, who might have been my friend or my brother.

A bullet lodged itself in the thick metal of the bench and I peeked up over. She was ragged, almost as ragged as I must be. Blood streamed from cuts all over her and it looked sort of like she'd been tied up recently, bloody cuts around her legs and neck. She wore only a very thin piece of leather, a holster its only feature.

The pistol she held in her mouth was just clicking at this point, she'd run out of bullets. She dropped the pistol and took a step away from where I took cover. She switched from red to yellow in what I assumed was now Eyes Forward Sparkle and looked me straight in the eye. “Help.”

She hit the ground, passed out. For some reason, I didn't walk off. I approached her, looking for a trap. Perhaps it was the guilt finally hitting me. I had a feeling that the old me had been a bad pony, one that would have left her. Or done much, much worse. New, amnesiac me just didn't feel like indiscriminate slaughter, as much as that sounded like fun to some deep animal part of my mind. The part that was in control told me I should help her. Do something. Make up for what may have been a mistake.

I came to her and found that, wow, she was beautiful. Underneath all the cuts, bruises and burns, she was a knockout. I lifted her lightly and pulled out my last healing potion. Maybe this was karma giving me a chance to brighten my day. It couldn't get much worse, but with luck it could get better.

I popped the top off and put it to her mouth, draining it slowly, lifting her head so that she drank it. I watched the bleeding stop slowly and some of the color returned to her face. After a minute or so, her eyes fluttered open lightly.

Oh god those eyes. Blue and violet. Heterochromia. Big word I knew for some reason. She looked into my eyes, I looked into hers. She punched me in my face wound. My world went white.

“Fuck! Ow fuck!” I recoiled, dropping her and grabbing at my face. When the current wave of blinding pain ebbed, I saw she had my shotgun aimed right into my face. “Okay, look gorgeous. Shoot me, okay. You gave me my answer. Helping somepony isn't gonna even things out, its just gonna get worse. Fuck it, I'm done.”

She faltered in her aim. She whispered lightly, so light I could barely hear it over the pain roaring through my head. “You... aren't here to take me?” I shook my head, spattering blood across the pavement. Great, I was bleeding again.

“Yeah. I thought I'd give the nice pony routine a shot. See how that worked.” I fell to a knee, the pain taking over. “Give you my last healing potion, see if we couldn't help each other out... not die.... get punched in the eye... not gonna.... find..... Hate.”

Out I went. A running theme for the day.

No rain this time. Eyes. Her eyes. I wasn't dead, though I could only see from my right eye. I was on what felt like a mattress, a worried mare looming over me. Could be worse. Could be dead.

“Oh... you're awake. I'm sorry I hit you.”

I smiled up weakly at her. “No problem. I’m sure I had it coming.”

She moved backwards, giving me a little space, looking shyly at me. It was quite fetching. “I... I did what I could. You only had bandages, I used them on your eye.”

I looked to my side. A broken, filthy mirror on the wall showed me. She'd wrapped a wad of the stuff to my face with what was left of the bandages, making me look less like a mysterious and dangerous creature of legend and more like a walking advertisement for getting your flank handed to you. I propped myself up slightly and looked at her. She'd cleaned up a bit and wasn't pointing a gun in my face. Improvement.

“So...” I spoke, putting on what I felt was my most winning grin. “What's your name? I'm pretty sure mine's Ripple. Two Kick. Something.”

She drew back slightly. “Two Kick Rip? The gladiator?”

Yep. That was fear in her eyes. I was a bad pony. She looked ready to run for the door and leave me here. I held up a hoof. “Yeah. I think. Everything before earlier today is sort of... gone. Whoever I was, that's over. I don't want to be... whoever I was. The kind of pony who gets shot by his friends and abandoned in a puddle. The kind who scares beautiful mares.”

Getting shot in the face can change a lot.

She looked less like she was gonna bolt. “I'm...” She looked quickly around the room before her eyes settled back on me. “Shade.”

I narrowed my eye at her. “Did you just name the first thing you saw?” She looked hurt, but the hurt did not look sincere. So she didn't want to tell me her name. Made sense. I was probably a murdering rapist psychopath. I wouldn't push this.

“Never mind. Thanks for not shooting me Shade. It's a nice change.”

She smiled slightly before sitting down next to the bed. She reached over towards me and I eyed her suspiciously, causing her to flinch before commenting on what had clearly caused her to shoot in the first place. “You look like a raider. A mummy raider.”

I chuckled lightly. “I think I was going for an intimidation thing. Guess it worked.”

Seeing how she viewed me, I guess I had to ask. “What have you heard about me?”

She looked over at Broken, resting where she had placed it on the remains of what had once served as my armor. She hadn't removed my hoof shotgun thingies, but I felt that it was more that they were on there pretty good. She still looked terrified and I noted the pistol in its place at her side, ready to be drawn. “I've heard you're ruthless. You dose up and kill anypony who steps into a ring with you. Never takes more than two kicks. You're a monster. One of the worst things to ever step out of Stable 87. You and Hate and your gang.”

Gang? I was in a gang? Makes sense. Maybe Outfield was part of it. Had been part of it. I tried to remember.

Nope, nothing. Everything was blank prior to a few hours previous.

She stared at me, her eyes narrowed cautiously. “You... really don't know this, do you? You don't remember anything or anypony?”

I held up a hoof and flexed my leg lightly. Didn't hurt that bad. “I remember... how to hurt ponies. I remember stampede. I remember.... concepts. Ideas. Muscle memory. Nothing concrete. I only know Hate because somepony tipped me off.”

“So... what are you going to do?”

I'd noticed the waver in her voice after the first word of every sentence. She was holding herself back, not sure if she should be speaking to me or unloading a weapon into my face. I shrugged. “I was gonna head to Neighwhere. Kill Hate. Figure some stuff out.”

She shook her head. “You shouldn't do that. Neighwhere's not a good place right now... or ever really. You'll be shot on sight. Hate runs things there.”

I had no choice but to nod. She knew what was going on. I didn't know the difference between a good idea and a hole in the head. Well, I had an idea.

“So, Shade, what brings you out here? You seem to know Neighwhere, why were you bleeding in a road and shooting at random ponies passing by?” Legitimate question, I felt. Though now that I said it, it might have been a bad idea. The rope cuts couldn't have been anything good.

She sighed, staring at the ground. “I... got away. I ran. Neighwhere is not a good place.” Had she been a pleasure pony or something? What kind of place was Neighwhere? She could see my confusion I guess. “I was a slave. They were shipping us off up to Filly and Red Eye. Griffins were coming to get us. I got out of my ropes and ran. I got a gun. When I saw you walking up the street, I was sure you were coming to collect me.”

“So how do you know I'm not? You could have shot me and kept running. Taken my stuff, made it as far as you could and hidden.” She looked scared. But not of me this time.

“I... couldn't kill anypony. Not again.” So she was complex. I could dig that. She didn't want to kill me. Another bonus.

“So. I can't go back to Neighwhere or I'll be killed. You can't go back or you'll be shipped off to be a slave for the rest of your life. In that case.... perhaps we should figure out where to go? Together I mean.” I could tell she was uncertain. “I know I can't really do anything to convince you I won't beat you to death in your sleep or sell you. From the sound of it I would be expected to do that. All I can really do you is tell you that now I've got a fresh start, I want to try something different. Something less.... downright evil.” I was being as sincere as I could. If what I had been doing had ended with me being shot in the face, a change of pace sounded pretty good.

Her voice kept wavering as she spoke. “I... we.... where would we go? Maremack is a deathtrap, there's nothing here in Hornsmith but ruins and the nearest town not tied to Neighwhere is Blank.”

Again, confusion on my part. “Blank? That's a town.” Pulling out the map I saw that yes, it was there. I'd just thought it was a comment or something. My PipBuck backed up the claim that there was a town called Blank.

“It's a trader town. Not like Neighwhere. No slavers or... other bad ponies. We would be safe.... I would....” She was unsure. I knew from the small screen on my leg that it was at least a days walk. A whole day alone with a monster for her. A day to a town that if they'd heard of me they might open fire. I couldn't blame her for being wary.

I tried standing up before a wave of dizziness hit me and I fell back down. “Fine. I'll walk you to Blank. Once I can walk. We'll head out in the morning.” Again with the eyes. If they weren't so suspicious, I could stare into them all day.

I held up my hooves. “You can keep the weapons for now. I just want some rest. You look like you could stand some as well. I'm in no condition to try anything as is. Hole in the head and all.” With that I forced myself to my hooves. I braced against a table when the dizziness came. “You can have the bed. I'll take the floor.”

I didn't know what it was. Likely that she looked more exhausted than I was, but she accepted my offer. It couldn't have been that I was charming and convincing. No, I was a bloodstained cyclops with weapons all but nailed to my hooves. A walking pile of scars, pain and bandages. I don't think I would have trusted me. But she did. She lay down, her eyes flickering once and she was out.

Good enough for me. I would try the good pony routine. See how that worked. I lay down on the cold floor, sliding all of the weapons away from me towards her sleeping form. A sign of trust. Because she had been kind enough to not shoot me.

As much as you deserve it.

Shut up voice.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as setting.

Anyways, ratings and comments are welcome and encouraged, so have fun with the story.

Chapter 2: Relay

The morning came following a long night of seeing Outfield's face as I crushed it into pulp beneath my hooves. Floating behind me at all time were those eyes. Judging me. Afraid of me. When I opened my eyes, I had to admit that I felt better. I couldn't see Shade from where I lay to my left, so I rolled to bring my good eye towards her.

Straight down the barrel of a gun.

My gun.

Shade lay with it in her mouth, snoring quietly around the handle gripped in her mouth. She'd pointed it at my face but had seemingly fallen asleep while deciding whether or not to fire. I pushed myself slowly away, rather moving myself than moving the gun and risking setting it off. When I was cleanly out of the line of fire, I stood off to the side.

“Shade.”

She mumbled slightly. I couldn't make out what.

“Shade. Time to go.”

I reached out with my magic, the steel colored glow surrounding Broken. I inched it slowly out of her mouth, trying not to startle her. Firing a gun while asleep just did not sound like a good idea. I finally worked the weapon loose and slid it away from her.

Now it was safe to try to wake her. I used my telekinesis, which was feeling much stronger today than it had previously. I used it to nudge her shoulder. Considering my last experience with a waking Shade, I wasn't risking getting too close. We didn't have any more bandages in case she bucked me in the eye again.

“Shade. Wake up.”

Her eyes shot open and she scrambled for the weapon I had moved away from her. She was panicked, but I did what I could to calm her. Holding my hoof out in what I hoped was a calm down motion, I lowered my head to try and look into her eyes. Her eyes connected with mine and locked on, even as her body was in motion.

“It's Ripple. Don't worry, nopony's trying to hurt you. It's just time we started towards Blank.” She slowed her search for a weapon before I floated the pistol she had accosted me with towards her. “Don't shoot me.”

She took the pistol from the air and checked it, showing a surprising familiarity with the weapon. Finding it had no ammunition, she backed away from me slightly, an untrusting look on her face. I reached into my bag for the rounds that matched up with the weapon she held nervously.

Homerun's bag. Homerun's ammo.

Stop it. I handed a small pile of ammo to her and she loaded the weapon with surprising dexterity for an earth pony. I hoped she'd tell me who she really was sometime. For now, I went about working through the remains of my armor, which had been through more than it could handle. I couldn't salvage most of the leather straps or any of the plates of armor.

The spikes. The blood. The fun.

Somehow, I did manage to salvage Broken's holster and sling it over myself. Finding myself without armor was disconcerting, but looking at Shade it wasn't so bad. She looked as though she was glad to just not be wearing chains. I placed my weapon into its rightful place at my side and lifted our bag of supplies with my magic. Yes. Much stronger today.

Shade was staring at me with a pained look, standing away from me. Something seemed to be bothering her quite a bit. She looked at the ground and kicked at a bit of trash. "I... I'm sorry. I almost shot you last night."

I nodded lightly. "I don't blame you, I'm sure I've done enough to warrant it. Don't worry about it, once we get to Blank you can be rid of me and get on with your life."

She looked into my eyes and nodded. I tried smiling, but it seemed to scare her. I'm sure I was terrifying, covered in blood and scars. She nodded towards the door anyways and I opened it with my magic, gesturing with one hoof. "Ladies first."

The road east snaked its way through the remains of Hornsmith, crumbling buildings lining the streets. From what I could gather, this had been a largely domestic city. I saw more homes than anything else, the inhabitants long dead. When I asked Shade if she knew anything about what this city had once been, she shook her head, muttering something about a unicorn town. Then she just stopped talking.

The silence between us was deafening. I had just so many questions that could be answered by pretty much anypony who knew the area. Was Neighwhere really that bad? Were there any other big settlements other than Blank and if so, what were their relationships with Neighwhere? Trading partners? Enemies? Did anypony not shoot at everything they saw?

It was obvious that her thoughts about shooting me while I slept were really eating at her and I dropped back to match pace. She'd been lagging behind the entire trip and I just knew that a whole day of this would be pure torture. I was not content to listen to just the sound of hooves and metal on pavement.

"Shade. You can talk to me. I don't blame you for wanting to kill me. I really don't." She looked away. Celestia was this mare hard to get through to. "Look, I know that I might have been a slaver, a murder, whatever I was. Somehow, I'll be able to prove to you that I've changed. I've left that all behind."

Stacked atop the bodies and blood and bones.

At this point I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince her or myself more. I didn't want to be a bad pony anymore, but I wasn't sure if a life like that could really be left behind. I suspected Shade had the same thoughts.

I saw the raider at the same time he saw me. Brown with a joker's mask as a cutie mark. I realized I hadn't turned on my E.F.S and had practically run into the pony as he came around a corner. Broken came out as quick as I could move it, the raider similarly drawing a large revolver with his own magic. I slammed the thick stock into the side of the unicorn's head, interrupting his hold.

The revolver clattered to the ground and I pushed the shotgun into his eye. He froze as I stared him down. I could hear Shade behind me but couldn't risk a glance back. The unicorn smiled. "Hey Two Kick. Good to see you're alive."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Hate really messed you up, didn't he. You really had that one coming, huh? Haha."

I pushed the barrel further into his now closed eye. "Did I? Tell me about it?" He grinned.

"You don't remember? Really? What, you lost your memory or something?" He laughed at my look.

"Ha! You did, didn't you? That's fucking classic." This pony's joviality was really getting on my nerves.

Who laughs at a shotgun pushed into their eye?

“The look on your face. Fantastic. I mean, what Hate said he got off of you is priceless, but so is that look.” I could hear what sounded like Shade shaking behind me as I glared and ground the barrel even further. Here was a pony who knew what happened to me and I was gonna find out, even if it took breaking every bone in his body.

Crushing and ripping and shredding and stabbing and beating and maiming.

No. That was the old me. The one that died in that field. His open eye drifted past me and looked behind me, a look of recognition sweeping through him. He looked scared for a moment, though he still sported the wide grin. I opened my mouth to ask the laughing pony more, but I was interrupted suddenly.

The shot rang out at the same moment a small red hole punched into the unicorn's face, right under the horn. The back of his head blew out and splattered his back and the street behind him in blood, brains and bone. He died with a goofy grin on his face. I twirled and saw the smoke curling from the end of Shade's pistol.

“What the hell!?! He knew who I was. He knew why I was shot! Why did you do that?!”

She blanched under my yelling and lowered the gun. “He.... that... he.... beat me every night. I couldn't fight back.” The shaking of her legs told me what she meant. This pony was another monster, like me, but this monster had done direct harm to the blue mare I had taken under my protection. I knew that taking this moment of retribution from her would likely remove any chance of me getting her to trust me.

To trust that I was a good pony.

I put Broken back in its holster and sighed. She walked past me and kicked the corpse once before walking off down the road. I paused only long enough to take a quick look through his belongings, finding assorted medicines and ammunition along with a few caps, before going after her. Add this to the list of things I needed to talk to her about.

Back to the stony silence.

We walked like this for another hour.

“I'm sorry.... Everything went dark. I'm sorry.” Her eyes were bloodshot and she was crying steadily. I didn't think that comforting her with a hug was a good idea so I went back to my attempts at verbal comfort.

“Some ponies need to die. It can't be helped.” I really believed this. Every pony like me should be shot in the head at least once. “I'm sure it wasn't my last chance. That's five out of five ponies I've met out here since I woke up in that field who knew who I was. I'm famous.” I shook my head as I lied to myself. “I'm sure the next one will know what I want.” She looked at the ground and turned away from me.

I was fuming inside that I'd lost an easy chance to find out what I needed. Getting away from Neighwhere was our current priority, I'd realized that if it was anywhere near as bad as Shade had said then my walking back in my current condition was a death sentence. I was a tough pony, I had have been to have survived what I did, but a town full of ponies that had known me for years when I didn't even know myself... that sounded like suicide.

Get to Blank, get a few days rest, I'd be ready to come back with a vengeance.

Something the dead unicorn had said kept nagging at the edge of my mind. Not like the voice telling

me to hurt ponies or mock me with information just out of reach, but more of a bad omen feeling. "...what Hate said he got off of you is priceless..." He'd taken something from me before he'd shot me. What could have been important enough for that? I didn't know Hate, but what little I had from the old me told me that he was not the pony to work on a whim. His shooting me had a purpose.

"Shade?" She had taken to walking ahead of me again, I assumed so that I wouldn't see her crying. "What can you tell me about Hate?" The look she gave me was filled with such loathing that I don't think I was fully prepared for it. Her features softened as she saw me flinch slightly.

It took her a while to reply, just walking down the road. Eventually her mouth moved after a few minutes of my thinking she was not going to answer. "Neighwhere is founded on the principle of competition. Everypony trying to be the best at whatever it is they did. Fighting, trading... raping... slaving..." Her voice trailed off as she thought on it. "Hate is the best. No pony has ever beat him, in anything. You were the closest, from what I've heard. He runs the town, you were his enforcer. You... killed so many that didn't deserve it."

That had gone straight back to telling me how rotten I really was faster than I had expected. All it had taught me of Hate was that he was better than I was. At everything, apparently. Great.

"Why haven't you run away?" She stopped walking. She knew who I had been, she knew what I was capable of. Why hadn't she left in the night, shot me while I slept, taken any of the chances she'd had. She could have shot the unicorn and myself easily, ending one of her problems.

"I... I don't know. Strength in numbers? An extra gun?" Her eyes avoided mine, staring at the ground. "You're the first to be kind to me in a long time." Ah. There it was. In this whole world, I was the only pony she knew who hadn't hurt her. At least not that I knew of or that she'd likely mention.

I was her only friend.

An escaped slave and a broken raider.

What a pair.

Shade was walking a lot closer to me than before. Had her admission been a realization on her part? Was she starting to believe I wasn't going to turn and sell her the first chance I got. Do something worse to her? I hoped deeply that she was, without her I was as good as lost.

I was amazed when we made it out of Hornsmith with no further interruptions. There had been a few close calls, but now that I had learned to keep an eye on my E.F.S. we had been able to skirt around any hostiles, though this had slowed our travel greatly. Lacking any medical supplies made the prospect of a fight rather unappealing and we still had a bit of a trip ahead of us.

My PipBuck told me it was midday when we had finally made it out into the endless stretch that was the wasteland proper. Suddenly, I missed the ruined buildings and broken glass of Hornsmith. There was truly nothing out here, a baked and ruined land stretching into the horizon.

"Shade? Have you ever been out here before?" Glancing over I caught her looking at me out of the corner of her eye. I think I almost caught a smile.

"I was born out here, Ripple."

Yeah. Stupid question, of course she hadn't grown up in a stable like me. Good ponies didn't come from stables. They came out like me, monsters that rape and pillage.

Celestia, why was it so hard to talk to this mare?

I felt something hit me in the side. Had Shade hit me? I turned my head as I realized that the impact was on the wrong side. Things slowed down as I saw the tin can spraying sparks at my hooves. I

triggered S.A.T.S. through a reflex I wasn't aware I had and aimed my focus on the can at my hooves. I kicked it as hard as I could, watching in slow motion as it arched up into the air and exploded not ten feet from me.

Nails burst forth from the explosive like rain, pelting my side and neck. I roared as time caught up and the gunfire began, off to my right. There was no cover save for a small ditch that I noticed Shade was already taking cover in, cowering from the gunfire. She'd gone back to the not shooting anypony mood, which did not bode well for our continued survival.

I threw myself to the side, crashing into the ditch next to her. I could feel each individual nail moving in my side as my muscles worked and my skin moved with the effort. Shade had a horrified look on her face, I assumed at my condition, but I didn't care. Somepony needed to die and I knew just how it would happen.

As I pulled my last dose of stampede, I thought briefly about my nice pony attitude. A nice pony could only tolerate so much when the grenades started flying. I jammed the needle into my flank, luckily avoiding any of the embedded nails. The rush came and the pain faded.

That sense of invulnerability swept through me. What was a measly grenade and a few guns to the might of the strongest pony in the wastes? I tensed my legs and propelled myself out of the ditch, flying over the street and landing on the far side.

I came down right in front of the first raider, who was charging our position with the combination of a knife and chainsaw, a rusted blade grinding angrily through it's length. I deflected the blade with one hoof, the chain throwing sparks and chunks of my hoof before slamming my forehead into the raider's face.

My horn punched through bone and brain, killing the pony instantly. With a toss of my head, I threw him aside and rushed the next, a unicorn with a small caliber pistol and a nasty scar across her face.

Somewhere in my mind, I registered the two bullets that hit me in the leg, but the red tint to the world cared not for such minimal wounds. Spinning on a hoof, I planted a kick into her neck, triggering a shell. The blast nearly decapitated the pony, her head flopping about, hanging from a bit of flesh and muscle. Her eyes met mine, a look of surprise and dismay going through her features in that split second.

They'd learn not to fuck with Two Kick Rip, the strongest pony around.

The best!

The third and final raider, a filthy earth pony who looked bigger than his dead companions, came at me through the spray of blood issuing from the unicorn's neck as she wobbled, seemingly unable to fall over. As he spun and delivered a kick to my nail riddled hide, my only thought was that he had copied my move.

How dare he! Did he know who he was fucking with?! Two Kick was NOT going down to something so blatantly stolen! Slaughter was an art!

I regained my balance faster than he did and threw myself into the air, coming down on his spine with both hind hooves. The blast liquefied his midsection, cutting him effectively in half. I landed on my hind legs amidst his ruined viscera, my front hooves held above me to draw in the adulation of the crowd.

The caps thrown from the stands. The weak kneed mares ready to throw themselves at me for my victory party! The congratulations from the other Paragons as I showed everypony we were the best!

The terrified look from the dual colored eyes peeking at me from a filthy ditch on the side of the road, a

bloody hole in her chest. Those cut through the red mist and the feeling of unlimited power faster than anything I could imagine. My blood lust ended as abruptly as it had started when that needle had pierced my damaged side.

I was suddenly aware of how injured I was. I dropped forward onto all four legs and stepped out of the ruined body. Every movement was agony, but watching as Shade went pale and threw up was worse. I stepped towards her and her eyes went even wider before rolling into the back of her head as she slumped over, bleeding in the ditch.

I dragged myself to her side and nuzzled her, trying to get her awake. My mind wasn't working right. Why would she want to see me? All she wanted was to get to Blank and be done with me. I stood still, trying not to think of the amount of metal scattered through my body as I opened one of my bags and drew out some Med-X with my magic. Thank Celestia that neither of us had used this yet.

Injecting myself, I felt some of the pain go away, but it stilled surrounded me like a thick fog. Straining, I lifted Shade's unconscious body onto my back and walked back over to the dead raiders. I couldn't spare the time for a thorough search, but unspending a bag that one of them carried revealed to me what I had hoped so desperately for. Two bottles of purple liquid. I ripped the lid off and emptied the first as I fed it to Shade, much as I had the previous day. The second I ripped the top off of with my teeth and downed in one gulp, feeling my flesh begin to knit together. It was probably a terrible idea to drink this when I was half nail, but I needed it. Enough to keep me going; enough to get me to Blank and deliver Shade into the freedom that she so sorely longed for.

You're losing your edge Two Kick. Leave the mare, take care of yourself.

No! Fuck you. I was going to do this if it killed me. Hate, Neighwhere, none of it fucking mattered if I wasn't able to deliver this pony to Blank. Do one good deed before I died. Redeem myself in some tiny way from the horrors I was sure I had committed.

It was more than something to do in my free time. It was a mission. A quest from a higher power.

That's no fun. No fun at all!

Neither was dying a violent, meaningless death. Go away.

I began walking down the road towards Blank, keeping a pace that wasn't slow enough that I would die before I got there but slow enough that I wouldn't rip myself apart in the effort. I filled my thoughts with those of blue and violet eyes and gritted through the pain.

I had no sense of time as I trudged along that cracked and broken street, time passing oddly. It felt like days at first before feeling like mere seconds. I walked, pushing each leg with the determination that I would not fail at this. All the while, the voice called at me from around those eyes.

I came to a wall.

I saw the sign through a haze of pain and delirium: "Welcome to Blank".

I saw the gate opening and ponies coming out with weapons drawn.

My voice called out from so far away. "Help her. Don't fucking bother with me. She's been shot. Help her."

I fell to the ground, as was becoming so common for me. I closed my eyes as I smiled. I'd made it.

I jerked upwards as my eyes shot open, sending pain shooting through my side. I gritted my teeth and curled up. I was on a bed. A fairly clean bed. I looked around the room. This was as clean as it got in

the wasteland.

To my right, I spotted the blue mare I had died for the second time in two days to save. She was asleep on a couch across the room, curled up and snoring quietly. I could only think that it was odd that she was sleeping in the same room as a dead pony. My eyes stared at her as I puzzled it through. Both of my eyes stared. Raising a hoof, I found that I could see from my previously bandaged eye. The area around the eye was tender and I saw that my leg and especially my hoof was wrapped in bandages. Bandages not soaked in the blood of my victims.

My eyes went back to her as I slowly figured out that I was not in fact dead. A bandage was wrapped across her chest, covering where her wound had been. Taking in all of her, I noticed the little details: The way her hair curled slightly in front of her eyes; the way she kicked lightly at something in her dream; her cutie mark. For some reason, I had never noticed her cutie mark before. A wrench over a heart. That made me chuckle a little.

The sound brought a reaction as Shade's eyes opened sleepily. Seeing me sitting up in bed she let out a small shriek and was across the room in a second. She was hugging me around my neck. I felt her hooves at my back and smiled as her mane tickled at my nose.

The door slammed open and a pony with a rifle flew into the room. He'd clearly been expecting me to try and eat her or something. He lowered the rifle slowly as he saw the mare gripping around my neck. He called over his shoulder. "Doc, your patient is up." He moved to the side as an aged pony pushed his way past, a stethoscope around his neck. He came to me and put a hoof on Shade's leg, pulling her away.

"Back up now Missy, I need to check your idiot friend." She moved only slightly but he pushed past and put a flashlight in his mouth. He shone it into my eyes before pocketing it and using his stethoscope to listen to my chest. I noticed only then that he was flying. He was a pegasus. I don't think I'd ever seen a pegasus pony before.

"Well, checks out. You were mighty stupid, moving about like you did, ya know. Seems like any other pony woulda just layed down an' died, injuries you took. All my years I've never seen such reckless abandonment of a pony's well being." He floated back from the bed and his eyes softened as he looked at Shade. "Though I can see why ya' did it."

"So, my idiot patient, what's yer name? All this mare could say was 'please' when she begged me not to let ya bleed out in front of the gate." Shade still hadn't really moved from my neck. I tried to talk but my throat felt like sandpaper. I coughed, trying to get my voice back and he pulled out a canteen, holding it to my mouth.

Drinking for what felt like the first time in days, my throat felt instantly better. Coughing again, I found the voice to answer him, weakly at first. "My name? Two.... Ripple. My name's Ripple."

"Well, Mr. Ripple, you've been out for some time. Six days after the many hours it took me to get all those nails out. Did you roll in the damned things?" I'd probably be better off not skirting the issue with this pony, he seemed to be all about getting straight to business. "Raiders. They ambushed us. Nail bomb."

He shook his head. "Then you decided to drag your bleeding, nail filled flank all the way to our town? To get this mare to safety, wasn't it? Mighty rare we see chivalrous behavior out here."

Chivalry? No, that was penance. I smiled as I lay back. At least I'd finally seemed to prove myself to her. For the first time in what I suspected to have been ever, I felt like a good pony. The voice yelled at me in the back of my head, trying to convince me to hurt. No. I was stronger than the voice.

Six days?

“She’s been waiting for me for a week?” Why hadn’t she left, started her life? I’d just get her hurt and killed.

The pegasus looked at her briefly before levelling his gaze back on me. “Yep. Which reminds me. We’ve got payment to talk.” Behind him, the pony with the rifle took to standing in what I had to admit was an intimidating pose. The message was clear. Skip out and suffer the consequences. “Another day and you’ll be right as.... radioactive rain. Good enough to pay up, and I’ve got a doozy for ya’ to help me out.”

He turned and left, exchanging glances with the guard pony. The pony with the rifle glared at me and closed the door behind him. Shade was still attached to my neck and I did not really feel up to asking her to get off of me. The weight was quite nice, especially as I heard her snoring softly into my bandaged neck.

Once I got back from whatever payment I had to make, I would have to have a real conversation with her. I owed myself that much. I closed my eyes, of my own volition this time, and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning came much too soon for my taste. I woke feeling better than I had in days, though couldn’t spend much more time delaying. I left the room under the watchful eye of the guard, who’s name I came to discover was Ironsight. The crosshair on his flank spoke volumes of his skill with that rifle. I was expecting that I would make a journey with him, but he left me to walk on my own, directing me across the street of the surprisingly bustling town to the merchant’s place.

Pushing open the door, I stepped inside. The doctor was there, as well as a mare I assumed was in charge of the store. She looked up as I stepped into her store and frowned at me. “I assume you are the pony that Intensive Care convinced me to loan all those medical supplies to? You owe me.” The doctor held up a hoof to ward off her angry gaze. “Now now, Traffic, I’m sure that anypony capable of taking a beatin’ like that and walking around a week later is sturdy enough for our little job.”

She snorted lightly, then nodded. “See, you owe Care and I a whole mess of caps. Luckily we have a way for you to pay it off.” I narrowed my gaze slightly. Doc Care stamped a hoof and I heard a rustling outside. “We’ve got a small problem with some raiders, ya’ see. They’ve been squatting just out of town in an old Ministry of Peace depot. We need ‘em cleared out so we can replenish our stock and it only seems right that the pony that used it up should help.”

I groaned. Raiders. My kind were really starting to turn into a pain in my flank. “Now we don’t know you enough to trust you to go out there and come back with what we need, so we’re sending along a little insurance.” The door opened and my jaw dropped slightly. Pushing his way into the building was a tall creature that made the little part in the back of my head that knew more than I did spoke up.

Claws. Beak. Wings. A griffin. Fun to kill.

Traffic looked up at the towering creature and nodded respectfully. “Ashred, one last job for ya.” He glanced down at me, not something I can say I was used to, being taller than most ponies myself. His golden eyes stared at me for a little longer than I would have liked, a predatory gaze. He looked back to Traffic and ran one taloned hand through the black feathers on his head.

“What would that be, Miss Traffic?”

She flicked a hoof towards me. “You and the bandaged wonder here are gonna deal with those raiders out near Flutter’s Cross. Clear the path for the scavenging party. Just make sure he does his part and don’t let him run.”

Ashred leaned down until his beak was right next to my head. "It would be my pleasure, Miss Traffic." I didn't like the sound of that.

Traffic had allowed me to stock up before I left and just added it to my tab. Even without Ashred making sure I came back, it wasn't like I was just going to abandon Shade after how she had reacted to my recovery. I had a job to do, a job to help ponies.

Life was starting to look up.

As I stood there, outside the gate, freshly bandaged and with a number of medical supplies sitting with a fair amount of ammunition, I felt ready for anything.

Ashred had been circling above lazily until I began walking towards the point on my PipBuck. He landed next to me and kept pace, a huge rifle on his back. I was limping slightly and I can admit that the feeling of missing a chunk of my hoof was rather offputting.

I'd reattached my hoofguns with no small amount of effort. Couldn't help but wonder how Doc Care had removed them, but once they went on I found that it was a fairly simple manner. They locked into carved notches in my natural hooves. The triggers clicked slightly as I walked.

"So. Ripple, was it?" Ashred's grin was getting on my nerves a bit. "Come on. You can tell me, what's your game Two Kick." I stopped. He knew me. I glared death at him and my horn glowed lightly as it gripped Broken. He held up a clawed hand telling me to pause. "Don't worry, I won't tell the folks of Blank who you are, but I gotta ask why the number two pony of the Paragons walked into Blank with an escaped slave and enough nails to put a house together."

I grunted, a stray bandage falling across my eye. I flipped my head to remove it and placed Broken back where it had come from. "Two Kick is dead. Dead in a field with a hole in his head. Did you know him Ashred?" My question came with a hint of menace. Was this Griffin a slaver or the type to consort with the life I had been ejected violently from?

"Call me Ash, please, and yeah, I know you. What, how can you forget such a fine independent contractor as myself? Was the job not to your liking?" That grin again, like he was playing with his food.

"My memory isn't what it used to be. Two Kick was a different pony."

He laughed at that. "Sure. Whatever Kick."

I was remembering what Shade had said about griffins working for somepony named Red Eye coming down for the shipment of slaves. "You said independent? You're on your own?"

The griffin nodded. "Most of my kind is up north with Gawd or that bitch Stern. Either that or they're back home fighting the 'clavers. Me, I found that this area was more... fertile for contracts. Not much competition in the skies." He tapped my chest with the back of a claw. "You Paragon's love your competition though, don't you."

I pushed his claw away. "I'm not a Paragon anymore. We had a bit of a rough separation. Look, lets not talk about that. Let's just get this over with and get back to town."

"Pony of action? I can respect that." He nodded his head off to the left. "That building with the antenna? That's Flutter's Point." A big building sat nestled up against a hill, an antenna jutting out of the roof towards the sky. Looking around, I noticed that the broken buildings surrounding the Point were plastered with posters of a beautiful yellow mare with pink hair. Though the posters were filthy, a sense of calm radiated from each.

We must do better? Yes we must.

Then the paint started. The mare's face had been defaced in increasingly more horrific ways as we neared the building. Then the smell hit. It was strangely familiar, but still revolting. Ash's feathers ruffled as he smelled it and I was glad I wasn't the only one disturbed by it.

"I'm gonna get a higher vantage point. You just walk in the front door." Drawing Broken, I nodded at the black feathered griffin. Honestly, it was what I was going to suggest. A winged sniper made the whole idea seem safer. He pulled the rifle off of his back and checked that there was a round in the chamber. "Just keep an eye out for these raiders Kick. They're... a bit off from what you might be accustomed to." With a flap of wings and a burst of dust, Ash was gone, launched into the sky.

Leaving me alone in a row of defaced posters. Not a problem, I'd probably faced worse than whatever these raiders could bring to the table. I checked that Broken was loaded and that my hooves were fully armed. I made sure extra shells were easily accessible and began my trot towards the front door of the building.

The front door was ringed with dismembered corpses, nailed to the structure and looped with garlands of organs. Was this raider decoration? Did Neighwhere contain some room I had once occupied, stuffed with corpses and decorated with the remains of my victims? Best not to think about it.

I stopped as I got near the door. It was wide open, but I heard nothing and saw no sign of active raiders. I took another step and the noise began. It was discordant, wavering. As though a mass of ponies were screaming all at once.

The first came through the door, brandishing a pipe strung with razor wire. He was painted in bright colors and had an insane smile on his face. I pulled Broken up to aim but a loud report rang through the air. A bullet caught the pony in the face, slamming him into the ground in a halt of dust and blood. A spent cartridge pinged off of the ground next to me as the griffin pulled the bolt on his weapon somewhere above me.

The next pony that came through the door was similarly insane looking, but had nails driven into her hooves. I'd had enough nails in my body for a lifetime and fired a round, catching her full in the chest. She hit the dust just as hard but tripped over the corpse of the first pony, spiraling blood into the air as she flipped tail over head.

We waited for another five minutes. The screaming continued but no ponies came out. I sighed. I'd hoped to avoid going into the building with raiders left alive. I looked upwards and circled my hoof above my head. A rush of air ruffled my mane as Ash levelled out above me. "Ash, I'm going inside. I need you to keep covering me through the windows." He nodded playfully and I glared at him. "Cover me."

He put the rifle over his shoulder and shrugged. "Yeah, got it Kick. Don't let the bad ponies get you. Not a problem." He saluted mockingly and took off again.

I took my first steps inside. The smell was overwhelming and I wrapped the bandage that kept falling across my eye over my nose. The smell of the fresh bandage was oddly soothing. I put another shell into Broken and began down the hall, moving slowly, listening to the screaming.

My E.F.S. showed red in every direction but the front door. I could see how this could be an amazingly useful tool, but noted that it just pointed. I couldn't tell if the hostiles were above me, below me or on the other side of the wall.

Hey, we can make this fun. Just some stampede and we'll paint the walls red.

No. Not listening. Good ponies didn't rip ponies apart and bathe in their blood. They certainly didn't

use other ponies as decoration. I was going to do this the right way. Stay true to Ripple and not give in to the urgings of Two Kick.

A change of pitch in the screaming warned me of the raider a second before he rounded the corner. Unlike the last time this had happened, I was ready. The shotgun boomed in the close quarters, throwing the charging earth pony against the wall, leaving a smear of blood as he slid to a rest. I grimaced as the voice in my head laughed.

Stepping over his body, I put another shell in the magazine. Best keep on top of my ammunition, there was no telling what I'd run into in here.. Using Broken felt natural, like I'd been using it for years. One of the few things I was grateful for from my old life was muscle memory. It had saved me several times in the last two days. Scratch that. The last eight days.

Coming to a staircase, I floated the weapon ahead of me, cautiously making my way up. The screaming continued but no raiders attacked me. The hall ahead of me looked out into the front of the building and I saw a shadow swoop past. Ash had at least not abandoned me in a raider den.

The next raider was much stealthier than the last and actually managed to catch me off guard. He burst from a locker where he'd been silently lying in wait, launching himself at me while letting out a scream. He began swinging a razor at me, drawing a red line across my chest and cutting through several bandages. I dodged back and activated S.A.T.S. Wow. I had to marvel as the pony swung the blade with his teeth in slow motion; I could practically count the hairs in his mane if I'd had the time or the inclination. I aimed at his head and queued up a shot, the roar of the shotgun activating as soon I turned off the spell. The buckshot tore into his face at near point blank range, sending him through a broken window and plummeting to the ground below with a crunch.

A thump behind caused me to spin around, aiming Broken. A mare had impacted the wall hard enough to crack the worn material, propelled by a high caliber round from outside. She fell to the ground in a rain of flaking paint and broken concrete, a wicked looking blade clattering across the hall. I wondered if Ash had let the raider get that close to me on purpose or if he had reacted slowly. I figured the former, as he seemed the type to toy with somepony he was supposed to be watching over. I spotted him on a rooftop across the way, throwing yet another mocking salute my way.

Reading the red dots on my E.F.S. I counted seven raiders left from what I could see and they were all clustered further into the building. I shouted out the window. "Ash, I'm going further in!" I saw him nod and take off. I didn't know how he'd cover me when I was in there, but despite all of my reservations about the griffin he seemed to be rather effective at his job when he wasn't cutting things too close.

Heading into the interior of the building, I began noticing the walls. Posters coated every surface. Like these raiders had some strange fixation with the mare depicted on them. I was curious what the Ministry of Peace was. I knew that I'd heard mention of it in my past, but nothing that I could remember. Ministry had a powerful connotation attached to it, but hell if I knew what that was. I'd seen no other mention of the Ministries in the area, only the kind looking pony on the posters gracing walls and billboards across the area.

Before I realized it, I had reached the center of the building. A freight elevator sat in the middle of the room, unused for two hundred years. The room ran right up to a skylight, though I could see the antenna further up, supported over the glass ceiling. Desks and chairs were piled up against the walls on all sides, giving me the image that the elevator had slammed down from high above, scattering everything in this room in its wake.

It was when I was looking up that the raiders made their move, a bullet punching into my side. Seven at once, rushing from every direction. I triggered S.A.T.S. in a panic, my adrenaline kicking in. I'd

fallen right into a trap. Taking stock of my surroundings, I figured that the spell had only enough charge for three targets, leaving me with four provided I could kill each in one shot. Shotgun, kick, shotgun.

I triggered the spell and it all happened so fast. Broken whipped out to the side, firing it's lethal shot into the throat of a unicorn wielding a sledgehammer. The buckshot ripped out her throat, spraying blood. The second pony, an earth pony screaming as he charged me with a length of iron bar wickedly sharpened into a spear. I hopped nimbly over the thrusting spear and put a powerful kick into his muzzle with a hoof gun, blasting his face across the room with the shot. While kicking, Broken was reflexively reloaded by my magic, with little control on my part. It fired again, tearing the leg off of the earth pony that had shot me at the beginning of the ambush.

Blood splattered about the room as time caught up with me.

Then there were four. A shot from above rang out in a shower of glass, catching one of the remaining raiders in the neck. I had no time to glance up now, but I could just imagine Ash hovering above the ceiling, firing down. I levered another shell into the chamber and fired at the nearest raider. Broken was a fantastic weapon and every shot seemed to be a kill, catching the rearing pony in the gut as he tried swinging a meat cleaver into my head.

I felt a blade pierce into my flank as one of them got too close. She was gripping the knife, twisting it in my side with her teeth, smiling crazily up at me. My blood sprayed her face and I jumped to the side, the blade sliding free. Broken swung towards her and fired, blowing the knife and her lower jaw into a slurry of metal, blood and bone. She fell over, her scream changed to a horrible gurgling sound.

One left. A unicorn with a shotgun. He came at me, raising the weapon to fire but was halted in a crunch as Ash plummeted from above, landing directly on top of him. His claws pierced into the unicorn's side, giving him a firm grip. The griffin lifted the struggling, crushed pony in front of him and wrenched off a leg in a spray of blood. Biting into the pony's throat stopped his struggles and Ash ripped away, trailing blood and muscle in his beak. He dropped the dead unicorn to the ground and grinned at me. "We make a good team, huh Kick?"

At that moment, a massive crunching sound tore through the room as a door to one end was ripped out of its frame by a powerful blow. The door cartwheeled the length of the room in an instant, faster than either of us could react, catching Ash with a bone breaking impact. He and the door were tangled in a broken heap off to the side as a triumphant roar filled the silence where the screaming had once been. Standing in the open doorway stood the largest pony I'd ever seen.

He was painted just like the mare in the posters, but covered in armor that looked to have scavenged from a sky carriage. I watched as several objects fell out of his mouth and recognized them immediately for used stampede injectors and assorted other medical supplies. His eyes narrowed to pinpricks and he let loose another roar, louder than I thought a pony could be.

Look at that. He's stronger than you. A little stampede would fix that right up.

My inner self stole my attention for a split second, but that was all the giant pony needed. The speed behind his charge was blinding and he hit me like a train. It felt like all of my ribs bent as he slammed into me in a bull rush, throwing me away from him. As I rocketed through the air to slam violently against the wall, I could think only of my broken armor sitting in a dilapidated house somewhere in Hornsmith. A hoof filled my vision and I ducked out of the way as the yellow raider bucked a hole where my head had been. I kicked out with a front leg, hitting him in one massively muscled leg. He didn't even register the hit, instead clamping down on the leg with his front teeth.

That hurt. I could feel each tooth cutting through my skin as he flipped his head, tossing me over his shoulder almost dismissively. I hit the ground and slid before coming to a stop on a flopping, jawless

pony currently bleeding to death. She kicked at my head, but was too weak to do much damage. The massive pony rearing over me ready to stomp down looked plenty strong enough and I kicked out with my rear leg, hitting one of his and firing into it. With a crunch and a roar from his throat, the buckshot tore into his leg, shattering the bone and shredding the flesh.

Instead of stamping down and finishing me, his bulk collapsed on top of myself and the dying pony next to me, giving me a chance. From my position crushed beneath him, I could move nothing but my hind legs. I kicked into him as hard as I could, again and again. I had two shells left in the weapons around my hooves and I put them both into his functioning rear leg and more sensitive areas next to it. I kept kicking after the weapons ran dry, kicking into the gaping wounds. He roared yet again and looked down at me with rage and pain in his drug addled eyes.

Like a mirror, isn't it.

“No!” I yelled in his face and kicked up into his chest, pushing him in to the air, removing the crushing weight on my chest. He swung at me, just out of reach, his hooves whistling past my face with each kick.

Ash to the rescue, swinging the crumpled door he'd been struck with with both hands. The metal of the door impacted the crazed stallions head, throwing him off of me. The playful grin was gone from Ash's face, replaced with a vindictive snarl. He lifted the door and swung it down onto the crippled buck's side, again and again.

Pulling myself to my hooves I moved to help Ash finish off the wounded raider, though as I recognized the look in his eye, I stopped. Ash had taken his broken wing rather poorly and was pouring all of his rage into the already dead pony at his claws. The door came down again and again with a progressively wet crunch each time. The door was bending with each hit and when it ceased to work as a club Ash tore into the pony with claws and beak, tearing off chunks of armor and flesh with each strike.

When he finally finished, the pony didn't resemble a pony anymore. Bones and blood were all that remained. Ash was breathing heavily, his claws and face dripping with gore as he glared down at the corpse. His one wing was at an odd angle, dragging behind him, not tucked up at his back like it's paired appendage. I lingered, not wanting to get too close to the griffin in case he was still looking to vent some rage. I'd already been shot, beaten, bitten and crushed today. Getting ripped apart by a predator was not high on my list of desires.

He slowed his breathing visibly, closing his eyes and pushing his talons in front of him. The grin came back and he shook his forelimbs, trying to wring them of blood. “We did good, Kick. Time to do some quick salvage, then we call in the teams.” I nodded and we surveyed the room. Ash let out a triumphant yell as he found an unopened medical box and ripped it open, spilling potions and bandages to the ground.

Using the bandages and a few strips of metal he formed a splint for his wing, grimacing as he applied it. I approached and took one of the potions, drinking it and feeling the most of my wounds close. The bullet had gone clean through and the feeling of my skin and internals closing up was rather satisfying. We swept through the room the raiders had been using for storage and I loaded up on scavenged shotgun shells, reloading all of my weapons and dropping the remainder into my bag.

“Ash, what will the salvage team get? Aren't we taking all of the choice stuff?”

He shook his head, splattering blood about. “Nah Kick. This is a Ministry storehouse first and foremost. That big elevator out there leads down to a cache of medicine from before the war. Sealed stuff, doesn't go bad. At least if it's anything like any other Peace building in the area.”

I remembered the cargo elevator from just prior to the ambush. The raiders had really been sitting on

ponies.” He gestured that I should follow him as he began walking out of the room.

I trotted after, glad to leave the room of death behind. “I’m not wearing all these bandages for the hell of it you know. I just had surgery.” He laughed in that dismissive way of his.

Once we were clear of the building, I was surprised how much I was looking forward to getting back to Blank. Back to Shade. Ash was walking alongside, his wing still bound up and keeping him grounded. His mood had soured as soon as we had started the trip back, his playful grin gone. Traffic had mentioned that this was one last mission for him and I wondered if that meant his contract was up. A future of uncertainty would certainly explain it. I could kill two birds with one stone if I played this right, cheering up my companion and getting some information.

“So... Ash. What do you know about Hate? Tell me like you would a pony who’d never heard of him.”

He looked over at me, his eyes angry. Then he lightened up a bit. Seemed that anything that got his mind off of what he was thinking was enough to cheer him up. Even talk of a monster about a monster.

“Hate? Well, I can tell you? He pays well. All of you Stable 87 ponies do, you’re just flush in caps, you know. That competition thing, either you’re rich or you’re broke. Hate runs things, I’ve never seen anyone, pony or griffin, with a mind like his. Everything he does has a reason. Every pony he’s killed has been towards some goal of his. From what I can tell he just keeps you Paragons around as a personal hit squad for when it doesn’t suit him to kill.” He grinned wider as he had recalled how well Hate payed. He kept grinning through the conversation save for when he mentioned Hate not killing. That brought a slight frown, a flash of menace.

Enough reminiscing about caps. I needed more information. “What about the Paragons. Who are... we?”

“There’s a tricky one. There’s around a dozen, with you and Hate up top. Tough fighters, the lot of you. Most of you walked out of that stable about five years ago and set yourself up in charge of a small community. Turned into Neighwhere in a year. I’ve been to a few of your little arena competitions over the years, always a big gathering. One of you Paragons will go into the arena against some beast or a couple ponies and just kill them. Gotta say it’s always a good show.” That explained the feelings I’d had when I’d been on stampede and the hallucinations of cheering and showering caps. They were memories.

Glorious memories.

Horrible memories. Though thinking of stampede made me want to take out a dose and put it into my leg. My horn even glowed for a second and undid the latch on my saddlebag before I willed it to stop. No stampede, not now. Ash caught the movement and lifted his brow.

“You always did rather well in the competition. I saw you about a year ago. I’ve never seen that much blood before or since. You were an artist in there.” I felt sick. I hated who I had been. I was changing my long term goal. I was still going to kill Hate, but for what he had done to the ponies of the waste. I would thank him for shooting me right before I broke his neck with my hooves.

“Heh, I know that look. Vengeance, right?” He snapped his claws as an idea came to him. “Tell ya what. You ever go after Hate, I’ll give you a discount on a contract. I need to have a chat with him before somepony takes him out.”

The gate to Blank came upon us before I knew it. It opened under the labor of two earth ponies pushing on a bar, allowing entry to myself and Ash. The streets were cleared, only a few ponies lingering about. I could hear a synchronized noise coming from nearly every building and tensed up. Was this an

ambush, had something happened while we had been gone? It had only been a couple hours, what could have happened.

A clawed hand on my shoulder drew my attention. Ash was doing that motion again, the one I was sure meant to settle down. He looked over me and grinned, heralding a clatter of hooves on dirt and an impact from my left. Shade, my beautiful redemption.

She was hugging me around my neck again, a far cry from the shy pony I had met over a week ago. She still hadn't spoken to me since I'd woken up, but I'd take what I could get. I smiled as Ash laughed and the two of us kept walking towards Traffic's shop, Shade's hooves dragging in the dust.

Walking into the shop, the atmosphere had changed dramatically. Traffic was actually smiling, but not at us. She was smiling as a small radio spitting out music. It took her a little bit to notice, but she turned and smiled to greet Ash. Then glared at me, but softer than previously.

"So, looks like I owe you some money. Bringing Pon-3 back to our little community was not a part of the job, but I can only assume that it was you."

I did what now? Ash shrugged at the odd glance I shot him. "I... did? Brought who?"

She walked around the counter and patted me on the neck lightly. "We've gotten nothing on the radio for months until just after you cleared out that building. The DJ is the best source of news and hope in the wastes, it's a relief to have him back." Relay active. So that's what that meant. "Clearing out the raiders covered what you owe. Here's what I can give you for the radio." She reached back to the counter and grabbed a bag that sounded like it was stuffed full of caps. She dropped it lightly as I caught it with my telekinesis and dropped it in my saddlebag. I would count it later.

Traffic looked to Ash and I could swear I almost saw a tear in her eye. "Ashred, it's been my honor holding your contract, but the time is up and your services are no longer required. I wish I had more employees like you."

She handed over a sheet of paper, which he took and tucked away. He bowed low, showing off the unusually high amount of respect he had around Traffic. "Pleasure's been all mine Miss Traffic."

He turned to leave but tilted his head to the side. "Ripple. I'll see you around." With that, he was off, a rustle of feathers out the door as he walked off. His words had been strangely ominous and stared at the door for a period. "Well, if you're done here, there's no loitering in the store. Go see Care, he's been asking for you." There was the sneer I connected with her. I turned to leave and noticed that Shade had detached herself from my neck. She was following closely at my side and I held the door open for her.

I guessed I was doing something right, everything had started turning out fine. Sooner or later, however, I was going to have to head back into the mouth of the beast and deal with Hate. Deal with the other Paragons. Deal with my family.

Oh what fun it will be.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as setting.

Comments always welcome. Rate/Track/Favorite if you feel it is deserved.

Chapter 3: Sweeps

In a short period of time, I found that Shade had not spent all of her free time at my side while I had been under. She'd been asked by Traffic what she could do to help around the town and had divulged a connection with mechanical workings. I'd been shocked to find that I'd only payed off half of what I'd really owed with my trip to Relay #108. Shade had been busy the last few days, repairs visible on nearly everything with moving parts in the city.

The once useless hydraulics system attached to the gate now wheezed and creaked as it opened the main gate to allow the coming and goings of ponies. The shoddily made irrigation system feeding the town's ragged farm had been overhauled, pipes replaced and seals fixed. A large fixed gun of an odd design has been refitted and made functional, further securing the area immediately before the gate.

She smiled shyly as I grinned at her. "Shade, this is amazing. Who would have guessed you were so skilled at this?" Every moment I'd seen her since I'd woken she had been blushing and I began to question if she would ever stop. It warmed my heart that she was happy, even if I didn't really understand what I'd done to get that reaction.

"Why did you have them fix me?"

Her eyes darted away from me and if possible, she blushed deeper. Stuttering, she tried to give me an excuse. I trotted over to her and lifted her chin, looking into her eyes. It was the first time I'd touched her without her having been unconscious or injured and my mane bristled slightly as I thought about that. "Why didn't you leave me to die, like I deserved?"

"You... you keep saying that. Like you wanted to die. When they told me how I'd gotten to that clinic, I couldn't just leave you. You saved me. You're not a bad pony. No pony who did what you did could be a bad pony." Her eyes hardened and she glared at me. My eyes widened in surprise as I realized she was mad that I thought I deserved to die.

I backed down slightly as her voice rose. "You took me in, helped me! Gave me your supplies when all I'd done was shot at you and caused you pain! No normal pony would have suffered so much to help any pony in trouble! You walked for hours in what I can only imagine was excruciating pain to help someone who'd only hurt you!" I had honestly not expected this much volume from such a small pony, but as she shouted she seemed to increase in size. A black shape in the corner of my eye drew my attention briefly. Ash was standing in a doorway, laughing as a mare put a buck twice her size in his place.

"I... uh..." All I could manage under her tirade.

She reached up and gripped the sides of my face tenderly, being careful of the wound taking up a good portion of my face. It had stopped hurting and I had honestly not thought of it in a while until she took such great care to not touch it. "Ripple, I need you to stop saying you're a bad pony. It's not fair. Not fair at all." Tears sprung into her eyes and she suddenly changed back from the pony that had been yelling into my face. Hugging me, she plunged her face into my neck.

This had taken a lot out of her. I had the impression that much of her current stability was resting on me, like I'd become some pillar for her current sanity. I stood there, blocking out the laughing griffin and focusing on the blue mare pouring tears into my bandages. Hearing the approach of hooves, I glanced to the side in time to see Doc Care approaching.

"I spoke with Radish, the mare that runs the inn. Two of you have a room for a few nights on account

of bringing back the radio. Everypony's mighty indebted to you two, but that'll only carry ya' through for a few days before ya' have'ta start working. Take it easy and finish healing." I nodded to the old pony and took the key he handed to me. "Now would ya' kindly take this display off the street, ya'all are weirding folks out." He turned and started back towards his clinic. I'd seen the hints of a smile on his face.

Shade pulled back from me, blushing furiously. The clouded sky was beginning to darken a bit but I could still see the color her cheeks had turned. I could also see the bags under her eyes, she looked exhausted. I handed the key to her. She took it and I nodded towards the inn I saw across the street. "It's been a long day. For both of us. I'm gonna take a look around town first though."

She was slow to turn from me and head towards the inn. For the first time in my current life, I felt important. That mare depended on me to be strong. I would be strong for her. I turned and headed towards where Ash still stood, the griffin grinning.

"Got yourself a marefriend, eh Kick? Didn't peg you for the type."

I glared at him briefly before smiling, taking in the joke. He was mocking me, but in a way that didn't seem intended to offend. I shook my head. "Nope, just a pony grateful for my help."

He punched me in the front leg lightly before putting his arm around my shoulders. "Here, lets hit up the saloon. I've got a business proposition for you."

He guided me towards the noisiest door in the town and pushed it open, leading me inside. A dozen set of eyes swivelled towards us and focused on me. Ash raised an arm in a grand sweeping fashion, shouting over the crowded room. "Everypony give it up for Ripple, the hero that brought music back to your lives!"

The cheering and stomping shook the room and I hissed at Ash. "I thought you said we were gonna talk business."

He winked to me and turned his attention back on the tavern ponies. "Now he's been through a lot today and has a lot of Care's drugs running through him, so the amount of liquor I'm sure you want to buy him would probably kill him. Save it for tomorrow." A chorus of disappointed sound replaced the cheering and Ash guided me to a corner table, taking a seat and sliding one out for me. I sat, suddenly realizing how tired I felt. I probably should have just gone to the inn, let Shade have the bed and pass out on whatever other furniture was left. The floor would even have been acceptable.

"Kick, I've been thinking. My offer for a discount, I've changed it a bit."

I narrowed my eyes at him, wondering what he was up to. He laughed. "I'm not shirking on the deal, not my way. I'm sweetening the deal." He tapped the table with a claw, digging into it slightly. "Way I see it, our goals match. We'll both be heading to Neighwhere sooner or later. I need to have a friendly chat with Hate, you need to strangle him until he shuffles off this mortal coil. So here's my deal." He began carving into the table, making the rough outlines of a pony and a griffin. "You and I work together. You can bring along your little marefriend if you want. I don't charge you anything but salvage and... let's say any caps that Hate or the other Paragon's have on them. Way I see it, we all get what we want that way."

I had to admit, his deal was pretty good, but only if I could really trust him. Things would go south pretty quick if he decided to sell Shade and I to Neighwhere, but having a seasoned griffin backing me up would really help in any scrapes I got in in the coming days. I looked at the table, at the pair he had carved. He didn't seem the malicious type, but it was hard to tell what the underlying goal here was.

"Ash, you're gonna have to give me more than 'you want to chat' before I decide on this, you know."

His eyes darkened a bit, the same look I'd seen when he'd mentioned Hate not killing. "Hate took something very dear to me. I need to have some words with him." We sat in silence for a few minutes as he picked at the table.

I finally nodded and broke the silence. "Okay. I'll accept your deal."

The grin spread across his beak yet again and he slammed his fist into the table. "All right! I knew you were the right pony to bet on." Reaching into the bag he carried, he pulled out the piece of paper I'd seen him put away at Traffic's. He slid it across the table to me. "This is my contract. As long as you hold it, I'm your griffin."

My magic picked it up off the table and I looked at it. It was just a beaten piece of paper with the name ASHRED written across it in what I hoped was red paint. It must be a griffin thing was all that I could figure. I rolled the paper and put it in my saddlebag. Ash had started yelling over my shoulder to the pony behind the bar for a drink and I looked closer at the griffin. I was getting the feeling he was not quite the mercenary he had made himself out to be. There was more to him than caps and violence. "Sounds good Ash. I hope this is as mutually beneficial as you made it out to be." His grin was strangely violent as I said this. I wasn't quite sure I wanted to be around when he started drinking. Not tonight.

Standing from my seat at the table, I yawned widely. "Well, you were right about me having been through a lot today. I'm gonna turn in." His drink on it's way, he leaned back. "Sure thing Kick. I'll see you in the morning, then. Just make sure you don't leave without me."

As I crossed the street, I heard the hiss of the gate closing and glanced to my side. A small pony in full black body armor was walking down the street towards me, several large bags at her sides. Something about the mare trotting towards me made me stop in my tracks and stare. I knew her.

Oh shit.

Dashing for cover, a high pitched whirring sound filled my ears. Two of the bags opened and the two black painted miniguns she was carrying floated out at her sides, spinning up. The noise they made when they fired was like a sheet getting torn in half. Bullets ripped into the ground where I had just stood and traced the path I had run. The stream of bullets shredded into the ancient soft drink machine I had taken cover behind, sending shrapnel scattering across the street.

The firing ceased but the whirring sound continued. "Wow, they were right! You did survive that head shot. Got a scar? Can I see it? Come on Two Kick, let me see." I responded by firing Broken around the corner at her, hoping to give myself a second or two to find a new vantage point.

"Ah, that's not nice Two Kick. Just let me finish you off. Let's leave these nice people to their lives, all it takes is one bullet. Or a hundred. All the same to me." As she spoke, I took a quick peak around the mangled machine to survey what damage I had caused, if any, I was taken back by what I saw. Not only was she floating two weapons meant to be fired from fixed emplacements at her side, she'd stopped each pellet of buckshot in front of her face. Entirely with her magic.

The miniguns had ammunition feeds coming from a third bag and a fourth was opening. A sleek black rocket launcher floated out and took aim, floating menacingly above her head. With a whoosh of flame and a clap of ignition a rocket shot towards me. Entering S.A.T.S. I targeted the lethal munition flying at me and fired Broken at it.

The shot clipped the missile in midair, ripping off one of the little wings on its side. It spun, spiraling into the wall on the other side of the vending machine, detonating in a cloud of fire and masonry. The vending machine was launched into me, throwing me into the street in a rain of fire. Hitting the ground, I felt a rib break in my chest but kept rolling and used the momentum to hop to my hooves, firing

Broken as I went. The roar opened up again and several of the bullets punctured my side before I could move.

An impact from the side sent me rolling into a side road with a large feathered object on top of me, claws tearing into my sides as he held me down. Ash held me down with one hand and pulled the large rifle from his back as the roar of the twin weapons continued, following the path we had traveled and ripping into the building between us and her.

He pulled me to my hooves and tossed me bodily further down the street as the bullets began tearing through the building and hitting the area of street we were in. I was immediately getting tired of being tossed about Blank, especially now that I carried more lead in me than previously.

Ash indicated that I should stay down and hissed across the street at me, carrying surprisingly well over the whirring of the minigun motors. "Kick, stay low. Sweeps is a crazy bitch. When she has to switch feeds, we make our move." I nodded lightly as I felt more of my blood filtering out of me like a sieve. I felt for my saddlebags and pulled out a roll of bandages, wrapping it quickly about myself. Sealing up the holes with the bullets still inside was a bad idea, but I just needed the bleeding to stop.

The crack of a high powered rifle filled the air as Ash fired a round at her. The firing stopped briefly and I could hear her grunt. "I know that gun! Ashred! It's been a while, what are you doing in this rat's nest?" The delight in her voice did not match up with her trying to kill us as she let off another burst of fire. Sneaking a look through one of the many freshly chewed holes in the building, I saw that she had caught that bullet as well but was now standing a foot behind where she had been.

The building began creaking noisily as the pony Ash had called Sweeps fired another rocket into the it, demolishing another wall. I could hear the residents of Blank screaming and running, but I had yet to see any of them. The guards should have been firing at the walking tank but the only weapons I could hear were hers and Ash's.

The air filled with a ratcheting sound as the miniguns ran dry and I heard her curse at the weapons. "Stupid pieces of junk, I make you and this is how you repay me?!" I could hear rustling her rustling through her bags and decided to make my move.

As I rounded the corner, I found why the guards had not been firing. They've been ground into paste against the very walls they patrolled, long red smears against the metal. I briefly wondered when she had time to do that as I neared her, saw her widening eyes and turned to plant a double buckshot kick into her face. I saw Ash in that split second, his eyes wide and his mouth yelling something as I felt a force grab my legs.

Looking back, my hooves were inches away from obliterating her face, her hazel colored eyes looking at me playfully. A light blue aura surrounded my legs and she shook her head disapprovingly. "Now Mr. Two Kick, you know I don't allow touching on a first date." With that I was lifted into the air and hurled down the street. The theme for these last few minutes.

With a crunch I slammed into the big sign over Traffic's store, tearing one of the parts of the T off in a shower of splinters and metal scraps. I bounced once on the roof and skipped over the gap between the store and the building next to it, landing on the roof and sliding until I came to a sudden halt half embedded in an old wooden box. My saddlebags hit me in the chest, torn off during the flight and knocking the wind from me. All I could feel were the bullets in my side and the many splinters I had picked up in my short trip.

"Oh....." I coughed, blood splattering my chest as I lay there. Would I ever go a day without bleeding? Was it even an option?

A clawed hand appeared at the edge of the building and Ash hauled himself up onto the roof with me.

He crouched next to me, taking a peek into the street. "Right. Forgot you don't remember her. That was a bad idea. Sweeps may be young but I've never met a unicorn as powerful as her." He handed me a med-x and I took it as quickly as I could, feeling the pain fade away.

I gritted my teeth and turned over, getting up into a crouch. I coughed again, "So, Ash, how does one beat an opponent they can't touch?"

Ash shook his head as he worked the bolt on his rifle, sending an empty casing spiraling off. "That's the thing about you Paragons, Kick. If it they were easy to kill, they wouldn't be Paragons. Look at you, most pony's would be dead twice in this fight already." He handed me Broken, which I hadn't realized I'd dropped, the weapon still looking as pristine as always.

The image went into my head of what had happened when we'd shot at her. The buckshot she had stopped with no issue, but the much heavier bullet had displayed a greater effect. I had an idea. "We gotta keep down, draw her to Traffic's."

Ash narrowed his eyes. "I don't want Miss Traffic to get hurt, you know."

I shook my head, "Oh yeah, I know. Trust me, I've got a plan." His look did not show a high amount of confidence as I pulled a dose of stampede from my bag.

The streets were eerily quiet, aside from the creaking coming from the deeply damaged building further down the street. Sweeps' voice called out over it all, a clicking and whirring giving her an almost mechanical sound. All it meant to us was that she had reloaded and was ready to kill us. "Where are you?" Her voice was sweetly singsong.

I was putting all of my focus on listening, putting every bit of my attention on the matter at hand. My vision blurred red, stampede pumping through my veins.

Crush her. Kill her. Make her suffer.

I shook my head, trying to get the voice out of my head.

Listen to Sweeps. Listen to her hoof steps. Get this right.

"Come on Two Kick. Ash. I don't wanna play hide and go seek. Just come out and let me kill you." That was it, her voice came directly from below my hiding place, crouching behind Traffic's sign. I stood and slammed my body into the sign, pushing with all of my drug fueled might. My muscles strained and I heard the bolts holding the sign pop free.

The sign began to move and I heard Ash kick into the part of the plan I had assigned him. His shots came from further down the street, as fast as he could fire. I heard her grunt as she blocked each shot with her telekinesis, increasing in volume. She didn't even notice the small shower of roof coming down around her, so focused was her defense against Ash's large caliber weapon

I roared and put everything I had into pushing and finally I felt the sign give fully and pop free. This sign was massive, metal and wood standing as a testament to durability in the wasteland. She only noticed the sign as it cleared the edge of the building, picking up speed. I slammed into the top of the sign, hoping that my added weight would help.

The sign impacted the street in a burst of dust, the sudden cloud rushing down the street in all directions, obscuring everything. When the sign hit, I was thrown clear, rolling across the street, dazed. Lifting myself to my feet, I slowly stumbled my way towards the impact site. I heard a soft crying and the voice in my head yelled in triumph.

She's down. Rip her apart. Kill her. Take her for yourself. I don't care, just have fun with it!

The red haze combined with the dust in my eyes and I could barely see, but I could see the black armored figure sticking out from just underneath the edge of the sign. The broken T had spared crushing her head, conveniently enough for her. Her helmet had been thrown clear and I saw a face twisted with pain. Her horn flared pitifully as she tried to lift the massive weight off of her. She froze as I stepped up to her, looking up into my bloodshot eyes.

She smiled weakly. "Hey Two Kick. Now don't take this too harshly. Just following orders, heard that you were still alive."

I snarled at her in response, the voice in my head screaming to just kill her.

Break off her horn, stab her to death. Skull fuck the bitch. Do ANYTHING!

A flash of multicolored eyes and I looked to the side as Shade hugged me around the neck. She stared into my bloodshot eyes and the monster stared back. They stared right into each other, wishing the other would go away. Shade won out as the drug rush, short lived as it was, faded from my system. The voice faded with it, the blood lust sinking back into the deeper parts of my mind.

"Dusk? What... what are you doing here?" Sweep looked honestly confused. So did I. Dusk? Was that Shade's real name? Why had she hid that from me?

Shade went to her knees next to Sweeps, stroking the crushed mare's lightly with a hoof. "Shh... it's okay, Sweepy. I just had to step out for a bit. Hate and I had a bit of a fight, nothing for you to worry about."

Sweeps eyes went out of focus for a little bit and then she looked at me. "You know... back at 87 I always had a crush on you, but I was just a filly. I did everything I could... when we got out. To prove myself to you. To the others. Joined the Paragons. Now... it all just seems wasted."

She stared into my eyes, an odd look crossing her face. "That... scar. Not a good look. Not on my handsome Ripple." Her one free leg reached out and touched me right below my left eye. "At least it was you... I'm so sorry for shooting at you. Orders, you know." A glance to Shade told me that I should say something. The echoes of the voice stirred around my head and I knew that for the safety of everypony in town that I should kill the crushed mare here and now. I didn't.

"Sweeps..." The name sounded odd coming from my mouth. This mare had been trying to kill me minutes before. "I... I'm sorry I crushed you." She laughed and coughed, spraying blood into the dust. "Don't lie, its no fun." Her eyes went past me and widened slightly. "Ash. Hey." Looking back, I saw him only nod as he walked up on his hind legs, his rifle aimed straight at her face. "Old girl's holding up well I see."

Her eyes lingered on the weapon and she cringed a bit. "Oh... my poor babies are under here. I was being so careful to keep them from getting dirty too..." Her eyes went unfocused again but didn't come back. "I... can't feel. I always thought this would hurt..."

She died there, under that sign

The inhabitants of Blank had begun trickling back out into the street as the noise had died down and I spotted Doc Care trotting towards us with a bag of medical supplies. I saw Traffic's eyes as she saw the damage done to her store. Shade's eyes as she looked sadly at me.

I turned and walked away. "I'll be at the inn."

I'd been pointed to the room by the pony standing in front of the inn, taking in the damage to the town. I assumed she was Radish. Our room's door was wide open, it seemed that Shade had left in a hurry

when she'd heard the fight. I stumbled into the room and collapsed onto a mattress on the floor. Now that the stampede had worn off, I was getting none of the benefits of its pain control. I'd lost my saddlebags somewhere and I assumed they were underneath the sign at this point, holding my store of medicine. As I hit the mattress, I felt every broken bone and every bullet inside me, scraping and tearing. I didn't care.

Sweeps, despite first impressions, had held me in very high regard. It almost seemed like she loved me. If I had to fight every Paragon like this, what would I come out the other side like? Would I be just as bad as before I'd woken in that field? It felt like I'd just murdered a sister.

I heard hoofsteps enter the room, two ponies from what I could tell. I didn't look. I heard a gasp from behind me accompanied by a sigh. My sides felt wet.

A muffled voice and a clatter of hooves.

Slowly, I noticed the darkness that had been creeping up on me as I lay there. I'd spent more time in the dark lately than I'd have liked and tried briefly to fight against it.

The sounds of more steps entering the room, brought me back slightly. I opened my eyes and saw a few blurred shapes. The blue and the black one were probably Shade and Ash. The others I couldn't make out.

I felt myself being lifted, talons cutting into my sides a bit.

We left the building, hurrying. I was growing concerned that I couldn't really focus or move. It felt like I was underwater.

Bright lights filled the world as I was placed on a familiar bed.

I blacked out yet again.

This all seemed familiar. Waking up on this bed. Shade on the couch. Ash reading a magazine was a new touch.

He was the first to notice I was awake and stood, walking towards me. "Answers that question. Since you're not dead, I'm gonna go get you something." He turned and walked out of the room, tapping Shade lightly with the back of a claw. She opened her eyes and stood slowly. No shrieking or hugging this time.

"Are you going to be alright Ripple?" She stood next to me, concern filling your eyes. I coughed and cleared my throat. How long had I been out this time? Days? Weeks?

"Dunno. What's Care say." My voice cracked as I spoke.

She smiled lightly. "He says you're an idiot and he's not doing this again."

"Well, that's fair." There was the hug I was waiting for. Shade seemed to make the voice go away whenever she was in close proximity, instead of the constant nagging I felt at the back of my mind. I'd never once thought of murder or pain when she was around my neck. She was quickly becoming my favorite drug in the wastelands and I was getting rather hooked.

Care walked into the room and hit me on the nose with his hoof. "Ya' know why ya' ended up in here this time? Any inklings? Any at all?" I began to open my mouth to tell him it was because I was shot, but he threw an empty red capsule in my face. "This shit. Stampede. It opened most of the injuries I'd already healed up on ya'! Your damned muscles split your skin like a sheet, ya' dumb fuck!"

I didn't know what to say. Sorry?

“If we didn’t owe ya’ for smoking the Paragon that walked into town, I’d have thrown ya’ back in front of the gate to finish dying. Next time, you’re getting thrown out. No more from Intensive Care, no sir!” He stormed out. Shade was still holding onto my neck and whispered into my ear. “If you ever want to get rid of the bandage look, you should listen to him.”

Then she sobbed slightly. “Thank you for being nice to Sweepy in the end. I always liked her.” I lifted a leg and patted her on the back. “I think I did too.” We stayed that way in silence for quite a while.

A knock at the doorway and Ash strolled in, carrying my saddlebags and something wrapped in a crude cloth. “Happy cute-ceañera, Kick.” He dropped the package next to my saddlebags on a table at the end of the couch and paused, looking at Shade and me. He grinned and turned around, with a flourish of his wings I noticed. His wing was better. “I’ll leave you two to your privacy. Have fun.”

I glared daggers into his back as he walked off and felt the awkwardness spread over the room like a blanket. Shade pulled back from me, blushing brightly, and walked towards the package. Opening it, she smiled and looked up at me. “When you can walk, I’ll help you put this on.” No comment on what ‘it’ was but she lay back down on the couch, waiting for me.

I stretched my legs and felt them cramp up immediately. My teeth gritted and my eyes watered as I worked through it. “How long have I been down this time?”

Looking up at me, she laughed a little at the face I was making. “Only for the night. It’s morning now.” It had felt like days.

I pushed myself out of bed, unsteadily, catching Shade off guard. She rushed to my side and let me lean on her, though the plan had clearly not been thought through. I was twice her size and weighed substantially more than she did. She grunted and her knees bowed slightly, though she still managed to get me to the couch. I sat on it and she lay next to me.

Floating my bag over to me, I popped the flaps and opened both sides, wondering what supplies had survived the scuffle. Most of my meds were still intact, a potion had broken and sprayed the inside of one bag with purple liquid. Something caught my attention and I leaned over to get a better look at it. Using my magic, I lifted the small orb out of my bag and floated it near to get a better look at it.

I saw Shade lift a hoof and open her mouth in warning, but the world disappeared.

oooOOOooo

I wasn’t me. Not the first time I’d had that feeling, but the first time I’d ever been a completely different me. Everything felt off. I was smaller, the pain was all gone.... I was a mare. That was definitely a different feeling... It felt less restrictive.

Everything around me looked cleaner. More polished. Much less worn.

The body I was in was walking down a long hallway, lit intermittently with harsh buzzing lights. In the hallway were two other ponies, a unicorn buck and an earth pony mare. They walked with a sense of urgency, my body lagging behind a bit.

“The Ministry Mare has expressed a keen concern with your research here. She wants to know the specifics of exactly what it is you’re attempting.” The earth pony spoke harshly and in a high, clipped tone.

The unicorn was floating a chart alongside him as he walked, flipping through pages while nervously glancing at the authoritative mare. “I can assure you, Miss Grace, that we are ensuring the highest standard of safety. We’ve emulated much of the facility on plans that we’ve acquired from the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, there are enough built in safeguards to make sure that nothing bad can come of this.”

“Fluttershy is not concerned about the safeguards. She is concerned about what you have in that room.” They were quickly coming up on a doorway at the end of the hall, painted yellow with pink butterflies on it. The symbol painted on all of the medical boxes I’d run across in the wastes. The emblem of the Ministry of Peace. Grace shot a wicked glance over her shoulder into my host’s eyes, being none to subtle. “Also, tell me why a mare from the MoAS is here.”

The unicorn shot a sympathetic glance at the unicorn I was in. “Miss Leap is on loan from Arcane Sciences to assist in the project, personally vouched for by Miss Sparkle.”

The unicorn practically barked at him, “Dr. Copper, could you please stop referring to everyone by ‘Miss’, it is giving me a headache.”

He nodded, “Yes, Miss... I mean Dr. Grace. As I was saying, Hopeful Leap has been instrumental to our progress here. I can have her qualifications sent to you if you’d like.”

Dr. Grace gave a sharp nod, “Yes, I think that would be best.” Another glare at my host, Hopeful Leap, and we came to the doors. To either side of door were alcoves with automated guns tracking us, ready to kill us where we stood. Leap stared as the cold metal killing machines turned, following her, but the two Doctors strode past them without a pause and through the doors.

The room they entered was massive, terminals and machines I couldn’t name covering the surface of every wall. There were ponies everywhere, unicorns and earth ponies, dressed in lab coats or protective wear. In the middle of the room was a giant glass tube with a thick orange liquid inside of it. We approached the tube, walking past ponies that shot nervous glances at Dr. Grace, like her being here was not something any of them had wanted.

Looking into the tube, there was a shape. Not a pony or a griffin. Nothing I could place, it was like a combination of several types of creatures. I’d never seen anything like it in my life.

Dr. Grace looked up into the tube for a long while before turning to Hopeful Leap. “Is that what I think it is? Fluttershy was right?”

The mare I dwelt in nodded to the angry doctor. She coughed once into her hoof and adjusted the glasses riding down her nose. “Yes, Doctor. I believe the Ministry Mare had dealings with one in her youth, and has every right to be worried. Don’t worry, the Draconequus is quite sedated and nowhere near the power of his brother right now, the being that terrorized Ponyville briefly.”

Grace went back to staring into the tube. “I’ve only heard rumors of what transpired in that event. Would you care to enlighten me how this is a Ministry of Peace affair? If I am to be running this operation, I wish to know everything I can about the subject.”

“The creature holds what we believe to be a powerful control over the fabric of reality. If harnessed, it is likely that we could reverse injuries suffered in combat or even negate the effects of powerful Zebra weapons such as the magi-chemical weapon used in Littlehorn”

Grace nodded slowly, taking in what Forward Leap had told her. “Yes, that does fall under Ministry of Peace jurisdiction. Very well, I shall pass word along to the Ministry Mare that she should have nothing to worry about. Do not make me regret this.” With that, she turned and stormed off, back through the doorway the group had entered.

Dr. Copper put a comforting hoof on her shoulder. “See Hope, I told you that Grace could be made to see reason and not shut us down.”

Hopeful Leap nodded slightly, still looking up at the creature in the tube. “I just hope that I can actually pull this off, the last thing that Equestria needs right now is a reality bending monster running about it.”

“Your Ministry set up the defenses in this place. You know as well as I do that not even one of the

Princesses could get in or out of here with proper clearance. If the creature escapes, he'll be detained and returned immediately." Copper had a hopeful glint in his eye as he stared at the Draconequeus, relishing the thought of a medicine of limitless potential. Hope just saw the potential for devastation on a massive scale.

She sighed. This was the job that had been assigned to her by Twilight Sparkle as a favor to Fluttershy. Who was she to turn down a role given to her by two of the most powerful ponies in Equestria. She had to stay positive.

This had to work

oooOOOooo

I came to on the floor, Shade staring hopefully in my face. I blinked a couple times and sat up. "What was that?" She smiled widely as she saw I was okay and hugged me again as I kept trying to sit up.

"That's some unicorn hoodoo. A memory sphere. Sweeps had it in one of her bags, thought you might like a souvenir. Didn't figure you knew how to turn it on." Ash was back in the doorway, though he wasn't looking too concerned.

I shook my head as I got to my hooves, holding Shade off for a few seconds as I got off of my back. I'd scattered the contents of my bag across the floor as I'd gone into the orb and fallen off of the couch and could understand why Shade had been so concerned. Ash just looked amused, as always.

Looking around the room, the recurring question came back. "How long?"

Ash answered this time. "Only a couple minutes. Probably as long as the memory in there was." Shade looked at the orb where it had rolled next to the couch and then back at me. Ash leaned down and picked up the orb, tapping it against his forehead lightly. "See, nothing for us non magical creatures. Stories I've heard though, these things can be anything. Any memory. Good or bad. Bad enough to fry a mind bad."

He pointed at me. "You need to be careful next time. We've got a contract and I don't want some mind wiped muscle head holding my reins. You know, more so than you are now anyways." He laughed and turned, leaving us alone yet again, taking the orb with him.

Now that I was standing, I approached the package and opened it. Inside was armored barding, quite different from the ragged mess I had left in that house. This was nice leather with armor plates in key places, such as my chest and sides. Just the kind of thing that would have stopped me from getting shot up or filled with nails. I reached for it with my magic but found that it was back at the weak level I had experienced before. Shade approached me and helped me put it on over my bandaged and beaten body. I flinched lightly as some of the large bruises were touched, but had had much worse just recently and stood still as she helped me.

Once the armor was on, we placed the saddlebags in their place and I slung Broken's holster over the whole ensemble. Sliding the shotgun into it's place, I had to admit that I felt like a badass. I turned to Shade and posed slightly. "How do I look?"

She blushed a bit and nodded. "You look like a proper good pony."

I smiled. That was just what I had wanted to hear. The two of us left the clinic.

The street was bustling again, but there was less of an everyday feeling in the air. A team of ponies were working on Traffic's sign, which had been lifted and propped against the side of the building. A disturbing smear on the corner was being rinsed off. The road itself was dented, the sign's shape

imprinted into the thick dust. I could still tell where Sweeps had been but her body was absent.

The building that had taken the brunt of the attack had collapsed sometime during the night and a pair of unicorns were picking through the rubble for anything that could be salvaged. It seemed that the building had been abandoned for the most part, but a small pile of salvage was still growing in front of it as they discovered items of any value and removed them from the wreckage.

I spotted Ash to one side leaning against a wall and picking through a bag. I trotted up to him, Shade at my side, and nodded towards the dent. "Where'd they take Sweeps?"

He didn't look up as he kept going through the bag. He gestured off towards Traffic's. "They took her into the store. Salvaging the weapons off her. I talked Traffic into giving me the bag of miscellaneous junk."

"Miscellaneous junk?" I'd been under the impression that everything Sweeps had on her had been a weapon or ammunition.

"Yeah, you know. Meds, caps, whatever this thing is, that memory orb you jumped into. Miscellaneous junk. As per our contract." The griffin was trying to identify a tube of something as he spoke.

I left him to his rummaging and crossed the street, avoiding the dent and the leaning sign. I pushed open the door, letting Shade go before me, and entered the cluttered room. On one shelf I spotted one of the pair of miniguns that had chewed up the town. I spotted Traffic's eye behind a pile of clutter on the counter, pretty sure that if looks could kill I would have exploded into a fine puree of pony.

"The fuck do you want? Want to rip up my sign again?"

I couldn't think of anything that would possibly appease the furious mare. I opened my mouth, searching for the words, but closed it after a few seconds. Shade took the initiative, stepping forward. "Miss Traffic, Ripple feels terribly for what he did to your store, but the damage could have been far worse. Imagine what would have happened if the Paragon hadn't been stopped this short into town, how many deaths there would have been."

Traffic snorted, stamping a hoof. "I know exactly what could have happened!" Her eyes softened as she looked at the blue mare standing in front of me. "Don't take it the wrong way, I'm grateful for all that he's done for the town." She looked back up at me with that fury shining through her eyes. "You just had to use my sign though! Do you have any idea how long it will take to get it back up?! Any idea just how heavy it is?!"

I held my hooves up and apart slightly. "A little bit."

I had to dodge as she threw a wrench at my head.

"Miss Traffic? Do you know where the Paragon's body is? Ashred said that it was brought in here." Shade just always seemed to defuse the situation, it just seemed impossible to stay mad when looking at her.

Traffic shrugged at her lightly. "She's in the back. We've gotten most what we could off her, but you're welcome to check. She's got one of those, can't quite figure how to remove it." Her hoof was pointing at my PipBuck. I hadn't noticed Sweeps wearing one, but she had been covered in armor and I hadn't had much time to really look for one when she had started shooting.

Shade thanked her politely and we walked behind the counter into the back room where an earth pony in filthy overalls was working on taking apart the rest of one of the multi-barreled weapons Sweeps had attacked me with. It was already stripped down and I assumed used to repair the one on sale in the front room. He glanced up at us and smiled as he saw Shade. "Good morning, M'am. Come to help me out again?"

“Sorry, Mr. Torque. Not today.” She made the introduction, “Ripple, this is Torque, Traffic’s repair pony. Torque, this is Ripple.”

He chuckled a bit, putting down the wrench he held in his mouth. “So you’re the pony that wrecked up the sign and put down that crazed gunmare. Got to thank you for not crushing her equipment as thoroughly as you did her.”

My eyes drew to the side where a bloody blanket was covering a figure on a table to the side. I nodded absentmindedly at him as I walked over to where Sweeps lay and pulled back the sheet a bit. Her eyes were closed and she honestly looked like she was just sleeping, though the amount of blood pooling under the table suggested otherwise. I didn’t remove the sheet entirely, not really wanting to see the damage that had been done, but just enough to get at her leg.

Sure enough, there was a PipBuck painted the same matte black that her armor had been, scratched up a bit but still in good condition. “I didn’t know what I needed to get that off, short of sawing off her whole leg. I’m a mechanic, not a surgeon.” Torque was suddenly next to me, looking at the device. “You’re welcome to try any of my tools, but I went through most of them already.”

Shade bumped in between us and took the PipBuck up in one hoof. Using the other she turned it on and fiddled with some settings before reaching into her own bag and producing a small wire from within. She plugged one end into Sweeps’ PipBuck and turned to me, motioning at the one on my leg. Lifting it for her, she quickly plugged it in and fiddle with a few dials and knobs on each.

I heard a small beep from the machine on my leg and she unplugged it. “Done.”

I wondered briefly what she had done and looked at it. My notes section now had several entries and the map had filled itself out quite a bit, aside from the small bit I had uncovered. Made sense that she’d know how to mess around with PipBucks, being from a town with such a high percentage of Stable ponies and being as good with mechanic work as she seemed to be.

Torque began asking Shade a bunch of technical questions about PipBucks which went a bit over my head and I cut in briefly. “Mind if I take her off your hands?” I flicked my head towards Sweeps’ body.

He shrugged. “I’ve got no problem but you might want to clear it with Traffic first.”

I nodded and test fired my magic. It had strengthened now that I’d been up and moving and I used it to wrap Sweeps fully in the blanket and lifted her, draping her over my back. Telling Shade to wait for me, I turned and left into the front room.

Traffic stared at me as I walked through the middle of her store, the bundle on my back bleeding lightly on her floor. I looked her straight in the eyes as I walked through, daring her to stop me as I walked out, grabbing a shovel in my mouth. She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it and glared. The door closed behind me, getting between myself and the angry mare.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered a story from my youth. Bits of that were still open to me at least. It was a tale of how long ago, before the Stables, most ponies would bury their dead. When the Stables came about, it was not an option and bodies were often burnt. I remembered vividly the buried part. Perhaps it had scared me as a foal, I wasn’t quite sure.

This just seemed right though.

As I stepped into the street, I turned towards the main gate and began walking. I heard Ash approach rather than see him, my eyes straight ahead, the shovel still gripped in my teeth.

“Ah. Okay.”

It sounded like he knew what I was planning and just walked silently next to me. We came to the gate

and looked up at the replacement guard, a nervously twitching tan earth pony manning the mounted gun on the wall. He hit the button after looking down at me for longer than I'd have liked and the gates opened with a hiss and a light screech as the recently repaired hydraulics went to work.

Once we had passed through, the guardpony closed the doors almost immediately and returned to staring down the road in the direction of Neighwhere. It felt that if anything approached, he was going to pull the trigger until the weapon went dry.

We walked down the road a short ways and I took a detour off up into the hills surrounding the town. Finding a nice spot clear of any long dead vegetation or rocks, I set the bundle containing Sweeps down on the hard packed earth and began to dig.

As I dug, I thought of the little mare I was burying. A slight breeze came through and pulled back the edge of the blanket, uncovering her head. Without all that armor and weaponry, she looked rather innocent, laying there with her eyes closed. It was rather unfortunate she had become a monster, she had seemed like a sweet mare at the end.

Right after you crushed her like a blood pack.

Ash looked on as I dug, sighing slightly. It was a bored sigh and he took off after a little while, flying into the air. Occasional flashes of shadow told me that he was circling, probably keeping an eye out for any threats while I was otherwise disposed. I hoped he was doing that at least, at this point I wasn't sure that Doc Care would heal me up if I got in another fight.

Finally, the hole was deep enough and I threw the shovel out before climbing out myself. Using my magic, I lifted Sweeps in her blanket and lowered her into the freshly dug grave. Looking down at the bundle laying in the ground, I felt pangs of guilt. Her final words were still haunting me. She'd loved me, or so she claimed. When this was over, I'd look through all the notes that had been on her PipBuck. See if there was something that could tell me something about the light blue mare that had both loved me and tried to murder me.

I shoveled the dirt back into the grave and went looking for a big rock. Finding one the right size and shape, I rolled it to the head of the loose earth. Rummaging through my saddlebags, I produced a piece of metal that had once been a knife or something in that line of weaponry and began carving into the headstone.

Sweeps.
I'm Sorry.

It was all I could think of. I stood there for a few moments, staring at the headstone, before I turned and trotted back towards the road. Ash landed at my side again, slinging his rifle back between his wings. We waved at the guardpony to not shoot us and walked through the gate as it swung open to readmit us into the town of Blank.

We'd be leaving in the morning.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as setting.

Comments can help me learn and grow to be a better writer. Also, rate/track/favorite if I have amused you with my tale.

Chapter 4: Cinder Trails

Looking at the dark blue mare out of the corner of my eye, I tried giving her my best grin. “Calm down, I’m pretty sure it won’t kill me. You need to relax a bit, enjoy the down time.” What I had wanted to say was that she should enjoy her last few hours with me. I’d be leaving with Ash to settle up a debt in the morning.

She leaned her head against my neck and sighed, staring at the table. A conversationalist she was not. I had to admit, I’d miss her when I was gone. If I got through a ruin of increasingly hostile nature, killed Hate, toppled a gang of murderous monsters, crushed an entire town of scum and got out the other side still shaped like a pony, I’d come back and see her. Big if.

When we’d gotten back to town, Traffic had been waiting just inside the gate. Immediately, she had asked Ash if he would leave us so that she could talk to me. He had nodded and taken off, flying into the town. She’d pulled me down a side alley and had leveled eyes with me.

“You’re leaving town, right?”

I had nodded, not sure where she was going with this. It was the first time she’d talked to me without glaring. “I can’t say I’m sad to see you go, but I have to thank you. You’ve done a lot for this town, despite what I told Intensive Care when he decided to pull you through the gate. He didn’t care that you were a Paragon.”

I’d tried to stutter out something, surprised that she had known this whole time. “Two Kick Rip, left hoof of Hate. You don’t just leave a reputation like that. I’ve had dealings with Neighwhere, with you, but something’s changed. You’re not the Rip I knew. I’ve listened to that mare talk about how heroic you were when you saved her, throwing yourself in harm’s way. The Rip I knew wouldn’t have done that. No Paragon would have.”

I’d not gotten the feeling with Traffic that I had when I’d seen Sweeps that first time, that feeling of déjà vu that had filled me with warnings. She shook her head as she saw me straining to remember. “Don’t worry Ripple, there was nothing between us. A couple of trading stops, nothing more. Back before the slaving started.” That was a good sign. Didn’t seem like anypony that approved of slavers would be living in Blank.

“That mare loves you, you know. I don’t know why, but you might want to say something before you leave her here.” Was Traffic psychic? I’d only told Ash... who must have told Traffic. Ah.

I had nodded my head. “Traffic... thanks. I’ll talk to Shade. Ash and I will be leaving early in the morning, we’ll need to stock up before we go.”

Traffic actually smiled at me. First time that had happened. “Come by the store in the morning. I’ll set you up.” I’d nodded in thanks and turned to leave, but her hoof on my leg had halted me. “Take care of Ashred. He’s not as tough as he lets on.” She’d looked at me for a few seconds then, an almost pleading look, and had left the alley ahead of me. I’d left shortly after and Ash had landed next to me almost immediately.

Which led back to the tavern I was sitting in. Ash was slowly getting blitzed and Shade still rested her head on my neck. “Shade...”

She sighed slightly and opened her eyes, looking at up at me. “I... we’re leaving in the morning. Ash and me.” She looked at me questioningly, glancing over at the oblivious griffin before lifting her head and sitting up. “You’ll be good here, I’ve seen how much you can help out the town.”

A hurt look cut across her face as she looked at me. That wasn't good. "You're leaving me?"

I nodded slowly. "It's what you wanted. I got you to Blank, to safety. You're not safe with me." I was gonna have to play this out slowly if I didn't want her to cry. She looked on the verge. I put a hoof on her leg reassuringly. "I can't guarantee that you'll be safe where I'm going. Once I deal with some problems, I'll come back. I promise."

Ash slammed a glass down on the table, causing both of us to jump. "Oh come on, just kiss and get this mushy crap out of the way." Shade blushed brightly and looked away and I just glared death at the inebriated griffin. He pointed the glass, cracked from the impact, at Shade. "He makes a good point though. We're gonna be in some heavy shit where we're going." Pointing the glass at me, he kept looking at Shade. "I've personally seen the sort of thing that your buck here can survive. It'd take balefire to make sure he stayed down and honestly, it's not just like you find those just laying around. He'll vanquish the villain and we'll come back big damned heroes."

He leaned back, looking for anything else to drink. "Just you watch, little miss. We'll be fine."

Somehow, that had worked. Shade looked strangely comforted, her eyes staring into mine. I'd miss those eyes, I had to say. She closed her eyes and rested her head back in its spot on my neck and I glanced back at Ash, who had a giant shit eating grin on his face. He tipped his glass at me and stood, wobbling his way over towards the bar to get another drink. I tipped back the last of my whiskey and rested my head on top of hers, taking my own advice and just enjoying the moment.

When we left the tavern, which I had come to figure out Ash had been living in when he collapsed in the darkest corner of the building and the pony behind the counter gave me a small shrug, I was carrying Shade. She had fallen asleep and I had ordered a few more drinks. Now I stumbled slightly, steadying her on my back with a magical steel glow. Once on the street, I realized that it was raining and hurried to the inn to get the sleeping mare out of the open.

I'd still not actually stayed in the room provided, having spent all of my nights in the clinic, but as I opened the door I noticed that it seemed doubtful Shade had spent more than an hour or two in it as well. I lay her gently on the mattress in the room and pulled a threadbare sheet over her as she mumbled lightly in her sleep.

I removed my barding, glad that my magic had come back in strength or I would have needed help. I put the barding on the ground within easy reach and lay down on the floor. As I drifted off to sleep, I watched Shade breath softly.

I would miss her.

I awoke to a tapping on the filthy window. I opened my eyes and found that Shade had moved sometime in the night, cuddling against me. Not that I was opposed to it, it just surprised me. Looking up, I could make out the blurry outline of a griffin's head shadowed on the window.

Time to leave.

I got to my hooves and put my barding on, keeping quiet so as to not wake up the peacefully resting mare. I packed up what gear I had and left, making sure to stay quiet. Walking down the hall towards the exit, I paused briefly. Should I really just leave her like that, to wake up with me missing?

It was probably for the best. She would likely try to tag along if she was awake.

Ash was waiting with his signature grin. "Hey there loverboy. Leave your little marefriend with some

fond memories?” He nudged at my side with an elbow. My horn glowed and Broken was outlined in its holster. He held up the hand, laughing. “Whoa there. I’m just kidding, Kick. Let’s hit up Traffic’s, then we should hit the road.”

I noticed that as we walked across the street, he kept running the feathers on his head low, over his eyes. His drinking must have left him with a killer headache. Not that it was bright in the wasteland... but it still made me chuckle slightly.

Traffic’s was still under major renovation and I wondered idly how they would actually put the sign back. The door was open and we walked in to find Traffic waiting behind the counter. She had a pile of supplies on the counter and was tapping a hoof on the counter, looking very bored. When she noticed us walk in, she perked up immediately and crossed her hooves on the counter, fixing us with her gaze.

“Morning, Miss Traffic.” Ash made a show of tipping some feathers in respect and I gave a little nod to Traffic. I could hear Torque working on something in the back room, but my attention went to the pile of supplies after only a second.

“I’ve scrounged up some supplies I can add to your tab, Ripple.” She nodded to me and smiled slightly. Her mood was entirely different from the scowling mare I had come to know.

“Ammo, for both of your weapons. Potions, Med-X, stuff for radiation. All the bandages I could spare.” I noticed that nearly half of the pile was bandages, both mundane and magical. I’d wanted to start avoiding them as a fashion statement but knowing my luck, I’d probably need as many as I could get my hooves on for my next body covering injury.

As we began sorting through the pile, what was mine and what was his, I paused, holding up an oddly colored shell. “What’s this? Didn’t know shells came in anything but red.”

Shaking her head in disappointment, she scoffed at me. “Don’t know how you survive.... anyways, gonna say this so you can understand.”

She held up a series of shells in one hoof... how she balanced them I doubt I will ever know. She pointed from left to right. “Buckshot. Slug. Magnum. Incendiary.” She dropped them back into the pile where they sat as a multicolored assortment of death. She held up another and flicked it into the air, catching it. She was rather talented for a merchant. “This is a little specialty, made in this very shop by Torque. Won’t find these anywhere else in the wastes, which is why I’m only giving you three. Explosive slugs. Don’t use these in close range, you’ll blow your hoof off. Again.”

She put it into the pile and smiled slyly at me. “Understand?”

I nodded, taking the ammunition and dumping it into my saddlebag. “Got it.” I had liked her more when she was being unfriendly. She was a bit of an ass when she was being friendly. I scooped what medicine Ash hadn’t taken into my bags and gave my thanks to Traffic. “Thanks for this.”

“Not a problem. Just pay me back later.” She rubbed her hooves together as she said this. I had a feeling I’d be paying for destroying her sign for the rest of my life. However long that may be.

Leaving the store, I spotted Ironsight, the guard that had been there when I’d first woken up in the town. He was trotting towards us, his rifle now placed firmly in a battle saddle. I found myself surprised that he not been one of the two guards that Sweeps had turned to paste.

“Heard about what you done.” His face darkened almost imperceptibly. “Shame hearing about Raindrop and Camellia. They were good ponies.” I was ashamed, I’d never learned the names of the two that had been killed. “I wish I were here but I was out investigating raider activity. If you see any, could you do me a favor and end their little spree? It’d be a big help.”

I looked at Ash who shrugged. We would inevitably kill some raiders, why not collect for the job. The

griffin answered first. "Sure thing, Mr. Ironsight. Just make sure to mention to Miss Traffic that we'll be assisting you in this."

Ironsight nodded and turned, continuing on patrol through the town. The gate opened as we neared it, the same shaky looking pony at guard, and we were out of Blank. The gates closed behind us as we began our walk towards Neighwhere, towards a point that had been on Sweeps' PipBuck.

Ministry of Peace Hornsmith Regional HQ.

It was all we had to go on, but we knew where it was and knew that there was something there that Hate wanted.

Good enough for Ash.

Good enough for me.

The walk back to the ruins of Hornsmith was rather uneventful. A single raider had tried attacking us, clearly insane beyond any reasoning, armed only with his teeth and hooves. He'd died before even getting within throwing distance of us, the contents of his head rearranged across the pavement by a precise shot from the large rifle Ash carried.

I suppose that the rain was keeping our encounter rate low. Eventually, Ash sighed quite loudly. Then he sighed again.

"Okay. What's wrong Ash."

"I'd forgotten how boring it was to walk everywhere. Why couldn't you have been a pegasus? Then we coulda gotten there sometime today." Really? That was his complaint?

I pulled up my PipBuck and flicked through the dials until I found what I was looking for. The radio. "I'll turn on some music, if that will entertain you."

Ash grinned. "Sure. Works for me, been meaning to listen in on Pon3 since we got the relay back up." I had to admit, I was curious as well, I'd never really listened to any of the radios running in town and I had been distracted while in the tavern. I pressed a button and the PipBuck began releasing a stream of music from it's tinny little speakers.

We walked, enjoying the sound of a mare singing. Then the song ended, replaced almost instantly by a buck's voice, shouting a greeting. "Good morning, wastelanders. That was the ever talented Sapphire Shores, singing about never letting life get ya' down. Now, its time for some news. This one's going down to all you ponies way down in Blank. I know you may have felt abandoned, but 'ol DJ Pon3 was just having some... raider related technical difficulties keepin' me from bringing the good news. I've kept an eye on you, but just recently I noticed you could hear me again!"

I paused. Was... this about us?

"Lookin' into it, I found something I didn't expect. A daring duo walked into a raiders den to get some medicine for the sick and downtrodden. They also happened to bring music back into those same ponies lives. If you two are listening, this DJ would like to give his thanks. You've helped ease the pains of day to day life for every pony down there. Now, to get back to givin' you that music that you fought so hard to bring back..."

I'd stopped listening as the DJ announced who and what was coming on next. Ash punched me in the arm lightly, laughing. "See Kick! We're famous already. Now if only he had said what we looked like..." His eyes trailed off into the distance. He was star struck.

“Ash, snap out of it. If he announced what we looked like, we’d have all of those raider’s friends out for our blood. Lets stick to the anonymity for now, it’s less hazardous.” I shoved him lightly and he snapped out of it.

His grin was a bit more manic than usual. “Yeah, good point. Lets kill some more raiders and get real famous, so they won’t want to mess with us anymore.”

“Yeah, not the point I was going for.” I couldn’t talk him out of it. He kept his rifle out after this, keeping his eyes out for any chance to gain some more fame.

Fame is fun. Go with it.

Great. Now that Shade was not around, the voice had slowly been gaining volume, trying to tell me what to do from the dark corner of my mind. I started feeling the ache around the same time, a need to be faster, stronger and better at everything.

I had two shots of stampede in my bag. Two chances for the monster within to come out. To distract myself, I looked around us. We were still in the stretch of wasteland between Blank and the ruined city, nothing much to look at. A building every now or then, burnt out or long since looted. Blasted trees and the occasional skycarriage impact site. They were all headed in the same direction, away from where I assumed Maremack was up on the mountain.

From here, I could see the mountain, knew that Neighwhere and Stable 87 were right next to it, but the mountain was covered with clouds. I couldn’t really tell where Maremack was exactly.

I froze as I noticed the three red dots on my E.F.S. and made whistled a short tone. Ashe stopped mid stride and looked back to see me pulling Broken from its place at my side. He nodded and I pointed towards the hostiles, then towards a nearby crashed hunk of metal. The two of us crept to it and took cover.

Looking over the edge, I saw what we were up against. Three ponies. They were camped out under the awning of a low shack I hadn’t noticed. Looking closer, I saw what I was looking for.

Jagged metal. Chains. Three flanks adorned with images of rape and death. Ponies that were like the old me. The ones I told myself all deserved to be shot in the head at least once. Ash checked that a round was chambered and took aim through a jagged hole in our cover. I’d kept the magazine in my shotgun low to account for my new options and floated out two slug rounds, loading them in.

I took aim myself, not used to this range but activating S.A.T.S. to compensate. Ash was competent enough at this to adapt and knew he would go for one of the targets I didn’t hit. Locking in my target, I keyed off the spell and fired a round.

The slug made the distance in a split second, hitting the pony to the left, a filthy orange unicorn buck with chains for a cutie mark, right beneath his eye. His head came apart violently as the chunk of lead tore into his skull and brain, splattering the wall next to him. Almost instantly, the rifle to my right made its report, echoing across the wastes. The pony to the right, a dark green earth pony mare, took the round right where her neck connected to her body. It blew a hole wide enough that I could see through.

The third pony moved faster than I had expected, diving for the door of the shack. Kicking the door in, he disappeared into the dark interior.

Then the other red dots flickered to life. The shack must have been full of them. “Oh fuck. Ash, incoming!” Automatic gunfire tore out of the building through windows, the doorway and a number of holes in the wall. As our cover took the full force of the fusillade, I saw Ash open his wings but pull them back in sharply as bullets grazed between the feathers, tearing several apart. He gave me a

halfhearted shrug and sat down, waiting.

I wasn't content to wait until they decided to stop shooting and start throwing grenades.

Or throwing nail bombs.

I loaded one of the special rounds Traffic had given me into the breach and took a few deep breaths. If I was to use these to their best extent, I had to know just exactly they could do. Ash watched me put the shell in and grinned, nodding at me in agreement.

I triggered S.A.T.S. more for the time than for accuracy. It was the side of a damned building. Broken floated free from cover and fired, making the same sound it always did. I'd hoped for something louder.

The side of the building exploded in a clap of pressure and debris. A full half of the dots winked out immediately. This was our chance. As one, we leaped over our cover and rushed the building, coming in through a cloud of dust and smoke.

The first pony I saw took a slug round through his open mouth, decorating the second pony I saw with chunks of spine. I slid to the side and kicked out, hitting the second pony in the shoulder with a rear hoof, the blast of a shell tearing her leg and bits of rib from her body.

Ash went in with his claws ready, tearing the throat from a wounded unicorn mare trying to lift an assault rifle. He still held his oversized rifle in one hand and slammed the barrel into the chest of a charging earth pony carrying a sledgehammer. The round didn't have far to go, punching through the buck and blowing most of his organs out the back.

From there it was simple. Most of the hostiles that had been in this room were shredded up pretty good from the blast, bits of wood and metal having sliced them to death. A few were still breathing or struggling and we put them down quick enough before reloading our weapons in the sudden calm that the short battle had left behind..

Ash went about his business, collecting the ears from the dead. When I had asked him about it with the first raider a few hours back, he'd told me it was as proof for the kills. Wouldn't collect on Ironsights job without any proof. It had made a grim sort of sense and I'd dropped it.

Walking amongst the dead ponies, collecting what ammo and supplies I could from the broken bodies, I paused as I noticed the sound my hooves were making on the floor. It was hollow. The building was not exactly large and I'd not expected it to have a basement, but I found a hatch on the floor within seconds. I opened it slowly, floating Broken next to me. Nothing but darkness.

I dropped into the hole, turning the light on my PipBuck on as soon as I landed. It illuminated the small room well enough and I stopped dead in my tracks as I saw what it held.

The dead ponies upstairs were slavers, probably just stopping here long enough to get some rest. Their cargo was in the basement. I counted three mares, two bucks, a colt and five fillies. They were all tied and gagged, their eyes looking at me with fear. I holstered Broken and called up to Ash. "Ash, gonna need some help down here."

His head popped down through the hole and he saw what I'd found. His grin disappeared completely and he dropped through, slinging his rifle over his back. We approached the slaves slowly, trying to convey to them that we meant them absolutely no harm. I untied the nearest filly first, but she bit me on the leg as soon as I removed the gag. I grunted through the pain, surprised at how hard she could bite.

Ash was cutting bonds with his claws, letting the ponies remove their own gags.

Before long we had all of the slaves freed and up above, away from the slaughter. Their self appointed leader was chatting with me. At me. The smaller of the two bucks, a red earth pony who had introduced

himself as Bulkhead, was rather odd. “Anyways, I must thank you dear sir. Without you, my colleagues and I would have been in a right jam. I do apologize again for young Nips taking a bite out of you, she does that to everypony you see. A right nuisance, I’ve been telling her mother since the filly was born that nothing good could come out of it. Rosemary, I tell her, you really must get your daughter to stop biting ponies. What if they should think she were a raider?”

My eyes had glazed over as he talked. Then he talked some more. My eyes drifted to the sides and I watched as Ash armed the ponies with some of the... lower quality weapons that the slavers had been firing at us, giving them excess ammunition and a few healing supplies. I knew that he viewed every item given as a loss, but I was glad that he was doing it anyways. He’d been treating these ponies with the respect I’d only seen him give consistently to Traffic.

Ash finished and walked towards me, the group of former slaves following him. “Hey, Kick, sorry to interrupt your conversation.” That grin again. Ass. “Everyone’s loaded up and ready to go. I gave Colonnade the directions to Blank and told him to mention us when he got there. Should be enough to get them entrance.”

Bulkhead was still talking at me as the other buck, who I realized was probably his brother, put a hoof around his shoulder and guided him away, a knowing look on his face. Ash waved lightly as the group headed off down the road, armed and free.

The contented grin would not leave my face. Shade would be proud.

We turned and began down the street again, heading towards the ruins and our first destination. Ash snorted and nudged me. “Bet I learned more about them than you did.”

I didn’t doubt it.

“The brothers, they’re down from Trottingham. Builders, the both of them. They’ll do well in Blank. The rest are just stragglers and orphans they’ve met along the way. Good bucks, gotta say.” Well, at least we hadn’t risked ourselves to kill some slavers and and free a mob of raiders.

“Right. Shut up Ash. I’ve got a headache.”

Chuckling, he closed his beak and paced alongside me.

Smooshed her flat. If only you knew who she really was. The things you two did together. The fun you had. You were like a brother to her. You killed her. Killed her flat.

Shut the fuck up. Shut the fuck up. Shut up.

When we had come to the outskirts of Hornsmith, I’d thought briefly of Sweeps. The voice had come in full force right then, either taking full advantage of memory only he had access to or lying to me. Either way, I was getting angry.

“Hey, Kick, check the map. I think we’re getting close.”

Thank you for the distraction. Lifting my PipBuck, I flipped through a few menus and came to the map. The street layout was on a convenient grid and the building we were looking for was just a couple of blocks south of us. I looked up, hoping to see something as important as the regional headquarters for the Ministry of Peace, but saw nothing but rubble. Either it was a short building or we were looking for a large pile of masonry.

Covering the distance was easy, but when we came to the building I saw what the challenge would be. It had the same design scheme that the rest of Hornsmith shared, bland and grey. I’d been under the impression that unicorns had a tendency towards artistic ability. None of that was present.

The Regional HQ was a squat, grey slab with a ring of shattered windows on its second floor. The front door was composed of two large chunks of metal with the MoP emblem carved into each. At least it wasn't slathered in posters.

The front doors were ajar slightly, but that didn't concern me. Hornsmith was probably emptier than the rest of the wasteland from what I'd seen. Aside from a few raiders and some radroaches, the outskirts were actually safe.

Stepping into the entry hall, I stopped. The inside was massively different from the outside. Plants were everywhere, covering every surface. Everything was... green. "Wow... that's bizarre." I hadn't even realized I'd been the one to say it until Ash stepped in next to me, his eyes wide. "Yeah. Everything's... alive."

The two of us stood there amidst the green, vines and leaves cushioning the floor beneath us. Ash ripped up a bit of foliage and held it in front of his eyes, rubbing it between his talons. "So... what do you suppose we're looking for."

The question of the hour.

The terminal behind the desk was on and still signed in. Two for two. The information on it was less than useful. Visitor sign ins, scheduling information, a memo informing of a MoM party somewhere in Hornsmith. Wasn't really sure what MoM was though.

Ash had been pacing and scratching aimlessly at the walls. "Ash, lets check further in. Keep an eye out for... anything, I guess." He dropped the shredded bundle of leaves he'd been holding and nodded, clearly excited to be anywhere but in this room. The main hallway leading down from the entryway had no side doors, but ended in a room similar to the one that had been in Relay #108, except that the elevator in the middle was of a much nicer model. I assumed that there was a skylight, but it was so choked with vegetation that I couldn't even see the ceiling.

Ringed the room were two levels of floors, a railed walkway running along the second level, though much of it had collapsed or been bent out of shape by years of plant growth.

The elevator doors were open and the dark within felt almost menacing. The vines were coming from the door, but as I looked closer I saw that probably both of us could get in if it came to that. Ash was circling the room, flapping slowly as he looked through doors and broken windows. "Yeah, Kick, I don't think anything important went on here. There's nothing. No terminals, no nothing."

I nodded as I walked to the elevator and peered inside. Down a ways I could make out a light. At least the power was still on. "Ash, think we're gonna have to go down there. You gonna be able to help me get out later without shredding me up?"

He landed next to me and looked inside. Holding up a hand, he clicked the claws together. They looked razor sharp. "I can do my best."

I sighed. That would have to do. Reaching into the darkness, I groped until I found a vine that ran all the way down. A few test tugs and I was pretty sure it wouldn't break under my weight. I twisted the vine around my leg a little and hopped into the blackness. Sliding down the vine proved easier than I had expected and I was down into the basement level no worse for the trip. Ash landed next to me with a burst of plant sap and leaves.

Wiping some off of my face, I glared at him. He shrugged and grinned.

This room proved to have much more of what I felt would help us. Several terminals lit the room, providing the light I had seen. Several had been crushed between vines, but the intact ones seemed to

be fully functioning. Walking up to the nearest terminal, I read what was written on the screen.

```
>>Ministry of Peace Regional Headquarters Hornsmith  
>>Basement Level 1 - Experimental Medicine  
>>  
>>Login:  
>>Password:
```

Well, at least this floor sounded promising. I checked each terminal in turn, but every one had the same screen. Nothing could be done until we found what we needed to log in or an already unlocked terminal.

Ash got my attention by snapping and pointed at something on the wall. A map of the floorplan was hiding behind some vines which he carefully removed, trying not to destroy the map. Much of it was worn away, but I could see the room we were in and two hallways leading to the sides. Looking, I saw one door was open but the corridor behind it was choked with rubble and more plants. The second door was closed.

Coming to the door, I saw no way of opening it. I went and looked at the open door to get an idea of what I was dealing with. Taking in as much about the open door as I could, I returned to the closed door and cracked my neck, shaking out my legs as I did so. "Okay, stand back."

I cleared away some of the vines at the bottom of the door and found grooves built into the edges. I jammed my hooves in and threw all of my strength into lifting the door. At first, nothing happened. Slowly, though, I felt the door begin to give. Slowly, but surely, it began sliding up into the ceiling. I strained and grunted, but this door was much less heavy than that sign had been.

With a pop of sparks and a crunch of metal, the door slid easily. I'd broken whatever was operating it as far as I could tell, but it meant that the door was no longer the impassable barrier it had been a minute before.

Ash clapped mockingly. "Brilliant tact there. Masterful lock picking, I must say." I ignored him and looked into the hall I had opened. The lack of vegetation was the first thing I noticed. This hallway was clean. I mean really clean.

Stepping into it, I looked around. I could barely tell that this hallways was around 200 years old. It looked brand new. Stranger and stranger.

Once in, I saw that this hallways was lined with what appeared to be labs. Science stuff lay all about the tables in each one, drawings and equations written on chalkboards. At the end of the hallways was another door, one that luckily opened when I approached.

The room beyond answered one of my questions. A plaque on the desk read Administrator Grace. I smiled as I recognized the name of the pony that had been in the memory I'd accidentally subjected myself to. The room had paper scattered across it, like somepony had been searching for something. The desk itself held two terminals. I walked around the desk to get a better look.

One of the terminals was blown out, several bullet holes punching through the screen and into the machinery within. A dried brown stain was on the ground beneath me and I didn't have to think much to imagine what had happened here. The second terminal, however, was a much better find.

It was logged in.

```
>>Welcome Administrator Grace  
>>Security Lock Down of Primary Shaft Activated  
>>Day [9999] of Lock Down
```

>>
>>
><>

Well, that explained the door. The last line was blinking intermittently and I tapped at a key experimentally. A letter appeared. Success.

I erased what I had written, hunting for each key.

><>end lock down

I pressed enter and the screen began scrolling rapidly through a loading bar. It beeped and the screen changed.

>>Security Lock Down Ended

>>Severe damage found in all sub-basement levels.

>>Maintenance informed.

I heard a humming as the building slowly brought itself back to life. Ash looked up from where he was rummaging through a stack of papers, tilting his head to the side as he listened to the low noise filling the room. He looked at me from the corner of his eye. "What did you do?"

Looking at the screen, I smiled and trotted back around the table, headed for the door.. "Hopefully, I just opened some doors. You find anything?"

Tossing a stack of paper into the air, he dropped to all fours and turned with me. "Nope." Leaving the office, I noticed that most of the labs were better lit now and terminals that I hadn't noticed were on, numbers running across their screens. Looking closer, I could see only gibberish numbers that must have meant something two hundred years ago, but were now just random numbers and words jumbled together.

The main room was only slightly better lit than it had been, though that was mostly due to the light shining out into the overgrown gloom from the spotless corridor. I'd sort of hoped for a change, but there was nothing.

Walking ahead, further into the room, Ash threw his claws above him in exasperation. "Nothing. This place sucks!"

The elevator shaft made an odd straining sound for a second before it exploded plant matter out into the room, coating the two of us in shredded plant goo. Ash took the full force of it and it coated him beak to tail, dripping green. He wiped his eyes clear and stared in indignation at the elevator, which had arrived at this floor.

With a pleasant ding, the elevator opened its doors for the first time in two hundred years. Bones poured out and I took a step towards it. Ash looked at me, shocked and dripping. "You're not getting in that? The bone tube? Really?"

I shrugged slightly and shook some of the plant matter that clung to my face and mane off. "The alternative is leaving. We've not found whatever it is we're here for, so why not?" I used my magic to move the bones out from the elevator and piled them next to the doorway. "Also, its blocking our only way out."

He looked defeated as I stepped into the elevator. I hid my grimace as I saw the color that the floor had turned. I was standing in two hundred year old melted pony. Ash approached the elevator slowly and stepped inside, tucking his wings in tight.

"Do not like this. On the record." He was shaking slightly. I looked at the list of options on the panel in

front of me.

1 - Lobby

B1 - Experimental Medicine

B2 - Dormitories

B3 - Holding

B4 -

The last option was heavily scratched out and seemingly coated in a layer of long dried blood. Sounded promising. I pressed that button with my horn and the doors closed. The light in the elevator was dim and flickered slightly, but I could still see the sense of panic on Ash's face.

"Ash... are you claustrophobic?"

He glared at me. "Don't know what that means. Griffins were given wings, meant to soar through the skies. We weren't meant to be underground. No room here at all." He kept on like that for a little bit, rubbing his arms with his claws.

I would definitely have to remember this little detail. Big bad griffin was afraid of small spaces.

A little readout above the door showed what floor we were passing and I watched as it ran down through the numbers until it came to rest at B4 and the doors clicked open.

Here I'd thought that above had been overgrown. I could barely see down here, so overgrown was the room. Vines hung across everything. Leaves and plants were dominant. Ash tore out of the elevator, cutting his way through several before he stopped, glad to be free of the confining tube. He noticed the environment for the first time and let out a low whistle.

"Hey Kick? You sorta getting the feeling that what we're looking for is maybe tied in with these plants?"

"Why are you whispering?"

He shrugged and pulled out his rifle. "Dunno. Just doesn't feel right down here."

I noticed it then. It wasn't just the plants filling the room. Something felt wrong in the air. No, everywhere. It just felt wrong down here. Broken floated out next to me and I nodded towards a hallway, the one path out of this room.

We proceeded slowly, moving as quietly as we could. The plants covering the metal floor helped in this immensely, masking our steps. The only light down here were from a few panels set into the walls, shining a pale light where they could between the gaps in the foliage.

The next room we came to gave me a sense of déjà vu. It was shaped almost exactly like the one that had been in the memory orb. In the center, instead of a glass chamber, sat a pedestal, thick wires and vines trailing into and around it. Atop the pedestal sat a small black cube.

Approaching, I felt the voice in my head perk up.

Hear that? You don't hear that? Stop walking forward you idiot. What the hell is wrong with you, if you die then the fun ends forever! STOP!

It must have been spite that kept me walking. Spite to that voice in the back of my head. No advice it had ever given me had been good advice. I approached the black cube and took a closer look. It was suspended in some sort of magical field, floating slightly. Built into the column was a terminal and I wiped away what vines obscured the screen.

>>Project Greenhoof

>>Operational Status: In Stasis

>>

>>Menu

I'd been getting the hang of these terminals and selected menu. The options provided gave me a bunch of technical jargon that didn't really feel important. Looking through a few, this was confirmed. The terminal politely informed me that more information could be found in the head scientists office.

I looked around the room, hoping to figure out which of the side doors lead there. Why of course, it was the biggest one there with the name Dr. Budding Leaf. That seemed rather appropriate for the project title. I trotted away from the cube, the voice letting out a little sigh of relief.

If it didn't want the cube, then I most definitely did.

The door slid halfway open as I approached, vines catching in its internal mechanisms. The door strained and shot sparks before letting out a puff of smoke and giving up. Doors in this building were not having a good day. At least it had gotten halfway open.

The office was filled with plants. It looked like they had come in through the air ducts, vines choking the distended hole in the wall. I took a few steps towards the desk holding a terminal and froze. Sitting there was who I assumed was Dr. Budding Leaf. The skeleton of Budding Leaf at least. Her jaw was shattered, vines crammed down where her throat would have been. Her ribs were shattered, plants growing through and around them.

On the desk I spotted a small black orb.

"Hey Ash. Cover me for a minute."

I put my horn to the orb and fell into the memory.

oooOOOooo

I was in the same room, just a lot cleaner, looking at a terminal. There was a loud noise in the air, a rhythmic screeching that grated on my nerves immediately. The door to the office slid open and the mare I was in began shouting before she even looked up. I could only assume that I was Budding Leaf right now.

"Why hasn't that damned alarm been turned off?" Slamming her hoof into the desktop and standing in outrage, Budding Leaf glared at a green pony in a lab coat. "First I get that case along with orders to send the specimen to Hoofington and then the alarm starts going off! Tell me why we can't get the fucking alarm quiet?"

The pony in the coat shuffled nervously, looking at the carpeted floor beneath his hooves. "We're sorry Dr. Leaf, we're doing all we can. The alarm seems to be coming in through the relays and we can't get any word from topside. The lab has initiated a full lock down and we've got several ponies stuck in the elevator. We're doing all that we can."

Leaf turned from him, opening a safe in the wall. I watched her turn the dial with her magic and took note of the numbers she used in the combo. Memory orbs were awesome. The door swung open and she floated a black metal case from her desk into the waiting safe. She slammed it and turned back to the lab coat pony. "Get out there and do what you can. I'll be out shortly to fix this."

The pony turned and left, leaving Budding Leaf to sit back down and cradle her head in her hooves. "Fucking Ministry shuts down my project... we were so fucking close. Just a few more days, that's all I asked. That cunt Grace..." Her eyes burned as she started crying. It was a weird feeling, going through this with no emotional context.

The room shook slightly and she looked up sharply. Screams came from outside the door and she stood, rushing around her desk. The door slid open and the horror of what was happening came to her. The black cube in the center of the room was glowing with a dark energy. A few assorted plants scattered about the room in the middle of experimentation had begun growing out of control.

The pony in the lab coat was running towards me as a leafy tendril shot out and gripped him around his midsection. It squeezed and his eyes widened as he screamed. Blood shot out of his mouth and the vine closed tightly, crushing him nearly in two. What came out both ends made Budding Leaf get violently sick immediately. Around the room, scenes of extreme violence were being played out.

A mare ripped into quarters by a collection of thorned vines that had pulled her into the air sprayed Budding Leaf with an incredible amount of blood, causing the mare to turn and retreat into her office in a blind panic. She slid over her desk, sitting down and typed frantically at the terminal.

>>Emergency Abort Code 45XRR36

>>Authorization: Budding Leaf ID38456

She slammed a hoof into a key and the terminal went dark for a few seconds, Budding Leaf breathing heavily and crying slightly. The terminal winked back to life.

>>Connection to Canterlot Ministry Headquarters Lost

>>Local maneframe rerouting signal...

>>

>>

>>Connection to Hoofington Ministry Office Lost

>>Local maneframe rerouting signal...

>>

>>

>>Local maneframe taking emergency control....

>>Control established.

>>Power to Operation Greenhoof ceasing. Magical shield active.

>>Full Cessation in [2] minutes.

>>[1:59]

>>[1:58]

>>[1:57]

Budding Leaf reached down to a drawer next to her, pulling it open. Inside lay the memory orb I was now looking into. She floated it out to her and held it in her hooves, putting her horn against it.

Sobbing openly, she spoke. "I don't know what's going on, but if we've lost connection to Canterlot and the Hoof... maybe those zebra fucks finally did it. I know the drill for this, record the last memory. I could give a fuck about that, but if anyone finds this, don't let my little Ivy know what happened to her mama. Lie to her, tell her I died in a lab accident or... or in whatever the fuck is going on outside. Celestia, I hope I remember how to use this spell..."

Her horn glowed and she began the spell to put her memory into the orb. The sound of shattering metal to her left drew her attention but she kept the spell going. Vines tore into the room through a shelf, throwing books and papers across the room. They headed straight for her.

I felt everything right before the end. I felt her jaw shatter as the vines forced their way into her mouth, I felt the ripping of her throat and stomach as they were violated by the plants. I felt her ribs shatter through her skin and finally felt her burst as the vines built up enough pressure to break her from the inside. The spell activated with her last forced thought.

oooOOOooo

I dropped the orb and clutched my sides, screaming. That was the most pain I had ever felt. Getting shot in the head, getting filled full of nails, having my skin split apart as my muscles broke through it. Nothing compared to what I'd felt in that orb.

I threw up as I lay there, holding my sides. I felt rather than saw Ash as he ducked under the door and rushed to my side. "Kick? What the hell happened."

I couldn't help it. I cried. I cried from the memory of the pain. I couldn't help it. It took me a while to pull myself together, at least ten minutes from what I could tell, clenching my teeth and finally getting my hooves under me. I stood woozily and leaned against the table.

I was breathing heavily and managed to get out two words. "Fuck.... me...." The memory of the pain was beginning to fade and I was slowly taking control again. Stumbling to where I knew the safe was, I ripped away the vines with my teeth and uncovered the dial. I turned it to the combination that Budding Leaf had used and the door clicked and swung open.

Inside were a the black case I'd seen her put in there and a few other items. Another memory orb sat inside and I cautiously reached for it. I was not ready for another memory, not for a while. I pulled it out with a hoof and dropped it into my saddlebag. I pulled the case out with my magic and noticed how surprisingly light it was. I popped it open and saw what was inside. Four square indents, each the side of the cube floating out there. There was a blue glint of metal layered into the case, shining strangely in the few places it was exposed.

The cube that had filled this place with plants and murdered every pony in here. I rubbed my jaw absentmindedly, the memory of it breaking into so many pieces still fresh. I placed the case down and slowly approached the ruined remains of Budding Leaf. The terminal was still on, highlighting her shattered remains with a sickly green glow. I shuddered as I pushed in next to her and removed the vines from around the terminal.

>>Cessation Complete

>>Disengage Shielded Specimen for Transport?

>>Y/N

I hesitated my hoof over the Y. I'd seen what that thing could do now. Did I really want it?

I was certain now that this is what Hate wanted, why this location had been on Sweeps' PipBuck. I had to deny him this. Anything with this power could not help anyone. It could only hurt. I had to stop him from getting it.

I tapped the Y and waited for a brief second to be torn apart by vines. Nothing.

Ash was still looking at me with a look of concern but kept his mouth shut. Neither of us were in much of a talking mood. I left the terminal and as I picked up the case I motioned to the nervous griffin that he should follow. Ducking under the door, I looked towards the cube. It was no longer floating but the magical glow around it remained.

The cube sat there on the pedestal. I approached it carefully and opened the case. I didn't want to touch it, even with the magical shield. Using my magic, I lifted it and floated it towards the case. I immediately began feeling lightheaded, as though the cube was trying to do something to me. Placing it into its slot, I slammed the case shut. The feeling disappeared.

The whole room felt better, that oppressive wrongness was gone. "Ash, lets get the fuck out of here." He was already starting towards the exit. Neither of us wanted to be here anymore. We practically ran down the hallways, our former stealthy movements long gone.

“Kick! Kick where the fuck is the elevator?” Ash was right. The elevator was gone. We both panicked for a few seconds before it slid into view. The griffin let out an audible sigh and took a step forward as the elevator doors opened.

There was a mare inside. Orange coat, orange eyes behind goggles, a white mane. The smell hit us as soon as the doors had opened, a sharp chemical smell. At her sides were black canisters, small fires tipping the barrels that jutted from them. Her eyes filled with the greatest joy as she saw me standing there.

I felt nothing but dread. I knew her.

Her horn glowed orange briefly and a small burst of fire emitted from one of the canisters at her side. That small puff turned into a full on fireball, flying straight at us. The two of us dove to either side but I could smell burning fur and feathers. The temperature in here had just jumped noticeably.

Turning, we fled back down the hall as she caught a speck of fire off of a leaf with her magic. It floated towards her, dancing in the air. She held up her hoof and the flame rested there. “Two Kick! Did you kill Sweeps? I told Hate she was the wrong one to send after that rumor you lived.. She always had a huge crush on you. Me, I've got abandonment issues!” The flame formed into the image of a dragon and grew in size, encompassing her head. From the cover I had taken, I could just see her as I loaded slug rounds into Broken.

“Ash, we can’t stay here. Find us a way out!” I whispered at the singed griffin crouching next to me and he looked at me with determination in his eyes. He wasn’t going to die underground. Nodding, he dove from behind the cover, staying out of the orange mare’s line of sight. I lost track of him as he started sticking his head into doors and looking for any other routes. My attention was on the mare walking slowly down the hall.

“Funny story, you being here Two Kick. I saw Hate shoot you. You always were a tough bastard, but you were such fun to be around. The arena, the field, the sack. Awesome.” She giggled. The fiery visage of the dragon was catching the vines on fire as she walked down the hall towards me, but the heat did not seem to bother her. Her hair wasn’t even burning.

“You Paragons really like to hear yourselves talk, don’t you?” As I yelled out, she stopped, looking at where I peeked at her from around my cover.

“You Paragons? What, you’re not one of us anymore? Two Kick Rip is giving up the title over a little head wound?” She broke into a fit of giggles, the fire growing around her and beginning to spread into the room, catching leaves and vines as it went. “I’ll remember to tell Hate that when I give him your ashes. He’ll have a laugh and we’ll all be merry. I’m sure even Skyline will laugh.”

I assumed Skyline was a Paragon. The longer she kept talking though, the longer Ash had to find us a way out. The air was still heating up and I was beginning to sweat heavily. I floated Broken up and took aim before firing a slug at her.

The shot headed straight at her face but she didn’t even flinch. The bullet melted in the air, liquid lead spattering the ground near her hooves. She lifted the nearest one to the lead and snorted in distaste. “You almost burned me. That’s not nice!”

The dragon reared around her and shot a cone of flame into the desk i was hiding behind. I felt skin blister and some of my mane catch fire. I smelt burning bandages.

Fuck this, she was going to cook me alive if I didn’t move. As soon as she started talking again, I bolted further into the room, taking shots at her as I ran. None of them connected.

Were all of the Paragon’s bulletproof? I wasn’t. It wasn’t fair if they all were and I could be shot.

I slid over a tabletop, taking vines with me and barely missed another shot of fire roasting me. “Ash! Found anything?!” I shouted loud enough that he had to hear me wherever he was. Being cornered in an oven by a pony that wasn’t bothered by heat was not a good prospect for myself or the errant griffin.

An idea came to me. I floated the case out and held it up. “Hate sent you to get something, right? I’ve got it right here. You burn me and it goes too!”

I heard her giggling again. “You must think I’m stupid. Hate sent me because he knew I couldn’t damage a soul jar. If it doesn’t burn and you want it, Cinder Trails is your girl.”

“I’m guessing you’re Cinder Trails then?” I’d gotten her talking again. Any time at all was good time. The heat subsided a bit and I could breathe again.

The dragon shrank considerably, down to the size of a baby. “You don’t remember me? I’m hurt Two Kick. I remembered you.” I glanced over the cover, sighting her beyond the flames that now filled the room. Jumping up onto her hind hooves, she presented herself with a twirl and a flourish. “Really? How could you forget all this? I thought you knew it pretty well.” A huge suggestive grin shot at me through the flames and heat.

She was great. Always ready to go. Always into whatever I wanted. You could have some fun with her.

Great. So this was my old marefriend. That’s fantastic. Hearing a whistle, I looked up. Ash was gesturing at me from a doorway before he raised his rifle and fired at Cinder Trails. The bullet was a little too big and she was not prepared for it.

It struck her along her neck, glowing red and cauterizing the wound instantly. She screamed and glared at us with evaporating tears. The dragon jumped back to full size and she charged, a wall of fire and heat. Most of the room that wasn’t on fire burst into flames as she entered the main chamber.

I bolted for the door that Ash had come from, a fanged head of fire shooting out at me. I ducked under it as it snapped at me, catching most of my mane and tail on fire. I rushed through the door and slammed it with my telekinesis as I went, locking it. It was a thick blast door, but the paint on it started smoking and melting as the door’s temperature skyrocketed.

Ash was standing next to an open hole in the floor, an unsure look on his face. Looking in, I saw only darkness but heard water. A sewer most likely, judging from the cover laying on the ground next to the hole. A quick look back showed that the door was starting to melt out of its frame. That was all I needed.

I hopped into the hole, throwing myself into the darkness. I hit the water and felt the fires go out, then I was swept away. I heard a splash follow shortly behind and hoped that it was Ash.

The pipe swept us away into the dark unknown.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece of fiction as well as setting.

As always, let me know how I’m doing in the comments. Thanks and rate/track/favorite if you enjoyed it.

Chapter 5: Underhoof

I slammed into the grate, feeling it long before I could see it. My trip through the waterlogged underworld of Hornsmith had been filled with darkness and uncertainty. Pulling myself from between the crush of water and the metal grate, I found I was on a surface made of what felt to be stone.

An impact followed by a coughing sputter told me that Ash had made it. I'd been unsure if he had been alive or if it was even him, my mind having filled itself with images of the shapely orange mare following me down the pipe to fry me. I reached down and jabbed at my PipBuck with my muzzle, eventually hitting the light feature.

The chamber was massive, a focus point for much of the sewer system it seemed. In the gloom I saw, or heard rather, dozens of pipes draining into this chamber. I'd never really thought of what was below my hooves as I had walked through the ruins of Hornsmith but now I had a strong sense that there was much more to this city than a blasted two story high skyline. If this was down here and the MoP headquarters had also been underground, how much else must there be?

It was an interesting thought, broken off as a bedraggled and unamused griffin stepped into the immediate area of light around me, wringing the water out of his wings and fur. He shook his head, spraying water about. "Ash, you okay?"

The griffin nodded slowly, looking at me. "Huh.... forgot that's what you looked like." I looked down at myself and noticed it immediately. Most of the bandages were gone, either burnt away or torn off in my trip through the tumultuous water. Luckily I had kept my barding and equipment, but for the first time that I could think of, I was mostly free of bandages. It felt sort of... liberating honestly. I turned my head to look at my side and the pain kicked in.

My back was burnt, quite badly. Moving my head had irritated the fresh burns, their constant submersion since having been gained had distracted my notice. Now they were open to the air and the burning sensation was rather painful. I sighed and pulled off my barding before opening one of my saddlebags. I levitated out a fresh pack of healing bandages and began wrapping my midsection and neck, the magical properties of the wraps making me feel better immediately.

The sense of freedom had been brief and of course the wasteland could not have left something like that unbroken.

I heard the ticking sound of Ash walking around the platform we had landed on. "That thing got any more light? It's still pretty dark down here."

I had just finished wrapping myself back up and putting on my barding. "Not that I've found. It's really only got an on or off setting."

He clacked his beak in what I assumed was disappointment. "That's.... unfortunate." Continuing in his search, I heard him stand on his hind legs and start checking the walls. I couldn't see it, but I heard the tapping coming from further up the wall. Curious, I moved towards the edge of our platform, avoiding the mesh grate in the middle, unsure how secure it was especially after our impacts. Two hundred years of constant corrosion could not have left it entirely stable.

I looked out into darkness, walls so distant I couldn't see them with what little illumination I was providing. If it came to it, would Ash be able to fly us over to another platform? Looking down, I shuddered slightly. Would I survive if I fell?

"Kick. Found something."

I turned and trotted to where Ash's voice was coming from. As the light reached him, I saw what he had found. Just past where the dark feathered griffin stood was an old metal door in the wall. It was heavily rusted and hadn't been opened for two centuries, but it was still a door. His claws were gripped around a handle and he was throwing all of his weight into it.

Approaching, I sized up the door. I could give it a good kick. "Ash, stand back."

He looked at me as I turned and prepared to buck the door, but his claws coming to a rest on my back stopped me. I turned, wincing slightly at the pain, lessened though it was. "Kick, think about that for a second. Door's metal, where's all that buckshot gonna go."

Oh.

Turning back towards the door, I felt stupid. Again I wondered how this was fair. Sweeps and Cinder would both have had this door open in ten seconds flat. I'd find a way through, I had to. "Okay... how about we both try."

Nodding, the griffin put his talons on the handle. I propped my hooves on it. "One, two, three!" As I shouted three, we both pushed down as hard as we could. The handle creaked a little, resisting. Come on... Come on....

With a crunch, the handle turned downwards, unlocking the door. We both let out whoops of victory and Ash pulled the door open, rust falling off the hinges and frame in a shower of flakes. I saw inside before he did and drew Broken. "Ash..."

The light from my PipBuck was reflected back at me from eyes in the hall past the door. I saw rotting flesh and bared teeth. A noise from my PipBuck told me of the radiation that was now flowing through the door. Ash jumped back from the door, drawing his rifle. I thought that I should really convince him to pick up a closer range weapon for a brief moment before I opened fire.

The first slug from Broken tore into the ghouls just as they started rushing us, taking a chunk of head off of the nearest to me. Shit, I still had slugs loaded from fighting off Cinder. No time to change out, I thought as I fired again. I'd fired three shots at Cinder, one at that first ghoul and that shot there. Fuck.

The firing pin closed on an empty chamber.

As quickly as I could, I pulled buckshot from my bag and started loading it, but the ghouls streamed through the door, closing quickly. A high powered round from Ash tore two of them in half, but I counted at least ten left.

The first to get to me got there when I only had two shells loaded. It had been a unicorn mare once, but that was long past. Now it was just another monster. I spun in place and put a strong kick into her rotting chest, the blast of buckshot tearing her apart. I was showered with a thick black liquid that must once have been blood. Three shells loaded. Three left in my hoof guns.

Ash fell back next to me, firing as he went. That thing was really loud in here. If we were in a hallway, it would be damagingly loud. For now, it tore a hole through every ghoul in a line. It only killed two, but tore the leg off of a third, halting his charge. Four shells loaded.

Out on the platform, stopping the ghouls became much more of a priority. We only had so much room to back up. The crippled ghoul tripped two of his mindless companions. That left four up and charging us. Fuck it.

Broken had a maximum capacity of five shells and I had four loaded. Floating next to me, it bucked as I pulled the trigger, sending a hail of lead pellets into the face of one of the ghouls. The shot tore deep, cracking bone and shredding brain. The ghoul hit the ground hard. I worked the lever on the gun and fired again. Similar effect. Two rushing me now.

Again, the weapon fired as it floated next to me, taking a ghoul full in the chest and halting his charge. Ash fired at the two that had fallen as they scrambled back to their hooves and rushed towards him, picking up speed. Again, his shot was very well lined up and the bullet decapitated one before blowing the second several feet backwards into a bleeding pile.

That left one...

Suddenly, I was falling, teeth snapping at my face. Oh fuck. The last charging ghoul had hit me full force and we'd launched off the edge. Oh fuck. The sensation of free fall was very unwelcome and I grabbed the snapping ghoul with my hooves, twisting in midair. We switched places, him underneath me now, still desperately trying to take a bite out of my neck. I punched a hoof into the snapping maw, breaking off long rotted teeth but ceasing his incessant snapping.

We hit something with a crunch. My hoof went straight through his head, sending bone, brains and that black fluid flying. I felt the impact softened as my larger bulk crushed the ghoul underneath me, but then the pain came. My ribs cracked and the hoof I had punched through hit something hard on the other side of his head with a snapping sound. My head hit last.

My eyes opened slowly as I came to. I was cold and wet. Everything hurt. I was really, really getting sick of this. A voice drifted through the haze of what I was pretty sure was a concussion. "Kick, you okay."

He drifted into view slowly as my eyes refused to work right, focusing everywhere but where I wanted them to. I willed them to focus and they slowly obeyed. I saw the black feathered face of Ash hovering over me. He had a bottle of purple liquid out. "Drink up, you'll feel better." I just opened my mouth and he poured it in. I did start feeling a little better, but my chest and leg still hurt a lot, not to mention every other part of me.

Though, now that I thought of it, all that pain seemed nothing compared to what I'd been through in that memory orb. I was on my side, laying on a stone walkway. I lay my head down, waiting and hoping for the blurriness to go away. Whatever I lay my head in was cold and slightly sticky. Ghoul goo. Ugh.

"Kick, I'm gonna pick you up and we're gonna get out of here, okay?"

I couldn't work my mouth. Fuck, this better not be permanent. I felt the claws dig in under me and lift me up. He was straining, I could feel it. I was not a light pony. Spreading his wings, he gave them a few preparatory flaps before powering us into the air. Looking down, I saw where I had hit. The ghoul that had broken my fall was a dark smear on the stone with a vaguely pony shaped outline next to it. At least that hadn't been me on the bottom.

I was flying again, this time headed up. We came to the ledge where the battle had been and I saw how Ash had dealt with those few remaining ghouls when I'd gone off the edge. Claw and bite marks covered the remains. He'd ripped them apart in close combat and I felt his blood dripping onto me from multiple wounds..

I didn't have control over most of my body and I was starting to fear that I had damaged my spine, but I could still feel. I could move my eyes freely now, they'd stopped fighting back. Looking at him, I saw bleeding wounds where he had been bitten. He set me down so that I was right side up, laying there with my legs under me.

We stayed there for several minutes, Ash keeping one eye on the still open door for any movement. I was waiting for the blurriness to go away so I could try walking. I'd already flexed my leg muscles and

aside from the one that was either sprained or broken, they all worked fine.

Slowly, I got to my hooves and found that I could not put much weight on my right one. It was definitely at least sprained. I took a few test steps, hopping slightly with my bad leg held up. I could managed. I spoke, my speech still a little slurred. "Ash... let's get going."

He stood and nodded at me. "You need a hand Kick?"

I shook my head at him, wincing slightly. The burns were still sore. "Nah... I got this." I spotted Broken laying on the ledge where I had been knocked off and floated it up to me, glad that it had not gone over or it would have been lost. Approaching the tunnel, I hopped the small ridge ringing the doorway and we began making our way into the blackness, my PipBuck lighting the way.

As we progressed down the tunnel, I found myself trying to send a mental letter to a higher power in what I assumed was a concussion fueled attempt at asking karma to forgive me. "Dear Princess Celestia. Hey... Ripple here. You might know me better as Two Kick Rip for all the shit I did.. I know that I'm not really the best pony around, but I've been trying to do better. Sorta wondering if you could throw me a break here and not let us die in a dank tunnel who knows how far underground. Well, you might know, but I'm not sure you can answer me."

I paused for a while, silently hoping that the kind ruler I vaguely remembered hearing about as a foal could hear my plea for help. I wondered if she could help me, but mostly if she could just hear me.

Ha, praying to some long dead pony bitch? You really are pathetic.

Great, the voice was here. If I knew where it was hiding in my head, I'd shoot it without a second thought if I knew it would help. Probably wouldn't. With my luck, it would put him back in charge. That was not something I would let happen.

Ah, but we had so much fun all those years. Money, mares, mayhem. It was fucking incredible. Best days of my life, then I got shot and you showed up. A sad, pathetic excuse for the damned Adonis that I was.

Yeah, because having ponies fear you and attack for little to no reason is great fun. Having a reputation as a slaughtering psychopath is SO much better than having friends that you can rely on to not shoot you in the face.

The voice went silent. Hey, so I could argue him down. Good to know.

As we walked, Ash was checking each door we passed. This tunnel stretched much further than I could see, likely a maintenance tunnel of some kind. Nearly ever door was either broken or so rusted that it couldn't be moved without much more effort than I could put forward right now.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, keeping our eyes out for ghouls, one of the door handles turned easily and Ash pushed it until the door clicked. Pushing the metal portal open, he stepped through slowly, watching for another horde of ravenous ghouls.

A shot rang out, missing Ash and ricocheting into the hall. "Whoa! Whoa, hold fire!" I didn't recognize that voice. It was gravelly. "Who are you. What business do you have here?"

"Whoa, just... name's Ash. This here is Ripple."

His claws beckoned and I stepped into the light shining through the doorway and limped into the room. Two ponies had a spotlight on us, I could only see their outlines through the glare. "Put away your weapons and close the door. Nice and slow." I could tell they had their weapons pointed at us. I slowly put Broken back in its holster, Ash sliding the rifle onto his back. One of the shapes began walking towards us and I recoiled slightly when he got past the glare of the light.

He was a ghoul. The primary difference between him and every other one I'd met was that he talked and wasn't currently trying to rip my throat out with his teeth. He stepped up to us, but still to the side providing a clear line of sight for his still unseen companion. He looked the two of us over. Ash with the bite marks covering his arms and the dark stains of ghoul remains in his fur. I was just covered in ghoul blood, injured and favoring one leg heavily. "How did you get in there? Nopony comes from there except the gnashers."

Ash held up his claws in his most disarming gesture, showing that he meant no hostility. I would have done the same, but I could barely keep my balance. "We came in through a water pipe. Sort of a snap decision, had no idea anypony was down here." Ash did the talking. I was still slurring my speech and thinking slowly.

The ghoul looked at the two of us for a while, obviously sizing us up and judging us. He lowered his shotgun and nodded. "Okay, I believe you. Just don't start anything or you'll be put down like a gnasher."

There was that word again. "Gnasher?" I basically chewed the word out, making it garbled but getting the question across.

The ghoul looked at me, his eyes a surprisingly bright blue. Guess there was the difference, that spark of intelligence. The rest of him had once been... white or grey. Now it was just scabs and necrotic flesh. "It's what we call the mindless ones out there. All they do is gnash their teeth. Gnashers."

Ah... took me a little bit. My mind was not working right now. "Makes sense..."

The ghoul looked at Ash. "Ash, was it? There something wrong with your friend?"

Ash shook his head as he pointed a claw at me. "He had a nasty fall, think he hit his head. He's pretty messed up. You got a doctor around here?"

The ghoul nodded and turned to shout at the other pony. "Hey Viola, take these two to Knife. Keep an eye on them, don't want strangers walking around freely." He stepped to the side and held out a hoof, indicating that we should follow the other pony.

Ash dropped to all fours and walked towards her as I limped behind. Once around the light, I saw that Viola was also a ghoul. A mare, she had a gas mask practically melted onto her face, obscuring most of her features.

As we left the room we had come to, I thought to ask something of Viola. "Where are we?"

She laughed a little. "Guess old Rail Spikes isn't much for welcomes, is he. This here is Underhoof, safest little town in all of Hornsmith. Don't start nothin' and you'll get along fine. Also, bit of a warning, as you may be able to tell from me and Spikes, we've got a number of ghouls living in town. We just want to live like every other pony, so as long as you don't have a problem with us, we won't have a problem with you."

That had gotten threatening fast, her eyes glaring at us from behind the mask which had given every word she'd said a sort of muffled yet sinister quality. "I got no problem with ghouls as long as they don't attack me. You got a problem with 'em Ripple?" I shook my head.

Her eyes softened behind the protective glass and I was sure she was smiling. "Oh good. I do so love when we get nice visitors."

As she said this, we stepped into what I assumed was the main chamber of the town. It was much larger than the rest I had seen, other than that giant black chamber, and there were a number of ponies walking around, ghouls and unicorns mostly. Now that I looked closer, they were all unicorns. The gnashers we'd killed out on the platform had been unicorns as well. Made sense, if Hornsmith had been

a primarily unicorn town before the war.

“Underhoof, where you can escape the horrors of the topside. We’ve got trade, drinks, entertainment. Also, more importantly, we have a doctor. Right in here.” She stepped into a side door with a big red knife painted next to it. I was a little nervous, that sign seemed more at home on a raider’s barding than on a place of medicine and healing. I followed her in, Ash lingering outside briefly before entering.

“Hey Knife, you got a visitor! Lay down there and the doctor will be with you.” Viola indicated a low bed, which I limped to before slowly climbing onto it. The bed that must have at one time been white. Now... I couldn’t really name that color. Ash leaned against the wall. Viola looked at the two of us for a couple seconds before she spoke again. “Well, have fun. Behave, or I’ll have to shoot you.” Her eyes told me that she meant it.

The room was quiet, I heard no movement from the back. Suddenly, somepony was there. “Well hello there!”

I jumped, or jerked spasmodically at least. I was surprised by her appearance, expecting much different. A young looking mare, not a ghoul, deep red coat and a pinkish mane. Soft blue eyes. A unicorn mare.

Her horn glowed pink and I felt her magic moving me as she began checked me for injuries. “Now whats wrong with you? Plenty of old injuries, but what’s going on right now.... Ooh, there we go. Bruising and swelling around the right front carpus, most likely fractured.”

She floated out a small light and shone it in my eyes. “Slowed pupil response, possible head trauma.”

Continuing on, she undid my barding with a quick motion and dropped it unceremoniously on the ground next to the bed. Lifting my bandages with her magic, she looked in. “Second and third degree burns along back and neck.” She wrinkled her nose at the smell of burnt hair and skin. “Diagnosis: Patient is in no critical threat, but still a priority.”

She had said all of that so fast I’d barely gotten it. Then she was gone. She didn’t walk, she just was here once second and then next to Ash the next. “Hold still, will you.” He was still drawing back in surprise.

She gripped his arms with her magic and pulled them out for her to look at. “Griffin patient has multiple puncture wounds along arms matching the bite radius of ponies of varying size. Most likely by victims of heavy radiation poisoning, otherwise known as Ghouls, or gnashers to the locals. Griffin patient is showing signs of fatigue.”

She shone the light in his eyes. “Pupil response normal for griffin species. Diagnosis: Griffin patient needs wounds cleaned and bandaged and a night of rest.”

She stopped and took a deep breath before turning over towards me and trotting across the room. It actually struck me as strange, her walk. Like she was unaccustomed to it. “Hello, I’m Crimson Knife. Don’t worry about the name, got it from my dad who thought it was intimidating. How are you feeling? How did you get hurt? Just tell me, I’ll be listening.”

She floated a doctors bag towards her as she was already using a pair of scissors she had gotten from somewhere to cut off my bandages. Once they fell to the bed, she stepped back from me. “Oh... you are just not sanitary at all. I need you to take a shower first. Here, I’ll help you.” With that, before I could even get a word out, she lifted me and the world blinked.

We were in another room, white tiles with a shower head in one wall and a drain in the floor. She dropped me gently underneath and turned on the water. I winced as it hit my burns, but she honestly seemed like she knew what she was doing. Not that I would have been able to get a word in edgewise. She quickly procured a sponge from thin air and began wiping me off. I guess I had been getting pretty

filthy, I'd been going for almost two weeks and who knew how long it had been since I'd bathed before that.

I was sort of surprised that my coat was actually a pure white. It had just been an off white or at worst a gray when I'd seen myself before. "Oh no, this just won't do." I started seeing hair fall. She was trimming my mane as she washed me. Sometime I'd get to talk to her. She was humming a song now, loudly.

This was probably the strangest mare I'd ever met.

"There we go, all clean." The world blinked again and a startled Ash jumped back to the wall he'd been leaning on earlier. He'd been looking for me. "Now I can begin treatment. Oh, and you were saying?"

I was? Oh, right. "Well.... uh.... hello Crimson Knife. I'm Ripple. I fell and hit my head." She was nodding with an eager smile on her face. I was sort of afraid she was going to explode with that much energy in her. She was beginning to wrap my leg in a splint and heavy bandages, but I saw a tube of something float by, the medicine inside seeming familiar. She jabbed me in the flank with it and I felt the pain go away. Med-X. Okay.

Then the knife floated past.

"Uh... what are you doing?" I was still a bit dazed by this mare and not just because of my concussion. She was all over the place.

"Oh, I'm just performing some minor debridement before I wrap up your burns."

That word was right over my head. "Debridement?" I felt the cold of the knife slice into my back, but there wasn't any real pain.

"The excising of dead tissue to promote healing in the neighboring healthy skin. Standard procedure from what I've read."

Wait. Wait. "Wait, what do you mean read."

She giggled slightly, "Oh, I've never had a burn patient before. Outsiders always bring me the most exciting new injuries." I tensed up, already under the knife. Her bedside manner left a lot to be desired. Looking down, I saw that a hardening shell was already around my leg. That left me with no legs unadorned.

The scalpel clattered into a metal tray and she spread something on my back, which immediately sent a sense of cold through me. I shivered slightly and she lifted me into the air before running fresh bandages around me. Not that the old ones were that dirty, but I wasn't about to argue with her. It just sounded like a bad idea to do so.

She placed me back on the bed and started talking in her fast pace. "Now don't do anything too strenuous for a little bit, take two of these," she handed me two potions that looked to be higher strength than I was used to, "One now and one in the morning. Get plenty of rest and see me later."

Turning, she approached Ash, who had a look of fear in his eyes. She went about her business of healing him.

Underhoof was an odd town. No pony had guns, aside from a few ghouls in armor I saw occasionally. Perhaps their location gave them the security that so many towns strove towards. I was getting quite a few odd glances, probably from the limp and the fact that I was an outsider, something they didn't get too often. No pony knew this was down here.

I was sort of in awe. Families walked the streets, a couple sat in front of a local eatery nuzzling each other, there wasn't blood or violence anywhere. I was the oddity here, a stain on the pristine image that Underhoof managed to pull off. Sure, the town was located in the sewers and maintenance tunnels underneath a city long ago destroyed by balefire and the reoccurring color motif was rust, but it wasn't the look of the town. It was the feel. The feel that this is how life should be.

My stomach suddenly let me know just how hungry I was and my concussed brain slowly agreed. I turned and headed towards the eatery, drawing strange glances from the couple out front. Walking in, I heard the bustle of the room shut down. All eyes were on me. I approached the pony behind the counter slowly, not letting my eyes wander around. This was awkward.

"Yeah... can I get... uh... just something to eat." The mare behind the bar nodded and made a quick plate of... food I guessed. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but it looked edible. I payed the mare and turned, walking my food to a corner table, away from the staring eyes.

I had just started eating when a pony slid into the chair across from me. I immediately pegged her as another outsider. An earth pony from what I could tell, though she was wearing a dark hooded robe and had a dark coloration, making her shadowed face all but impossible to see. A single gray eye glinted at me out of the darkness.

"Always good to see another surface dweller down here. Hi, name's Fluster. I'm a trader. You are?" Her voice was high pitched and sweet.

I swallowed what I had in my mouth and looked at her. "Ripple. Sorry if I seem off, a bit concussed."

She nodded knowingly, a smile causing her teeth to catch the light, adding more to under the hood briefly. "So, Ripple the concussed, what do you do for a living."

I paused, thinking about that. Revenge wasn't a good answer. Spite wasn't either. "I'm a treasure hunter." Perfect.

"Ooh, sounds exciting. So how does a treasure hunter come to be down here. They don't normally let anypony in without a good reason. I for one bring in ammo from the outside. These ponies don't have any of their own, all they got is medical supplies. Word is they've got a MoP vault down here somewhere."

My ears perked up at that. The Ministry of Peace had hidden some pretty interesting stuff around Hornsmith. Some of it was horrible, like the cube I had in my bag, but there seemed to be a near endless supply of medicine stashed around the town.

"A colleague and I... we found our way here through the sewers. Didn't know the town was here, but they let us in to recover. Had a run in with gnashers."

She grimace. "Yeah, those ghouls are pretty mean customers. The ones in the tunnels I mean." I took another bite of the food, chewing slowly as she talked. Somepony entered the joint but I didn't look up. Not until he stood next to the table looking down at us.

Rail Spikes.

"Oh, this is convenient. Just the two ponies I was looking for. Listen, I need to see you two in my office when you're finished eating. Got a little problem that needs settling." Great. I nodded at him, taking another bite. I wasn't sure what this food was and I couldn't exactly describe it in any accurate detail, but it wasn't half bad.

After Spikes walked away, I looked across the table at the trader. "Know anything about that?"

She shook her head. "Not a thing. Spikes probably has a job for us though."

Ah. Of course.

Fluster led the way as I wobbled along behind her. Her robe dragged along the ground as she walked and I wondered what sort of job the two of us could be working on. She didn't exactly look combat capable, but if she was actually a trader, she had to know how to fight or she would have died long ago.

Rail Spikes' office, as I found out, was actually the headquarters of the Underhoof Guard, the entity that policed Underhoof and protected it from outside aggression. Made entirely of ghouls, the Guard kept the ponies of this town safe. Rail Spikes was the captain of the Underhoof Guard, which explained why we had even been let in to town. Captain says you're okay, everypony follows along.

Ash was waiting for us, his arms heavily bandaged as he looked grumpily at us. "That pony is crazy. You left me with her."

I shrugged slightly. "Sorry Ash, didn't think about it. Concussion and all." I nodded towards Fluster. "Meet Fluster, she's from topside too. Rail Spikes' asked her to meet him too." Ash nodded in greeting at her, clearly wary of the hooded pony.

Rail Spikes stepped into the office from a side room and closed the door. "Good, now time to get to business. You two," he pointed at Ash and I with a hoof, "owe Underhoof for letting you in. We've got some gnashers that have been attacking the west entrance and you're going to kill them. Fluster here is going to be your guide to their den, she knows the tunnels better than anypony. Fluster, you get first pick of any salvage as payment."

The trader pony practically rubbed her hooves together when he said that. Ash and I traded glances at the prospect of protecting a pony through something like what we had gone through earlier.

"Hey Chief." Ash was tapping a claw to the end of his beak as he spoke. "You got anywhere to buy guns around here? I'm not exactly equipped for fighting down here."

Rail Spikes nodded, pointing out the door. "Outside, tunnel on the left. Blue buck, name of Gristle. Don't ask about his name."

Nodding, Ash turned to leave. I followed, Fluster close on my hooves. She trotted along happily, still practically glowing at the prospect of salvage. Me, I worried about her safety. We mess up and she died.

From behind us the gravelly voice shouted. "Oh right. Now I talked to Knife and she told me neither of you are to go anywhere til the morning, so we've got a nice cell for you here in the jail. You can head out in the morning."

We stared at him. We were going to be in the jail all night? Honestly, I'd slept in worse places and I was sure Ash had as well. Nodding, we both felt his gaze follow us as we turned and kept going down the street.

We must have made quite the procession. A bandaged up and angry looking griffin, a large white unicorn covered in burns, bandages and scars, and the small robed pony practically hopping after us. The fact that we were all surface dwellers was just icing on the cake for the townfolk to stare at us.

Ash ducked through the tunnel, sticking to walking upright since his claws and arms were bandaged. I followed, limping slightly and not used to the extra height given by the cast on my leg. The side tunnel led into a room jammed floor to ceiling with storage lockers, shelves, and crates. A small blue buck was digging through a box in the back of the room and looked up as soon as we entered his domain.

"Welcome to Gristle's Emporium. Everything you need for facing the hazards of the wastes. I'm Gristle, how may I help you today?" He was very short for a buck. Colt sized. Ash towered over him,

looking down. The buck to his credit showed no fear. Ash grinned, sure he was going to be able to get a deal. The bargaining was on.

I sat down, rubbing absently at my broken leg and Fluster sat next to me. We watched the two go back and forth, haggling and throwing deals at each other. I'd never seen Ash work before, he'd always just gone to the store and come back with stuff. He was good, way better than I was. Fluster watched it like it was a sport of some kind, her eyes going back and forth as they tossed bids at one another. Finally, it came down to the line.

Gristle won, but not by much.

Ash turned back to us holding a large revolver in one claw, the cylinder open. He was looking the weapon over, checking the barrel and the firing mechanism for any defects. Finding none, he took two boxes of ammunition and a holster belt that Gristle handed to him. From his bag he counted out a good number of caps and several items he had picked up. I wasn't really paying attention to what he handed over. He fastened the belt around his waist and put the weapon away.

Despite having come out paying more than I felt he had wanted, he looked pleased. "Kick, you should really look into getting another gun."

I shook my head. I was fond of Broken and it felt almost like I'd be cheating on the weapon if I got another gun. "Maybe another time. Right now... I think I need to lay down."

The blurriness was beginning to come back in force. I was exhausted from what I had been through and the concussion was just making things worse. I turned from him and left the Emporium, headed back to the jail. By the clock on my PipBuck, the sun had set hours before and it was getting fairly late. I walked into the Guard station before hearing the hooves behind me. Right.

I turned and looked at the mare following me. She hadn't gotten the hint off of what I'd said. "Fluster, we'll set out in the morning. Go get some sleep, we'll see you bright and early." The look in her eye was odd. Not being able to see the rest of her face made her fairly hard to read. Without saying anything, she turned and trotted off back into the town.

Walking into the jail cell provided, I found a bunk bed and collapsed into the lower bunk. I was asleep in seconds, glad that it was by my own decision and only partially from injury.

When I opened my eyes, I was immediately aware of two things. The griffin on the top bunk snored, and waking with a single gray eye staring you in the face in unpleasant. With a startled shout, I backed away from the mare standing on my bed, staring into my face.

"Oh good, you're awake. We can go get that salvage now. Come on, lets go!" Her voice pierced through the sleepy haze filling my head.

I groaned and floated the potion Crimson Knife had given me up from where it lay in my bag and drank it. My head was feeling much better, as were my burns. My leg still ached a bit, but bone was taking longer to heal than flesh. I kicked my PipBuck leg into the bed above me, trying to wake up the heavily snoring griffin. No response. I looked down at where Fluster was sitting on my bed, "Watch out, I'm gonna try something."

I braced myself and pushed upwards on one side of the mattress above through the thin metal bars. It lifted and dumped the sleeping griffin onto the cold metal floor with a loud crash. I heard him groan for a while, then the claws came up onto the mattress. The griffin's head followed shortly and he looked none too pleased.

I shrugged nonchalantly, "Had to wake you up."

He stood, dusted himself off and walked out of the open cell, picking up his things as he went. I pulled myself off of my mattress and put on my barding and saddlebags, following behind. Fluster was right behind me.

The large door made a ringing sound as it slammed shut behind us. We stood in a large tunnel, much bigger than the one we had originally come in. This tunnel was better lit as well, lights running its length. There were signs of traffic on this path, but the torn body of what looked to be a local a ways down the tunnel indicated that it was in no way safe. The body had been ripped apart and partially eaten, blood smeared across the hall and walls. It had not been a pleasant death.

Fluster looked down at the pony for about half a minute. “Pipe Wrench. Local mechanic. He was a good pony.” Her saying that made me immediately start thinking about Shade. It had been only a day since I’d left her in Blank, but it felt like an eternity. I looked at the mare as she gazed at the corpse for a few more seconds and turned, walking further down the hall. The two of us caught up to her quickly and we walked down the tunnel, following her lead.

Quickly, we hooked off of the main path and into a side passage. Then another. Going down some stairs, I hoped briefly that Fluster was as good at knowing these tunnels as Rail Spikes had said, but the confidence with which she moved, never questioning the path we were on, made me feel that she was.

Ash walked with one hand on his newly acquired gun, practicing quick drawing it. He was getting pretty good. I was also quite glad that he had gotten a sidearm. The last time he had fired it down here, my eardrums had nearly burst from the pressure put off by the large rifle.

“Okay, they’re right up ahead. Be careful.” The robed mare had not said anything since we’d found Pipe Wrench and her voice broke the silence I had not even been aware of. I drew Broken and made sure that it was fully loaded. Ash pulled the revolver from his hip, serious now. He stepped forward, his rear legs making very little sound.

He was much stealthier than I was, despite his height, and lead the way. I gestured to Fluster that she should stay close to me and stay low. She nodded eagerly and crept up next to me. She made no noise in doing so and I suddenly felt like a clumsy oaf with my audible click-bump walk from the cast still on my hoof.

Ash was moving ahead of us, going from cover to cover. Making it to a bend in the tunnel, he peeked around the edge and jerked his head back. He held a claw to his beak in a shushing fashion and we snuck up next to him. I peeked around the corner and saw them.

Four ghouls, just standing there, luckily with their backs to us. Ash got a big grin on his face and looked at me. Using two of his claws, he made a walking motion. Then he put his fist into his open hand. I nodded. Ammo conservation would be important, we didn’t know how many we were dealing with. The noise from gunfire would also bring the rest running.

Moving as quietly as possible, rather difficult for me I had to admit, we edged around the corner, approaching the ghouls. Ash snuck ahead while I waited for him to make the first move. Between the cast and the metal on my rear hooves, I wasn’t getting close to them without being detected.

The griffin crept silently behind the nearest one, looming out of the darkness behind it like the predator he was. He grabbed it’s jaw and wrenched its head up, his claws digging deep. Slashing across its throat, he nearly took its head off. The ghoul let out a pitiful choking sound and the others turned their heads towards the griffin’s kill.

I made my move. I moved quick, closing the gap before they even fully registered that one of their

numbers was down. My PipBuck clad hoof impacted the side of one ghouls head, driving it into the wall with shattering force. The rotted unicorns skull burst like a melon and I was on to the next target, kicking out with one of my back legs. The impact was dead center in the side of my second ghoul's neck, the snap of its spine audible through the necrotic meat encasing it.

I looked back in time to see Ash grab the remaining ghoul by the neck, his talons sinking in for better purchase. The ghoul tried to make a noise, but he was pinching its windpipe closed. Gripping the side of its head, he wrenched it to an unusual angle before letting the dead ghoul drop to the ground.

That had gone better than I'd expected. A whisper of cloth on metal made me turn and I saw that Fluster was already amongst us, looting through the ratty utility barding the ghouls wore. "You guys are good. Gnasher's are mean, but you can find the most interesting things on them." Pulled a screwdriver from the pocket of one and several caps from another. She held the screwdriver in her mouth proudly. "Been needing a new one of these."

She slipped what she had found into her robes and I sort of wondered if she had bags, pockets or what. I'd ask later. "Glad you got what I was saying Kick. You really suck at the whole stealth thing." I was aware. Glancing back at the robed mare, I found she had finished looting the bodies and was nodding eagerly.

"Lets... let's get get going. We've still got a job to do." Them judging me was getting sort of annoying, so I turned and began trotting away from them further down the tunnel.

Click-clack-bump-clack. Click-clack-bump-clack.

Damn it.

After that, mopping up the gnashers we encountered was easy. They were always clustered in groups of two to four for reason's beyond me. Ash and I made short work of them all. I guess I had over thought how dangerous they actually were based on our encounter with over a dozen. Smaller groups were much easier to handle. Fluster followed our trail of extermination, leaving nothing of value behind.

Finally, we came to a tunnel leading downwards. It was much darker down there and a horrid stench drifted up to us, much worse than what we'd grown used to.

"The den is down there. Be careful guys... there's a really mean gnasher down there." Fluster was cowering a bit as she spoke. For once, she didn't look excited. She looked legitimately scared. I nodded and began walking downwards into the darkness, Ash next to me. Glancing back, I caught Fluster peering around the corner at us, her gray eye catching the light. Without that, she would have been all but invisible. I saw now how she knew these tunnels so well and yet had displayed zero combat ability.

The tunnel leveled out and we found ourselves at a large metal door, different from every other door, hatch, and portal I had seen down here. Entirely rust free. The paint was long faded, but I thought I saw a faded starburst on the door. Didn't know that symbol, it wasn't the three butterflies I'd gotten used to seeing slapped on everything of importance around Hornsmith.

It looked like a bomb had gone off in the room past the door. The room had once been square, but now had holes punched in the walls and ceiling, like an immense force had pushed them outwards to the point of breaking. Standing near the center of the room was a single gnasher. Bigger than the others, a large unicorn stallion. He was wearing scraps of heavy armor, heavier than any I'd seen. He was wearing a battle harness, but the heavy weapons that had once been mounted on it were shattered and bent, far beyond use.

Ash slowly put away the revolver and drew out his rifle. This room was large enough that it might be safe to fire. He took aim through the scope and carefully sighted. I crouched, ready to spring into action

at the first sign of hostility.

BOOM!

The shot rang out and the round hit the gnasher in the side, throwing him into a pile of boxes, crushing them into the ground. Then the gnasher stood back up, turning towards us. He let out a shriek and began running across the room at us.

“Shit!” Ash worked the bolt and pulled the trigger again, the round punching into the armor, slowing the charging gnasher for a second before he got up to full speed again. Plowing straight through Ash, the griffin was thrown into the wall, his rifle clattering away into the rubble.

The gnasher hit the wall too, but backed slowly from the wall and started turning towards me. Broken fired, the buckshot tearing into the gnasher’s face and neck, but he barely flinched. What the hell was this pony made of? He charged me, hitting like a brick wall and throwing me end over end. This all seemed familiar somehow was all that I could think as I went airborne. Oh right, the raider in #108. It sucked fighting ponies stronger than myself.

I slid a few feet and pulled myself to my hooves, ready for his next charge. The gnasher kicked up dust as he started building up speed and I waited. At the last second, I jumped to the side and queued up S.A.T.S. Locking in his head twice and his front legs once, I triggered the spell and life began moving again.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

The first shot took off his snout in a spray of dark liquid. The second blew out his eye and chunks of his skull, exposing his brain to the outside. The third shot tore into one of his legs at the knee, stripping away metal and rotten flesh to expose muscle and bone beneath..

He hit the ground and slid through a pile of rubble, kicking up a huge cloud of dust and debris. I coughed as I reloaded Broken. I aimed back into the obscuring dust, sure that the large gnasher was finally down. I heard rubble moving and my jaw dropped when I could finally see.

The dead pony was standing back up and turning to face me. A loud shot rang out and a large caliber round tore another hole in the gnasher’s chest, but he still didn’t go down. Charging again, this time with a limp, the gnasher was at least easier to dodge. Leaping to the side but putting a kick into his flank as he passed, I tore another chunk of the pony off but he kept going. Ash dodged as well, putting a round from his rifle into the thing at close range. It went clean through, blowing metal, bone, and innards through a hole in it’s side, but still it came on.

Ash flapped his wings once, lifting him the distance between us and landed next to me as the gnasher slowly turned to start another turn. “What the fuck is this thing?”

The griffin shook his head as I asked and he lined up another shot, “Kick, I got no idea.” The rifle kicked as it hurled another chunk of lead down the room and into the nigh-invulnerable gnasher, blowing chunks off but not dropping him.

“We keep hitting him like this, eventually there won’t be any pony left.” That was my plan and I couldn’t think of any other solution.

The griffin grinned, the look I hadn’t seen in a bit. “Yeah. Let’s do that.” Racking the bolt and putting another round in, we waited for the next charge. It was a good thing that the gnasher was a mindless berserker or this plan would probably fail.

It kept charging and we kept dodging, taking pieces of it with each pass. It was beginning to wear on

our ammunition reserves though, which was starting to concern me. “Ash, you got anything explosive in your bag?”

He shook his head and we had to dodge again, firing into the passing gnasher. At least it had become routine. “You still got those explodey rounds though.” That was true, I guess that only having two of them left had kept me from considering using them, but this was getting ridiculous. Fuck it.

I loaded one of the rounds into Broken and triggered my S.A.T.S. not wanting to risk missing on this. I locked in the now charging gnasher, frozen in time through use of my spell, aiming straight into the center of his chest which was now almost completely gone, a dark cavity into his innards.

I fired, watching the explosive slug travelling the distance between us and clear the gap in the gnashers chest. Time sped up and the charging beast exploded from the inside, ripping him in two. The front half landed near us and I groaned as it tried righting itself and started dragging towards us. It was a simple matter then of stomping the gnasher until he couldn't move anymore.

I was slowly being coated in black goo, but I didn't care at this point. I called out, “Fluster, you can come clear the place out now!” My E.F.S. showed all clear aside from the red dot I was crushing into paste. Bones crunched and organs squished as I went. Eventually, the pile of once pony was just a quivering mass of hostile intentions. I was briefly struck with the guilty image of what I had done to Outfield as I looked at it, not fully understanding how it was still showing red. Break it down, rip it apart, burn it, shoot it, crush it. This pony just would not stop trying.

This was no ordinary ghoul, nothing like any I'd seen. It had taken far too long to kill and both Ash and I were visibly tired of fighting. The dark shape that was Fluster started working her way around the room, rummaging through surviving boxes and checking every dark corner. I heard her let out a low “Oooh...” and turned looked closer. She had found a door, barely distinguishable behind a pile of rubble. “Could I get some help?”

I trotted over to her, still dripping black ooze. I'd been covered in worse. She recoiled as I neared her, covering her dark face with a robed hoof. “Oh Celestia do you smell! Oh, I'm sorry. Please, could you help me move this rubble, I need through this door.” I chuckled as she felt that she had offended me, but I knew how I smelled. I was covered in what passed for ghoul blood, not exactly a pleasant liquid.

I started shifting the rubble away from the door, using my greater strength to easily move chunks of metal and stone. Ash trotted up next to me and used his more dexterous hands to assist. In no time at all, we had cleared the door, to which Fluster took immediately. Pulling the screwdriver from somewhere under her robes as well as a small strip of metal. Inserting the two in the lock, I wondered if she knew what she was doing. With a click, the door opened and I figured that she did. That skill would have helped back at the HQ or with any of the boxes I had smashed open trying to get into.

She practically hopped as she entered the room and the two of us acting guard walked in behind, weapons drawn. The room was... strange. Equipment I couldn't even guess at the function of lined the walls, but a single terminal sat in the center. Fluster was clearly not interested in the terminal, opening instead the number of lockers lining one wall.

```
>>Ministry of Arcane Sciences - Hornsmith Maintenance and Storage
>>Connection to Canterlot Server Lost - Read Only Mode Active
>>
>>
>>
>>Report 2576
```

I activated the report, the only option since the terminal was in some sort of lockdown. A wall of text

popped up and I read through it, not expecting much.

--Report 2576

“Grace is having us move one of the subjects from Project Endless out of Hornsmith but with our limited presence here, we’ve got to keep it in this damned maintenance room. Hate this town, everything’s underground. Sure, Hoofington isn’t much better, but at least you get to see something there. The town up topside is so very bland. Like they chose the lamest unicorn in existence to design it. None of the usual flare. Anyways, I hate having to keep that thing here, I don’t trust it. None of those ponies seem right and we’re keeping it in a room filled with the experimental power supplies for long term cryogenics containers? Who’s idea was this. Probably Glory’s, she has no idea how to handle magical materials, much less magical weapons. These MoP ponies shouldn’t be messing with this, it’s way beyond them. Hold on... somethings going on. Ground just shook. I’ll report further when I return.

-Azure Crystal

-MoAS Inventory Control Specialist

That was all there was. I wondered if the pony we had put down was the same one she was talking about. Also wondered if the power supplies she had talked about were what had caused so much damage in that room. This had just added questions to my mind, though not as important as what Project Endless actually was

Was it connected to Project Greenhoof? The horror I’d seen (and felt) attached to that made me think that if another Black Cube or whatever that thing in the tube, the Draconequeus, was involved, an unkillable pony was not beyond question. I copied the report to my PipBuck and turned away from the terminal as Fluster walked up next to me. “I got all the good stuff. Let’s head back, Rail Spikes will be happy that you took down these ghouls.” She smiled, the light reflecting on her white teeth under the hood. Again, I wondered what she really looked like.

Nodding, I turned to the door. “Let’s head back. Fluster, you lead the way, pretty sure we’d get lost without you.”

She hopped out the door and I followed, Ash close behind. Passing the mass of bone and rotten meat that was the unstoppable gnasher, I noticed that a blood smear was on the ground for a foot or two. It had still been trying to get at us. Shuddering, I gave it a wide berth, heading to the door. As Fluster continued through, I asked Ash to close the door behind us. That thing was really creeping me out.

He closed the door with a loud bang and turned a handle, locking it securely. With that, we headed back through the tunnels towards Underhoof where then hopefully we could make our way back topside. There was only pain in these tunnels.

When I saw the corpse of Pipe Wrench, I knew we were on the right path. Right up ahead was the main door to Underhoof, undecorated and looking much like every other door of it’s size down here. I now fully understood how a town stayed so hidden and functioned with scavengers and merchants like Fluster heading out to bring in supplies.

Fluster approached the large metal gate and banged on it with a robed hoof, three times and then one. The door clunked and started sliding into the ceiling, revealing the entrance to Underhoof. Rail Spikes and two Guards I hadn’t seen before were there, guns pointed straight into our faces. Upon seeing Fluster though, they lowered their weapons and moved aside. We walked in and the gate closed behind us with a loud clang.

Fluster, still rather excited about the salvage she’d brought in, hopped towards Gristle’s Emporium. Ash

and I stood there as Rail Spikes approached us, the other two Guard heading into the city to do whatever it was they did when not guarding doors. “I see you’ve come back in one piece. Kept Fluster unharmed too. Good work, didn’t know what to expect from you two honestly. If you’d died, no skin off my back, but if she died this town would be down a talented scavenger. Can’t have that, but I knew she’d have been able to handle herself if the situation got bad. Anyways, I’m rambling. You’re payed up and free to go, though Knife asked to check up on you before you left.” He nodded, a short nod, and walked away from us. We made our way towards the big red knife and trotted through the open door.

“Crimson Knife? You here?” I called out only to have the unicorn appear in front of my with a small pop I hadn’t noticed before. She glanced the two of us over and her eyes narrowed. I felt the straps holding my barding loosen and the whole thing was removed along with my bags.

She was immediately at my side, looking at me and lifting the bandages from around my midsection. “Patient displaying substantial bruising most likely from strong impact. Bruising not in conflict with burnt area, debridement treatment showing positive results. Burns healing nicely.”

She leaned down and her horn glowed, tapping my cast. The whole thing went transparent and I could suddenly see my bone. That made me a little queasy. “Bone fracture healing nicely, potion seems to be doing its job and helping the process along at an accelerated rate.”

The little flashlight came out again. “Patient’s pupils responding normally, concussion nearly completely healed.”

Then she moved to Ash, giving him the once over and removing his bandages. Once she finished talking to herself, she recoiled from us, her nose wrinkling. The world blinked and the three of us were in the room with the shower. The water turned on and myself and the griffin were immediately soaked.

As the water ran over my face, I had to ask. “Is this necessary?”

She was scrubbing both of us rapidly with twin sponges. “You’re both absolutely filthy. Filth begets infection. Infection begets death. I won’t have any of my patients dying because they’re dirty.” The scrubbing got to my mane and I sighed, accepting my fate. Ash hadn’t said anything, just sitting there as the red mare scrubbed at his black feathers.

Yep. Strangest mare I’d ever met. Even with Shade’s strange behavior, Sweeps’ complete switch of personality, Cinder’s gleeful insanity, and Fluster’s overactive scavenging, Knife took the cake on this one.

As we stood in front of the opening gate, we were both in good moods. We were going to get back to the surface, out of this hell of metal and darkness. Ash had a massive grin and I was honestly a little proud that he’d been handling his claustrophobia so well, but made a note to avoid elevators with him. The large metal gate opened fully with a shuddering bang and we took our first steps towards the surface. Rail Spikes has told us the route to take and I’d done everything I could to tie it to memory.

As we walked down the hall, I heard a faint rustling sound and looked behind me. I saw nothing save for a few Guards as the door closed, looking down the tunnel at us. I just chalked the noise up to the gate and kept walking, eyes forward.

The two of us walked side by side for a long while. We’d gone to Gristle’s and loaded up on ammo and supplies with what little we had left to trade, along with a bit that Fluster had apparently given him for just that case. She was a nice pony, way nicer than we had deserved. She made me think of Shade, honestly. I was missing her more and more. I think I was in love, or something. It was a strange feeling, nothing like the usual guilt and self-loathing. A warm feeling. The pain of being away from her was an

alien feeling though, like part of me was in a completely different locale.

That rustling noise again and I whipped around, Broken drawn. Ash kept walking and whistled for me to keep up. I saw nothing behind us again and holstered the shotgun before turning to catch up to the griffin. "Hey Kick, you should calm down bronny. Nothing bad sneaking up behind us." He leaned in close and whispered, "It's just Fluster. She's been following us since we left."

I turned my head slightly, playing it much stealthier this time. There, I caught a glimpse of a dark robe disappearing into a doorway. Playing along, I kept walking, a smile on my face. At least with her tailing us, we wouldn't get lost. I don't think she'd let us go off our path and end up dying somewhere in the tunnels, at least not if I had her pegged right.

Slowly, I began noticing that the tunnel we were in was sloping upwards. It was the small stream of water running down one side that tipped me off. Must be raining topside. Occasionally, I would peek behind my shoulder to make sure that the mare was still following us. Sure enough, now that I knew what to look for, I saw her. I knew what to look for and I was still straining to see her.. A little darker shadow than usual, a small rustle of fabric, each of these betrayed her location.

Ash's head perked up a bit and he moved quicker. I trotted faster to keep up with him, Fluster's noise behind us picking up only slightly. "What's up?"

The grinning griffin began running. "It's rain! Can't you hear it, we're near the surface!" We rounded the corner and came to a stairway running up to a door. He took it several steps at a time and stopped right before the door, taking a small breath. Placing a claw on the door handle, he turned and it swung freely.

Opening the door cautiously, he peeked out briefly before opening it wider and stepping out into the rain. I followed, eager to get some fresh air. It was really coming down outside, like the sky was trying to wash Hornsmith off of the world. Ash was standing in the middle of a partially flooded street, staring straight up with his wings spread wide. He was laughing to himself.

The door had lead into an alcove in between two buildings, a small shelter from the rain. I stood there, not wanting to get wet at this exact moment. I'd had enough water for a while. I stuck my head back through the door and caught movement as Fluster darted back around the corner. "Fluster, it's alright. You can come out, I want to talk to you."

Her hooded head poked around the corner and I saw her single gray eye looking up the stairs at me. Sighing visibly, she began the ascent, reaching me in no time.

"I was hoping you guy's hadn't noticed me." I patted her lightly on the head, shaking my head with a smile. "You did a good job, I would never have known if Ash hadn't told me. Why are you following us though?"

Looking past me at the griffin in the rain, she smiled. "You two are fun and if you don't mind, I'd like to hire you to be my guards for a bit longer. It would just be me following wherever you went and scavenging what I can. I've never had guards on the surface before, I can only imagine what we'll find. You're treasure hunters after all."

Oh right, I'd told her that. I grinned, nodding. "Yep. We're treasure hunters alright. We'll take the job, just stay out of the way, alright?" She bounced lightly, nodding happily. "We'll be going to some pretty dangerous places, so I want you to do your stealth thing as much as possible. Rail Spikes would kill me if I let you get hurt..." Though he might kill me if he knew that she had followed us up here.

Ash walked up to us, dripping heavily from the amount of water his feathers and fur had absorbed. Looking down at Fluster, he nodded with a grin. "Hey short stuff, you finally came out of hiding."

The griffin shot a glance at me, I shrugged in response. “Fluster’s hired us as her guards for a bit longer. She’ll be travelling with us.”

Crossing his arms, he glared a little. “Well... can’t say no to that I guess. Caps are caps and I’m under contract. Just don’t get in the way, okay?” She nodded up at the large predator, unbowed by the bird of prey look I’d seen him give to several ponies now. The look he’d given me when we’d first met, like I was a potential snack. Must be his way of testing a pony’s resolve.

“We’d better take shelter for the night though, this rain is gonna make travelling a bit tough. Think I saw a building a bit further down the street that looked promising.” The griffin walked back out into the street, pointing down the road. Following, Fluster and I joined the griffin and we strolled down the drowning street.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as a setting.

Credit for the name Underhoof goes to No_One, writer of Fallout Equestria: Heroes. Brohoof to him.

As always, if you've enjoyed it thus far, please comment/rate/favorite/track. Much love from me.

Chapter 6: Stadium

Waiting for the rain to end was growing rather tedious. The room we'd taken shelter in was the driest in the building, but held few comforts. A shattered bookcase slumped against one wall, its contents rotten and faded, barely identifiable as book anymore. It didn't stop Fluster from rummaging through as soon as we'd entered the room and she'd come out successfully with an old magazine. She lay to one side, the magazine propped between her front legs with a small flashlight held in her mouth, reading contently.

Ash was busy cleaning his weapons with one of his own feathers he had plucked from his neck. He'd said something about weapons jamming and breaking if they didn't receive maintenance and I'd briefly tried checking Broken for any such issues. It was as flawless as it had ever been, devoid of even blood and dirt. That made me wonder the origins of the weapon... but one can only think on why something is clean for so long before they get bored. I'd propped myself next to a window, staring out into the dark day. I checked my PipBuck occasionally, wondering if the sun was still even in the sky hiding behind those clouds. It was early evening, but the light level had been the same since we'd taken those first steps into the street.

Deciding to look through the files I'd accumulated on my PipBuck, I scrolled over to the menu containing my notes. I'd read most of this, copying it to my PipBuck as an afterthought each time I'd accessed whatever file it was, but I paused as I came across three I hadn't seen. Three files that had been transferred from Sweeps' PipBuck. I went to the oldest first, seeing that it was dated from some time before the current date. Seven years before, to be exact, which would be when she was still in the Stable. When I was still in the Stable.

Selecting the file, I pressed play and immediately I heard the voice that had told me how she had felt, not the voice promising to kill me quickly. I liked the kinder Sweeps much more.

"Oh what fun! I can record on this thing too? Hey, hey Gentle, did you know about this?"

A second voice, a mare, or I guess it was a filly, piped in with a singsong voice. "Sweepy, stop messing around with that. The Overmare will get mad if she finds out we're playing around instead of studying. Won't be long before we'll be going up against everypony else, don't want to be unprepared. I hear Crackerjack and Ripple are opening a new shop too, so that's just more we'll have to deal with."

I could practically hear Sweeps blushing as my name was mentioned. "Ripple's got a new store? What're they selling?" I could hear the turning of pages, meaning that Sweeps was indeed studying, or at least feigning it by flipping pages.

The filly named Gentle responded to Sweeps with a snort. "Crackerjack is running the store, Ripple's just playing at security. Making sure nopony breaks in after curfew, you know how they are. Don't want anypony stealing anything or getting secrets that would put them at an advantage."

"I'll bet Ripple looks great doing that. All those muscles and those eyes.... he can guard me any day." I heard a flutter of pages and a thud bringing a small shriek from Sweeps.

"Hey, stop fantasizing. Besides, he's three years older than us, why would he pay attention to a filly like you? Grow up a bit." I realized that I was blushing. The feeling of guilt for crushing Sweeps with a sign was returning as well. She hadn't been messing with my head, she had really loved me, or at least had had a serious crush on me.

Hah! Serious crush! That's a good one.

I listened to the rest of the tape, the two fillies rambling on and getting into an argument about Sweeps' grand plans for her and my future. How we'd get married and raise foals of our own, run a successful business and how I'd eventually be in charge of the Stable as Overstallion. How we'd die, old and surrounded by our family and friends. I decided that I couldn't listen to this anymore and turned off the recording.

Looking up, I noticed those predatory eyes and the single gray eye looking directly at me. Ash looked solemn, Fluster just looked confused. She hadn't been there when I'd crushed the mare from the recording and I wasn't feeling up to explaining what I had done. I looked away from them and wondered aloud to myself, "When is this rain going to let up? We've got to get moving."

I think Celestia was listening to me, because right then it did let up. The downpour turned into a drizzle in ten seconds flat.

Thank you.

I stood, the cast clunking lightly against the floor. Ash pulled himself up and Fluster stood as well, tucking the magazine somewhere into her robes. I lifted my PipBuck and flipped to the map. "Next point is... that way." Pointing a hoof towards the south wall, I led the way to the door. The water level in the streets was already dropping rapidly, draining into the extensive sewer system I now knew lay beneath us. I'd wondered if water was good for my cast, but it had already been submerged a couple times and shown no ill wear. Crimson Knife had made it out of tough stuff.

Once on the street, we had been walking for only a few minutes before I heard the reports of gunfire close to our location. Pulling Broken from its holster, I looked around and checked my E.F.S. but didn't see anything. The shots must be coming from nearby, but no pony was shooting at us, which was an improvement over the more common occurrence of my motley little band being attacked. "Ash, can you check that out?"

He smiled broadly and shot into the sky with a whoop. His demeanor had brightened substantially once we had come back to the surface. Shooting straight upwards, he cupped made a show of looking about, focusing on something to the east. Dropping down to only a few feet above the ground, he pointed down the street. "Looks like some raiders down that way. They're shooting at a building. Want to check it out?"

I nodded up at the griffin, looking around for Fluster. I spotted her in a doorway doorway, blending into the shadows and looking out into the street for aggressors.

I took off at a quick trot, making sure that Broken was fully loaded. As I neared, the sounds of gunfire grew louder until they were just around the corner. I took a quick look and saw what I was up against. Three raiders, two with battle saddles, firing at a storefront.

"Come on out! We only want to have some fun! It gets lonely out here." The largest of the three was shouting at the building as he fired shots into it from the hunting rifle at his side.

A smaller buck next to him was laughing and agreeing with him. "Yeah, fun! Lonely!"

The third was staying silent, holding an axe in a magical aura. Two earth ponies and a unicorn. They were obviously raiders, with that look of blood soaked spikes and filthy manes cut into bizarre shapes.

Looking up, I saw Ash at an altitude aiming down his rifle at the three, ready to begin firing as soon as I made my move. Fluster was somewhere behind me, staying low. Good mare.

Three shots rang through the air and I saw the group scatter, ducking and dodging to avoid being hit. "Shit, she's got a gun!" The gunshots sounded oddly familiar and a sense of dread rushed through me.

I took off, sprinting around the corner and closing the distance with the raiders quickly. The smaller

buck saw me first and turned towards me, aiming the shotgun on his battle saddle. A loud blast rang through the rain and the a force from the heavens hit him right between his shoulder blade, severing his spine and blowing a blossom of blood onto the ground.

I roared as I charged the group, tackling the pony with the rifle saddle. I slammed my hoof into his face, feeling teeth shatter and blood spray. I hit again and heard the sound to my left just in time to duck under the swinging axehead, narrowly avoiding decapitation or a crushed skull. The silent pony came at me as I rolled off of his friend, dodging the swings of his axe. He went for an overhead swing and I reflexively floated Broken up to counter it, fairly certain that the shotgun could take the blow. The shotgun caught the haft of the axe right beneath it's wicked blade and stopped mid swing.

The unicorn had a surprised look on his face as I swung around and put a single kick into his muzzle, obliterating his face and spreading his head across the ground behind him. The axe dropped to the ground just as Ash landed next to me before reaching down and slicing the beaten pony's neck with a claw to put him out of his misery. I holstered Broken, having not actually used it for its intended purpose and floated the axe up and into my bag. It was in decent shape.

Turning towards the building, I shouted over the rain. "Hey in there! You can come out, you're safe!"

Ash hadn't put away his weapon and had it at the ready, just in case whoever was in the building decided to start something with us. If I was right about those gunshots though, and I hoped dearly that I was, we would not be having any issues with hostility.

I saw a pair of eyes poke out from behind a shattered window, that stunning combination of blue and violet. She was up and through the window in a flash, running across the muddy ground between us. The feeling of hooves around my neck was something I had desperately missed. She was crying into what was left of my mane again.

I heard Ash sling the rifle over his back and the soft rustle of Fluster's robes as she approached. I waited for about a minute before I pushed Shade away from me softly. "What are you doing out here? You shouldn't have followed us." I was confusingly happy, mad, and terrified all at once. The mare I wanted to see more than any other had followed me into the wasteland, abandoning the safe haven I'd left her in to make her way into a ruined hellhole filled with raiders, slavers, ghouls, and who knew what other horrors.

I had to be mad at her right now. "You were safe in Blank! We would have come back!"

She looked as though I had struck her and spoke softly. "I... I woke and found that you had left. I didn't get to say goodbye." Oh please tell me she hadn't followed me to properly see me off. "You need me out here. What if your weapons break? I can fix them."

She had a point, but we were already carrying one pony that couldn't fight around with us. Fluster was barely noticeable, not a trait I'd seen in Shade. In combat, I'd only seen Shade ever actually hit one target she'd been firing at and that had been more of an inconvenience than a boon. Still...

The thought of walking her back to Blank like a scolded filly sounded massively insulting to both her and us. She'd escaped Neighwhere and made her way all the way to where I was, as well as travelling across the wastes and into Hornsmith all on her own. Between myself and Ash, we could tackle anything that the city had thrown at us, save for one example, but Cinder had had all of the deck stacked in her favor. I wasn't counting that one.

"Okay. You can come with, but I'll need you to promise me that you'll stay behind Ash and myself. I don't want you getting in the way." Or getting hurt. Or killed. She nodded slowly and her eyes travelled past me to the robed mare. Her eyes darted back to me and I thought for a second that I saw jealousy. Really? This pony was crazy.

“Shade, this is Fluster. She’s a trader we’ve got a deal with. Fluster, this is Shade. She’s... uh...” I couldn’t actually think of what she was other than an escaped slave and a pony with what was starting to seem like an unhealthy attachment to me.

“She’s Ripple’s marefriend.” If I could have made Ash burst into flames, I would have.

I stammered a little, unsure of what exactly Shade was to me, but she stepped forward and shyly introduced herself to the robed mare. “I’m his mechanic.”

Okay, sure. Why not.

“So we’re not going to question how she happened to be in the same area as us after we spent that time underground?” Ash posed the question and I paused to think about it. Perhaps this was the break I’d asked Celestia for. I hadn’t thought much about it since it had gone through my concussed brain, but delivering Shade unharmed from a raider attack in the middle of this ruined city sure seemed like providence to me. Maybe Celestia really was up there watching me somewhere. Perhaps this was the first step towards my forgiveness for what I’d done in the past.

I shrugged to the griffin in reply as Shade leaned against me, taking in my warmth as we stood in the light rain. The voice in my head was gone, instead of just always at the corners, taunting me. Ash shook his head, chuckling, as he saw the stupid grin that had plastered across my face. Fluster’s eye looked between myself and the blue mare leaning against my side, a look of mild confusion on her shadow obscured face.

I let Shade rest like that for a bit before I pulled away, pointing my body towards the next point on the map. “Well, we’d better get moving, it’s going to be dark before too long.” Ash and Fluster nodded in agreement and Shade looked just a little disappointed that I’d moved away from her. The four of us began trotting down the street towards the south, keeping an eye out for any more raiders.

As we walked, Ash moved ahead of us and Fluster drifted behind a bit, as I’d noticed she had a tendency to do. This left Shade and myself in the middle of the group, the mare still sticking very close to me. I looked down at her, at the contented smile on her face.

“How did you find us?”

She tripped a little but composed herself quickly, looking back up at me. Seeing I was looking for an answer right now, she sighed and looked at the pavement passing beneath us.

“When... when I copied Sweeps’ PipBuck to yours, I took a peek at the map. I know Hornsmith, I knew where you’d be heading. I tried catching up, but by the time I reached the MoP headquarters, the two of you were long gone... the whole building was on fire. I didn’t want to think that you’d died, so I made my way towards the second point.”

I’d forgotten what her voice had sounded like. She was always such a quiet pony and this was a strange departure for her.

“I ran into those raiders and they chased me. Then you found me.” Smiling widely at me, she let out a loving sigh.

“O...kay.” So she was much more resourceful than I’d given her credit for. If she’d managed all of that off of a glance at a PipBuck, perhaps she was nowhere near as helpless as she’d seemed. The pistol she’d shot at me all that time ago was still in its place at her side, so at least she had been armed while she walked through the ruins looking for us. I didn’t want to think of what would have happened if those raiders had come across her unarmed.

“Well, we’re headed...” I checked my map again and pointed. “That way. Need to get going, that fight might have attracted attention.” Three nods of agreement and we made our way off down the road

towards the next destination on the list.

We had been walking for quite some time, nothing changing in the environment other than how each building had crumbled into the street. Signs of raider activity was everywhere, but we saw no actual raiders about. Bodies nailed to walls and horrific signs scrawled on walls were everywhere, but no sign of who had put them there.

Turning a corner, I spotted Ash peaking around a wall. He'd moved on ahead of the group a few minutes back and we'd just been following behind him. Looking back at us, he held a single claw to his beak and beckoned us over with another. Shade followed me as I tried moving as quietly as I could. Fluster appeared at my side, nearly making me jump. She'd been all but invisible for so long I'd almost forgotten she was there.

"What is it?" Whispering low as I reached the griffin, he indicated I should take a look. I stuck my head slowly around the corner and saw what he was trying to show me.

It had once been a... stadium of some kind. There had been a wide open field surrounding it for a couple blocks worth of space. It could have been beautiful once, but right now it was surrounded by high walls of rusty metal and razor wire. I spotted several filthy looking ponies standing guard over a large gate, sniper rifles on battle saddles as they watched the approach.

I pulled my head back and sighed dejectedly. "That's the second point, isn't it?"

The griffin nodded.

It couldn't have been as easy as I'd hoped. We'd gotten lucky with the headquarters, the door had been open. Now there was a veritable army of raiders between us and whatever Hate wanted. I just hoped that he didn't have it yet.

"So.... how do we get in there?"

Shrugging, Ash looked at the building around us. "We wait and watch. Wouldn't want to pull anything until we know what we're dealing with."

"Couldn't you just drop me in? It's getting dark, I could blend in."

He pointed around the corner. "See that? Razor wire covering the whole thing. They don't want fliers just coming in."

Well fuck. Fine.

"So... we wait and watch."

He grinned at me as I dropped my shoulders. "Great idea Kick."

There was a filthy, hole filled sheet between us and the Stadium. This room had once been a bedroom of some kind, though Ash had said that it provided the best spot for us to hide. He'd pointed out that the subtle movement of the sheet in the wind would provide perfect cover for us this close to the building, the snipers having gotten used to it's movement. We'd be able to safely survey from there without drawing the attention of the guards.

Ash and I lay down at the edge, Shade and Fluster in the room behind us. The griffin had detached the scope from his rifle and was looking through it at the wall in front of us. "It's a damned fortress.... fairly new too, wasn't here the last time I was in this area... that was months ago though, plenty of time for that to get built."

I spotted movement in the clear area in front of the gate and nudged the griffin, pointing it out. It looked like three ponies approaching the gate. They stood there for a few minutes and we could just barely make out shouting between them and the guard ponies on the wall. There was a pause and the gates opened, allowing entrance. Now if only we had a way of hearing what they were saying without being seen.

I turned, my eyes resting on the robed pony in the corner rummaging through an overturned desk. “Hey Fluster, how’d you feel about a quick walk?”

She hadn’t been thrilled at the idea, but with Ash’s assurance that he wouldn’t let anypony hurt her if she got spotted, she grudgingly accepted the task we’d given her. With the next group of ponies to come near the gate, she’d tail them and listen in on what they were saying. It was better than nothing and with the failing light I was sure she’d be like a ghost. I could barely see her in the daytime, and I knew what to look for. The darkness was her best friend.

Ash had reacquainted his rifle with his scope and was shredding the rotten mattress in the room. “To hide the barrel” he’d said. Swaddling the weapon in shredded mattress, he slipped its end through a gap in our cover sheet and lay down, watching the high metal wall and also trying to keep an eye out for the little mare we’d just sent out into the street.

I could barely see her from my position, a small dark shape underneath a bench. We waited. Before long, I could hear raucous laughter coming from the street next to our little hideaway. Two large ponies, both clearly raiders from their spiked barding and visible lack of hygiene, passed into the open area and paused in awe of the structure that greeted them. I could just barely make out what one said to the other. “Sure that’s the place?”

A nod confirmed it.

The two began their walk, moving much more warily than they had before. Passing by the bench hiding our stealthy little mare, I watched as the two picked up an extra shadow moving from cover to cover, darkness moving through darkness. The Stadium had begun lighting up, crude torches being the primary light source. There was a large bonfire directly over the gate and two guard ponies watched the pair approached through their scopes.

Hearing the shouting again, I noticed that it sounded like they were being asked the same thing. Another wait and the gate opened, allowing entry. The two ponies walked through and the gate slammed shut again.

Several minutes later, Fluster stood in the doorway, her gray eye glinting in the shadows. “They were raiders from up north. Apparently there’s a call going out for good pay to any raiders that show up and say ‘Massacre sent for me.’ They said that and the gate opened.”

Well, we had a way in now.

Ash was looking at me, shaking his head. “You’re going to go in, aren’t you? They’ll know you in an instant.”

I shook my head, a brilliant idea passing through my head. “Not if I don’t look like me. Fluster, you have any raider barding?”

Rummaging through her robes, she pulled out a few ragged strips of leather covered with chunks of metal. Perfect. “I’ll also need something to stain myself with.” When she produced a jar of something dark and viscous, I grinned widely.

Looking me in the eye, all she could say was “You’re paying for these.” I nodded and began removing

my barding. I removed my bandages as well, the burn scar giving me a more dangerous look. I looked the part of a raider, but it was the details that would really give me the pass in that I was looking for.

I began floating the raider barding towards me when I felt a small tug on one of my rear legs. Looking back, I saw that Shade was working on one of my hoof guns. Right. Two Kick Rip, wielder of the ballistic hooves. They were as iconic to me as Broken from what I'd gathered. I sighed and helped her, twisting and pulling on each to pop them off of the notches carved into my rear hooves. When she had both, she put them in her bag immediately, probably to keep something of mine close.

For once fully unarmed and without armor, I felt more vulnerable than I thought possible. I noticed Ash was looking at me strangely and tilted my head at him. "What?"

He made an audible sniff as he looked at me. "How many raiders do you think have taken a shower in the last day?"

That hadn't occurred to me. I was actually clean. Well, clean for the wasteland. I knew just how to get messy though. Using my magic, I pulled a chunk of glass from the window frame just beyond the sheet and drifted it over to me. Before Shade could even let out a gasp, I slashed it along one of my legs, opening a shallow but heavily bleeding cut. Dropping the glass, I began smearing the blood over my coat and through my mane.

I was starting to look like old Two Kick, the raider. Once I was thoroughly bloodied, we waited for it to dry before taking whatever was in the jar Fluster had opened and began rubbing it in. It had an odd smell, but helped along with the blood to give me a well worn look. "What is this?" It was turning my coat a patchy brown, which was much less noticeable than my natural white.

Fluster just shrugged, an amused look in her eye. Perhaps I didn't want to know.

Once the barding came on, I took to finishing the disguise. Pulling some of the shredded mattress to me and wrapping it around my legs, I covered both the cast and the PipBuck. I padded the cast leg good, to get around the bump sound it had been making, thinking it might give me a bit of a limp to go along with the image. I grabbed another shard of glass. Using it as a quick mirror, I took in our handiwork. Yep, I looked like a murdering, raping monster. Just the kind of pony I'd been once and had sworn to kill since. I sighed, part of me deeply disappointed, another part breaking through just briefly to laugh in joy.

The discerning predatory eyes of the griffin looked me over. He nodded his approval, clacking his beak in thought. "Yep, Kick. I sorta want to shoot you, so the disguise works. Now you got a plan other than to walk through the front door?"

I shrugged. "I'll improvise."

"Hope what you come up with is better than that." He then unhooked the belt and holster from around his waist and handed it to me. "You'll need a weapon. Bring it back or I'll find you." He grinned as I took it and strapped it around me, counting the bullets in their places along the belt. I had quite a few shots, hopefully I wouldn't need them. I floated the revolver out, testing the weight and aim on it before holstering it and nodding.

I was ready.

The sun was fully down now and the Stadium was glowing as though on fire. I stood at the edge of the open area, taking it in. I was mostly imitating the raiders I'd seen coming through today, a couple more having made the trip since that group Fluster had spied on. They all stopped here. I'd been staring at the building for a while, so it had lost most of its initial moment of awe.

Trotting across the field towards the gate, I looked up at the snipers pointing their over-sized weapons at me. I was tough, but I doubted I would survive a hit from one of those. I really hoped this would work.

When I got to the gate, I stopped where all the others had. I could hear the two talking above me, but not what they were saying. They looked down at me, judging me.

“What’s your business here?!” The voice shouted down to me with a none too subtle hint of malice. Looking up at them, down twin barrels, I spoke the words I hoped would get me through the gate.

“Massacre sent for me.”

Saying the word sent a shiver down my spine. Massacre. Something just seemed wrong with saying it. I waited for the bullets meant to end my life to rip into my head, but they never came. I heard a low groan and the gate slowly swung open, giving me my first view into the compound within. “You’re good, head on in.”

I nodded and made my way into the lair of the beast.

I was immediately struck with how many ponies there were in this place. I’d gotten used to the near desolate ruins of Hornsmith, seen the sparsely populated Blank and had felt that the streets of Underhoof would hold the most ponies I’d see in one place. This compound must have had hundreds of raiders. The combined smell was quite powerful, but a part of my mind felt that it was right, that this was how an army of unwashed psychopaths should smell.

Inside the metal walls, a crudely constructed town sat in the space leading to the stone walls of the Stadium. I spotted blacksmith ponies banging chunks of metal into weapons, bars filled with drunk and disorderly raiders, rows and rows of cots housing those that could sleep through the noise. I’d never really wondered what an army would look like, but now I knew. Either Hate was gathering an army here, or I’d just walked into the worst place that I could think of on a hunch.

Hate had to be gathering an army here, I’d seen no attempts of attack on the fortress, which I was sure would have had a couple of Paragons tearing down the walls if it had been hostile to the goals of that most hated of ponies. Now, I just had to find why this location was on Sweeps’ PipBuck.

I trotted through, looking for something I hoped would clue me in as to where I should go to look for whatever it was I was here for. Pony with a plan, that’s me. Then I felt a jab at my flank. Turning, I spotted a stringy little unicorn looking up at me. “You just came through? You gotta head into the field, get your orientation.”

I glared down at him and he responded with a bored expression. I guess that having to welcome every raider to walk through the gate would have inured this pony to pretty much any response at this point. I just nodded and began walking in the direction he had pointed me. The stadium was the same color as the rest of Hornsmith, even on the inside. That continuous dull gray.

The field, however, was a completely different world. Bodies decorated most surfaces, entrails and blood making up the majority of the decoration. Jagged metal and spikes rounded out the rest of the motif, making this legitimately the most disturbed place I’d ever recall having been.

In the middle of the field, a cluster of raiders lazed about, waiting for something. I recognized several of the raiders we’d seen come in while scouting the place out and trotted slowly towards them. Didn’t want to get too close to anypony, just in case my fame managed to get around my efforts at disguise.

Once I reached the area of the milling raiders, I noticed him. I’d missed him at first, sitting up there amidst the bodies. A huge pony, larger than myself. It was impossible to make out what color he had once been, it was currently the combination of colors one gets from soaking in blood and never

cleaning it off. Reds, browns and blacks smudged together, the very color of violence. He was staring down at us, sitting on the dead body of a mare. Glancing away from him, I noticed that the raiders were blissfully unaware of his presence, laughing and joking amongst themselves.

I felt suddenly that my noticing him was the cue he was waiting for. Standing to his hooves, he jumped down into the field and began approaching us. Eyes as yellow as I could imagine stared at us as he grew closer. The raiders noticed him and instinctively backed away from him. I'd only felt this predatory feeling from Ash before, an instinctive drive as old as time itself to get away.

"About fucking time one of you pathetic fucks noticed me!" His voice slammed into us as he practically barked, throwing the last puzzle piece into my mind. The color of this pony, his eyes, that stench, the propensity for corpse decorations. That name. Massacre. This was Massacre.

A Paragon. I knew him.

He got to the nearest pony, a wretched little mare, ribs slatted and eyes jaundiced. Looking down at her, he lifted one hoof and placed it next to her face in a stroking manner. He stared into her eyes for a little bit, her gaze breaking and shying away from him. With a speed not fitting his size, he drove her head into the ground at his feet, dazing her and making the rest of us step back.

He slammed her face into the field repeatedly until there was a sickening crack and she died, one hoof kicking at the air futilely. "Nope. Fucking weakling." He trotted to the next and went through the same routine. The buck he chose was still staring at the twitching corpse on the ground at his feet, bleeding from her eyes and ears. "Fucking look at me!" Massacre screamed into his face, foam forming at the edge of his mouth.

The buck did and stared into the stallion's eyes nervously, preparing himself to be murdered. Massacre looked at the buck like a predator sizing up a meal. "Spineless, but strong. Hauling detail!" He jerked his head to the side dismissively, sending the smaller buck towards one of the paths out of the killing field.

Moving through the group, he killed about every fourth pony, sending the rest to either Hauling, Digging or the occasional shout of Guard. A few tried to run, regretting their decision to make their way here, to join this "army". Those didn't get very far, Massacre chasing and slaughtering. The few that slipped past ran into armed ponies at the exits, meeting fates much more merciful than those handed out by the mad stallion.

Then he came to me, the last in the group, the two of us standing alone in the field, amidst corpses and blood.

He towered over me, staring his insane stare down into my eyes. I stared back, not wavering.

"Last fucking option, don't let me down. I'm feeling stompy." He placed his hoof on the side of my head, as he'd done for every pony before me. It was dripping with blood and cerebral fluid, smearing into the filth I was already coated in.

Looking over me, he nodded. "You're strong, unless all this is for fucking show. You're also the fuck that saw me first. You got eyes in your head. Remind me a bit of somepony I knew. Good pony, died like a bitch. Survey!"

I hadn't heard this option yet and waited for him to indicate where to go. He just stood there, staring at me. Then I heard the soft sound of hooves approaching and the small unicorn buck that had dismissed me so easily when I'd entered was at Massacre's side. I realized that his name must be Survey.

"Survey, get this fuck over to recon. I want him in the tunnels looking for the item." With that, Massacre turned and leaned down to clamp his teeth onto the nearest corpse before beginning to drag it

back into the stands with him. As I followed Survey from the field, the thought struck me that Massacre was doing Equestria a favor with each raider he murdered and used as furniture.

Gotta use what you've got.

The voice was back. Again. He really waited for any chance to get a word in and now that I wasn't near Shade, the intensity of his voice was back to its full volume instead of the vague whispers I would occasionally get in the vicinity of the blue mare.

Got to keep my mind on the task at hand. Survey and I left the field and back into the Stadium proper. Instead of continuing into the scrap town surrounding it, we turned down a small side corridor leading down into the underbelly of the large building. "Scouting?" All I managed to get out before the unicorn snapped his head around and glared at me.

"Don't talk. Just follow." His voice had that same bored tone as before.

Pretty bossy for somepony I could probably kill with a single kick. Underneath the field was apparently a labyrinth of locker rooms, offices, and maintenance tunnels. I spotted several ponies hauling chunks of metal and rock up one passage and figured out that there was probably a major excavation going on down here. That would explain the fortress and the call for willing labor.

Survey stopped in front of a door and pointed at it with a hoof. "In there. Figure it out." Then he turned and left. Rather impatient, he was.

I opened the door and walked in, finding a tired looking green mare laying on a decrepit couch against one wall. "What? Massacre finally decide to kill me?"

What? "Uh... no. I was sent down here to be part of scouting?" Her eyes stared at me for a while, green like the rest of her. Sighing, she rolled off of the couch and onto her hooves in one clean motion, walking across the room to a cluttered desk, beckoning me to join her. Closing the door I approached her cautiously.

"Scouting. Been a while since we've gotten one of you down here. Scouting requires skills that most of the rabble from the wastes just don't have." Looking closer, she did seem quite out of place around here. None of the scars, rotten teeth, jaundice, or any of the other physical signs that came with life in the wastes. Eyeing me curiously, she answered this unspoken question.

"I'm not one of you, no. I lived down here before those fucks moved in and invited all of the rabble. Was a nice place once. Families and commerce. Then one day Hate and Two Kick and Massacre walked in... Place was never the same." She sighed as I fought to keep from reacting.

I'd done this. Celestia did I hate who I had been.

"Anyways, ponies gotta eat. Follow me." We left the room and went back into the labyrinth of tunnels. Now that I knew to look, I did see signs of previous habitation. The ponies that had lived here sure hadn't stayed it seemed, other than the mare guiding me. I would have noticed children, unless they were hidden away or had been taken off. Or slaughtered.

"Hey... what's your name?" I wanted to know so that I could apologize later for what I had done.

"Jackleg. Don't ask, it's a type of drill. You got a name or should I just call you Raider Fuckhead?"

Oh crap. Hadn't thought of a name. Uh...

"Badeye."

She snorted a laugh and looked back at me, at the giant dark scar puckering the flesh around my left eye. "Badeye. You know you were selected for having good eyes, right? Dumb name."

Sure beat telling her my name was Two Kick Rip, one of the ponies that ended the town that had once been here and was responsible for her situation. Whatever it was, I still couldn't tell if she was a slave or what. She walked around like she owned the place, barking orders at anypony that got in her way as we navigated the subterranean maze. Finally, we came to a closed door which slid into the ceiling upon Jackleg flipping a switch on the wall.

Inside, it was dark. Not pitch black, but dark, with only very minor lighting. She stepped in and I followed her, the door closing behind us. My eyes adjusted to the gloom and I noticed that there were three other ponies in the room.

“Red Dogs, this is Badeye. Last minute addition. Play nice.”

The door opened and the light from the tunnel streamed in, outlining Jackleg as she stopped in the doorway. “I’ll see you ponies in the morning. Play nice.” The door closed and the room plunged back into darkness.

“So... new meat.” The pony shape to the left spoke, a deep voice echoing slightly around the room.

“Wonder if he’ll last longer than the last one. Really though, Badeye?” A mare, higher pitched voice in the middle.

“I d-d-don’t know. Looks b-b-b-big enough to fill the gap. Ya know... the one I b-b-blew in that wall. Heheheh.” A buck from the sound of it, a stutter making him sound a little more manic than he’d have been able to pull off with just the voice.

My eyes were adjusting to the dark and I saw them now. It was too dark for colors, but I could see their eyes and where they were in the room. All three were laying on cots, looking up at me. They’d been sleeping when I’d come in.

The one with the deep voice spoke up again. “So... Badeye. Welcome to the Red Dogs. When the digging and the hauling are done, we’re the first to go in. Highest mortality rate in Stadium. Name’s Bone Black. This is my sister Ivory.” Gesturing towards the mare in the middle, who nodded towards me. “The twitchy pony is Crossed Wires.” I saw now that Crossed Wires was a unicorn, while Bone Black and Ivory were both earth ponies.

“Now get some sleep. We’re heading into the tunnels early. We’ll decide if you’re a good fit if you don’t die.”

With that, the three lay down in silence. I trotted to a bed pushed against one wall and pulled myself up onto it, laying down. As I stared at the ceiling, I couldn’t stop thinking about Shade, Ash, and Fluster. They were waiting for me outside, but this position I’d fallen into seemed to be the best way for me to figure out what was going on.

I did miss them though. Didn’t feel right falling asleep in here while they hid in a building.

I heard a trio of snores and took it as my queue to allow sleep to grab me. Still felt odd going to sleep, I’d gotten so used to head injuries and unconsciousness.

“Hey Bone Black! Ivory!” A banging on the door woke me up and I could just make out Jackleg yelling on the other side of the door. “Rise and shine! Tunnel 17 is open and ready. Have fun.”

I heard Bone Black groan as he rolled off of his cot and Ivory yawned loudly, before standing and kicking one leg into the bed holding Crossed Wires, jerking him out of his dead sleep. It was still as dark in here as when I’d fallen asleep, but I could see much more clearly.

Crossed Wires was rubbing at his eyes before he pulled a pair of goggles on. Bone Black was pulling

on barding and checking a gun while Ivory combed her hair. Looking over at me, she tossed something my way. It was a pair of goggles.

“Put these on, don’t want any of that bothersome light to ruin your night vision. Won’t be much where we’re going.” Sliding the goggles on, I noticed how much light they blocked. Now I couldn’t see anything. I nudged them up with a hoof to right above my eyes, ready for when I needed them.

“Goggles on. Lets go.” Bone Black trotted to the door and rested a hoof on the lever next to it as he spoke. Flipping the goggles down over my eyes, I waited for him to open the door. It opened with a soft hiss and I was immediately glad for the protection. It was bright in the tunnel outside, but the darkened glass between myself and the light kept me from losing the edge I’d been building.

Bone Black led the way, Ivory close behind him. I kept pace and could hear Crossed Wires behind me, a strange scuffling sound. Looking back, I noticed that we had a rather odd way of walking, almost like he was stuttering. It fit.

Everypony in the tunnels stayed out of our way, grizzled raider and beaten slave alike. On one wall we passed I saw a large 17 scrawled crudely in white paint. “So. I have to ask what we’re looking for.”

Ivory looked back at me, flipping her hair out of her eyes. “Old rumor is that there’s a secret underneath Stadium. Grew up hearing the tales. The boss guy moved in when he heard the story and left us with Massacre and a wall of steel. Now we’ve got this, digging around and looking for that secret.” That surprised me a bit. I’d thought that perhaps Jackleg had been one of the only original residents left, but here Bone Black and Ivory, brother and sister, grew up here. I couldn’t imagine seeing your childhood home turned into a raider fortress.

Then I remembered that when I got to Neighwhere, I’d have to live that experience.

I could remember bits of my childhood, I had that at least. I remembered the Stable, but everything from what I guessed was just before I got my cutie mark, which I still had not given much thought to the meaning of, was a sieve.

The echo of gunshots rang through the tunnels, pulling me back to the here and now. I tensed and gripped Ash’s revolver with my telekinesis, ready for action. As we rounded a corner, I found where the commotion had been coming from. A trio of dead ghouls, gnashers from the look of them, lay just inside a hastily torn down wall. They had come from a tunnel only barely lit with emergency lighting. The tunnel that I assumed it was now our job to check out.

There were two larger bucks standing near the hole with assault rifles on their battle saddles, covering the gap. Bone Black edged past them and we followed suit, the sentries unmoving. We headed into the darkness a ways before Bone Black stopped and took off his goggles. We all removed our goggles and looking into the gloom before us.

I recognized this. We were in a sewer tunnel, much like the ones around Underhoof. This one was rather more unused though, the hoof tracks from the two ghouls visible in the accumulated dust of two centuries. “Okay. Keep an eye out for gnashers and dead falls.” I felt that Bone Black was saying this more for my benefit than for our companions’, they were experienced at this specific task. Sure, I’d been through my share of tunnels, but never in the dark.

We walked the tunnels, keeping our eyes out for anything of interest. What exactly we were really looking for was unknown to me, but I was down here for my own purposes. If I saw the three butterflies, I’d know where I needed to be. Get in, grab whatever it was Hate wanted, and get out. Nice. Easy.

In theory.

In practice, I had no idea if we were even where I wanted to be. This was the 17th tunnel they'd dealt with in this exact manner and had found nothing but an increasing mortality rate. There was a chance I'd be doing this for much longer than I'd thought. Shade would be waiting for me, unsure of what had happened. Unsure if I was dead, alive, captured.

I was beginning to sweat despite the cool underground air. The more I thought about it, the more I questioned why Ash hadn't stopped me. This was a terrible plan. He wouldn't be able to swoop in and save the day when the shit hits the fan. The griffin, my friend, was outside watching over the two mares that had come to be travelling with us. Protecting them.

I'd gotten used to having a friend there to help me out. The thought of not having that honestly frightened me.

"Hey, calm down. Do everything right and you won't die." I hadn't noticed Ivory falling back until she was trotting right next to me. She must have noticed how nervous I was getting. I nodded slightly, trying to get my game face on. The mare smiled lightly at me in the darkness, a soothing smile.

This was going to work. It had to.

I practically ran over Bone Black before I noticed he'd stopped. We'd come to a crossroads; down one direction I could clearly make out a collapse, rubble and earth filling the passage. The stallion stood at the crossroads for some time, looking down the two paths we had before us. "Badeye. You're the new guy, which direction would you say we should go?"

Taking my place at his side, I took a look down each path. I sniffed the air a bit, recalling everything I'd taken in while I'd been following Fluster towards the gnasher den during my first trip into the underground. Looking down, I made note of the faint tracks left by the passage of gnashers. I pointed a hoof down the way that they led. "That way. The other way is undisturbed and smells. Probably a break in a sewer line down there."

Bone Black looked down the path I suggested and nodded. "Well, you go first then. See if you're right."

Nodding slowly, I set the pace for the group down the tunnel. All I could hear were our four sets of hooves echoing down the tunnel and I could only see about ten feet in front of me with any real clarity.

I heard the fifth set of hooves a second before the gnasher charged me straight on, flying out of the darkness in a frenzy of teeth and hooves. I had just enough time to raise the leg that had the cast on it, the gnasher's rotting teeth biting deep into the dense material. Using my greater strength, I slammed the gnasher's head into the wall, pinning him between my cast and the unmoving surface. Using a move I felt that Ash would approve of, I pressed on, cracking the rotting ghouls' jaw before shattering it entirely. The creature dropped to the ground, its gaping mouth oozing blood, teeth, and spittle. It looked up at me viscerously before I turned and gave it a strong kick in the head, crushing it against the wall with a satisfying crunch.

Looking back, I saw Bone Black holstering his gun while Ivory and Crossed Wires peaked around the larger stallion's flank. I grinned and started walking again. That would at least perhaps get them to stop thinking that I was mere seconds away from death at all times. I could handle myself down here, they were only gnashers.

Further down the tunnel, it opened into a much larger avenue running in a different direction with amber lighting giving the whole thing an otherworldly feel. Immediately to the right was a large unmoving metal grate, thoroughly blocking the path with built up debris forming an efficient dam. Light trickles of water came through small gaps and I had the feeling that most of this would be underwater right now if not for the blockage. To the left, however, I could make out a door a bit further

down. Smiling to myself, hoping that my luck was still keeping up, I trotted towards it.

Three butterflies. I could have shouted in victory, but I held it down and let out a small chuckle. Bone Black and Ivory appeared at my sides, looking up at the butterflies. “What did you say you were looking for again?” Neither of them answered me, clearly still stunned at the sight of the large metal door. Looking to the side, I saw that Crossed Wires was activating a terminal set into the wall, the green glow giving him a sickly color.

“Wires, what does it say?” I had to know.

“Uh.... Ministry of P-p-p-peace emergency passage. An escape t-t-t-tunnel. Sounds p-p-promising.” He went back to tapping at the keys with his magic. There seemed to be no method to what he was doing and we stood there for a little bit. Bone Black and Ivory took a short walk down the tunnel to check for any other doors while I sat there with the twitchy buck.

Seeing a good chance to ask questions without raising suspicion, I muttered low so that only Wires would be able to hear me. “So... Wires, what’s the pay for all this? Jackleg didn’t quite say and I wasn’t going to ask Massacre.”

Glancing sidelong at me, he snickered. “It’s f-f-food, shelter, entertainment. Anyone that shines g-g-gets to be in Neighwhere’s army. Red Dogs just g-g-get in faster.” More aimless tapping.

“There. D-d-damn, was hoping I’d get to b-b-blow the door.” He twitched his head to the side as he spoke, a loud clang following shortly. Bone Black and Ivory made it back in time for the door to begin opening. Inside was a familiar design, a tunnel very much like the one down which Ash and I had fled from Cinder into the sewers. Instead of a portal into a water pipe though, this one ended in the door we’d just opened.

I led the way still, a pony on a mission. If I was right, what I was waiting for would be right through this door...

I opened the blast door at the end and pushed it open into the research chamber. This was not like Project Greenhoof. Not at all. Instead of plant life overgrowing everything, there were several large chambers of metal and glass, most of them broken but a few still in good shape. Large machines fed tubes and wires into each. The machines all ran into a pedestal in the middle, obscured by wires and metal.

Jackpot.

I hoped.

“What... is this?” Ivory spoke aloud as she entered the chamber, Wires and Bone Black close on her hooves. I didn’t answer as I made my way towards the middle of the room, hoping to find what I was looking for on top of the pedestal. It was covered with wires, which I pushed out of the way to find...

That it wasn’t there. No black cube. No reason for me to be here. Fuck.

My shoulders slumped and I turned away, looking for side doors. The layout was almost identical to the one that had been at Project Greenhoof and I located what I believed was the head researchers office. Weaving my way between the various odds and ends littering the room, I made my way to one wall and approached the door. The power was off and the door didn’t open upon my approach.

Looking back, I saw that Bone Black and his sister were rummaging through desks, looking for anything good for them to take back to Stadium. Wires was looking around nervously and when I called his name he jumped. “Wires, can you find a way to get some power in here?”

He nodded excitedly and began frantically searching for something in the room, pulling panels off of

walls and checking doors. I sat down in front of the office door, dejected. I really was wasting my time, there was no cube here.

Ivory appeared at my side and sat down, watching the manic little buck as well. “You’re looking for something here. I can tell. Who are you really? You’re not some random raider, much too nice for that.”

I sighed. There really was no point in keeping up the charade with Ivory or Bone Black. They weren’t raiders, they were doing this because they really had nowhere else to go. Wires, though, was a raider and I had every intention of keeping him in the dark. “There was supposed to be something here. Something old, from before the war. The Paragons want it and I want to keep it away from them.”

She smiled and watched the buck disappear down a hatch in the floor. “Vendetta against Hate? I can understand that. Bone Black and I lived here our whole lives. Jackleg and a few others are from that time too. We had a nice little deal going, trading scrap and relics for food and weapons with traders. We were in the tunnels, Bone Black and I, when the Paragons showed up and killed anyone who objected to them. By the time we surfaced, most were dead or enslaved, and we were cut a deal. Work for our freedom by making trips into the underground. Dangerous work but it beats being given to Massacre.” She shuddered as she said that. How many of the ponies in the field had she known?

“Why haven’t you just left? You’re not under guard while you’re down here.” Looking around quickly, she lowered her voice to a rushed whisper. “Hornsmith is filled with raiders. Nearest town is controlled by the Paragons. Where would we go?”

I began opening my mouth to tell her about Underhoof but I stopped as I felt a slight humming come from the ground. “Put on your goggles.” I flipped mine down and Ivory did the same. Bone Black heard me as well and put them on right as the lights flickered from their low glow to full brilliance, filling the room with bright light.

I saw the color of the two for the first time then. Bone Black was a charcoal black, fitting of his name. Ivory was likewise appropriately named, an off white. Both of their cutie marks were of what looked to be paint jars. The door behind us hissed open and I pushed myself to my hooves.

As I walked through the open door, I had a flashback to the pain of having my chest burst open. Stumbling, I hit a shelf filled with rotting books. Taking a few deep breaths, I heard Ivory’s voice asking if I was all right. I shook the memory of the pain off and nodded back at her before continuing inwards.

There were no skeletons here. No sign of horrors unleashed. Just a terminal on a desk. Pulling myself in front of it, I tapped a key when I saw what was on the screen.

>>Project Endless - Sleep Mode

The screen blinked and scrolled through a long stream of gibberish at the touch, warming up after so long displaying a single screen. After a few seconds, it settled, a new screen telling me all I needed to know.

>>Project Endless

>>Operational Status: Specimen Transferred to Maremack Facility

>>

>>

>>Menu

The same layout as Greenhoof’s terminal, but I knew now that what had happened to Ivory’s home, all those slaughtered ponies, had been for nothing. The cube wasn’t here. It hadn’t been here when the war had started. They’d been holding material mid transit in that MoAS storeroom, so why would they have

left everything else where it had been.

This facility probably would have been decommissioned before too long if not for the end of the world.

“There’s nothing here.” I sighed and Ivory stepped around the desk to look at the terminal screen.

The green glow reflected on her eyes as she read the screen, running across it several times to make sure she’d read it right. “Project Endless? Is that what we’ve been looking for all this time?”

I nodded. “It’s not here. I don’t think you’ll be wanting to take this back to Massacre, he doesn’t seem like the type to take bad news very well.”

Ivory’s eyes began filling with tears. Bone Black walked into the room and froze as he saw his sister crying. He pulled the gun and pointed it at me. “What did you do?” He was quite adept at speaking around a gun.

I held up a hoof and backed away from the crying mare. “Nothing. I didn’t do anything.”

“He didn’t Black... we just can’t go back home anymore.” Ivory’s voice cracked a bit as she spoke. The pistol went back into its holster at his side and the large black stallion looked quizzically at the white mare. “Can’t go back?”

I answered this one. “What you’ve been looking for, all this time down in these tunnels? It’s not here. It’s at Maremack.” He understood, nodding. “Well, that’s just not good news.”

The three of us stood there for a little bit before I spoke. “I know a place you two can go, if you want.” They looked at me, skeptical that there really was anyplace they could go. I felt that if need be they’d just make a life down here with the gnashers and the rats. Underhoof would be preferable to that as far as I was concerned and these two seemed like good ponies.

“There’s a town in the tunnels a ways from Stadium. Underhoof. Runs on scavenging, sort of like how you described old Stadium. You two would probably be welcomed there, I’ve got a few connections.”

Ivory smiled and looked at her brother, nodding at him. He frowned, running the idea over in his head, looking for any reason not to give it a try. The stoic stallion eventually nodded at me and smiled at his sister. “Sounds good Badeye.”

“It’s Ripple actually.”

“Ripple... and I thought Badeye was a bad name....that just takes the cake.” Ivory snorted and started laughing. Bone Black and myself caught in and before long we were all roaring with laughter. It took a few minutes to stop and eventually I wiped a tear from my eye before looking around.

The three of us were here and the lights had been on for a while. The fourth member of the Red Dogs was still absent. “Shouldn’t Wires be back? Where is he?”

Ivory and Bone Black looked around as well and we left the office, entering the main chamber again. There he was, standing near the door we’d originally come through. He was looking right at us and held something with his telekinesis, a small box floating in the air next to him.

“I’ve b-b-been waiting for this, you know. Finding this d-d-damned chamber.” He grinned straight at Ivory. “It’s a shame too, I was working up the c-c-courage to try tapping that pretty flank of yours.”

Bone Black and I both drew our weapons and pointed them at the buck. This was quickly turning into a bad situation. Wires, who I now saw was a dark orange tinted black at the edges, shook his head at us. “Look around. Got the place rigged. Wouldn’t d-d-do that.”

I glanced around and noticed there were now several devices scattered around the room. I’d heard mention of Wires’ penchant for explosives but hadn’t thought he’d been carrying this much on him.

This looked like enough to level this room and kill everypony in it.

“Massacre told me... he said t-t-t-o look for a room like this. If there was nothing here... b-b-blow it all up. If there was a little cube here... b-b-blow up the room after taking the cube. Kill everypony that’s not me. Got a spot on the P-p-paragons if I do so.”

I snorted at that. “The Paragons don’t recruit. They all grew up together.”

Looking at me strangely, he twitched slightly at that news. “How would you know? You’re just some raider scum. I’m a d-d-demolitions genius. I can wire and blow up anything.”

I pointed at my face. “See this scar? Before I got this I was a Paragon. Two Kick Rip. Ever heard of me?”

The blood drained from the buck’s face and he backed further away from me. I felt Bone Black and Ivory step away from me as well. “I was Hate’s number two pony and he shot me in the face and left me for dead when I’d served my purpose. I’d been his friend my whole life. You’re just some shit from the wastes, what makes you think he’d even keep you around? You’re as dead as the rest of us if you do this.”

He shook his head, uncertain for a few seconds before his eyes hardened and he glared at us, shaking the detonator menacingly at us. “You’re lying! P-p-paragons d-d-don’t d-d-die. They live like gods! I’ll kill you all and collect my reward!” He was backing towards the open blast door, ready to flee into the tunnel and set off his explosives to kill us all. I fired a shot at him, the bullet smacking into the door next to his head.

He stumbled, falling but catching himself before throwing himself through the door and slamming it behind him. Fuck. I was a terrible shot at range. Why did I keep forgetting this?

A flash of black and Bone Black was in front of me, kicking at both myself and Ivory. The impacts caused us to fly through the door as the world exploded, propelling us into the wall above the desk. Everything went dark as I hit.

Had I mentioned I hate this?

If I could get a couple of caps for every time I woke up like this, I was sure I’d become a rich pony in only a few months. The smell of burning metal filled my nostrils and my whole world was cracked when I opened my eyes. I nudged the broken goggles from my view with a hoof and rolled over, slowly checking myself for injuries. This was second nature by now and I found I was just bruised and burnt a little. My scars all hurt, an annoying burning sensation covering the large on on my back.

There was nothing broken that I could feel, and I was sure Crimson Knife would kill me if anything had been. I had difficulty moving my rear legs though and I panicked briefly before I checked them visually. Ivory was draped across my legs unceremoniously, pinning me down. I couldn’t see Bone Black, but the desk I lay behind was obscuring most of the room from me. Pulling my legs gently from underneath the white mare, I bent over her to check for life signs. Her breathing was fine and I couldn’t see any major cuts. That ran about the extent of my medical knowledge.

“Hey, hey wake up.” I was having flashbacks to when I went through this with Shade and briefly wondered if saving her would have another mare obsessed with me. I hoped not. It was turning out to be quite inconvenient in the long run.

Her eyes opened slowly and as they focused on me I saw for the first time that they were magenta. Her goggles had been knocked off in the blast but it was dark enough in this room that it shouldn’t be hurting her eyes. I wasn’t sure how frequently Red Dogs saw bright lights, but it seemed like they spent

much of their lives in darkness. The only light I could see in the room past the desk was a flickering orange, probably fire from the sound of crackling flames.

I sat back from her as she lifted herself up. She looked at me once and her eyes got wide. “Bone Black!” She jumped to her hooves, wobbling slightly as she went around the desk looking for her brother. I followed, unsure if it was really safe to walk around a room that had just blown up. I heard her shriek and she suddenly went out of view. Assuming she had fallen through the floor, I vaulted the desk and found where she had gone

Bone Black was laying on the other side of the desk, burnt and broken. In saving the two of us from the blast, he had put himself right in the path of destruction. Most of his hair had been burnt off and he bled from dozens of wounds. One eye was gone, a bleeding hole where it had been. He coughed a mist of blood as Ivory hugged him close. I’d barely survived a much less intense blast in my time, and I knew as much as he did that he was a goner.

I stood there awkwardly as they shared a final moment together before he took a last breath and slumped in her grip. She cried into his charred mane for a while before I pulled at her shoulder. “We need to move, this place could be unstable.” Slowly, she stood and we left her brother’s body laying in that office room. I was taking it for granted that the layout of this facility was similar to the one underneath the headquarters building and headed for the hall that should contain the elevator.

The room was demolished, the explosives having taken out much of the equipment and even some of the walls, letting what was held back spill into the room. Dirt had piled into the room in areas and water leaks were putting out some of the fires, but chunks of the room still blazed away. The elevator was destroyed but there was a door down a side hall with a picture of stairs stenciled on. Pushing the door open, we entered the staircase and began moving up.

Ivory was moving with purpose, despite the tears cutting clean lines into her dirty face. I recognized that face. I’d worn it while carrying Shade’s body while I was filled with nails. She was ready to do anything. Most likely at the top of the list was to rip the head off of Crossed Wires with her bare hooves. A sentiment I shared.

That pony was going to die. Painfully.

Arriving on the main floor, we found nothing. This building had been cleared out a couple hundred years ago and the front door was heavily locked. We kept going up and went out through an exit in the roof before scaling down a building conveniently collapsed across the street, forming a ramp of rubble and debris. The sun was somewhere above us behind the constant cloud cover and I figured it to be somewhere in the middle of the morning.

Most of my disguise had been burnt or blown off and my PipBuck was exposed, now that I looked down at my leg instinctively. Checking the map to find out where we were, I discovered that we were a ways from Stadium but I could still make out the top edge of the large building through a gap in the wall to my left. Outside of the range of the snipers but close enough that we risked detection by raiders making the trip in, looking for steady work in an army of killers.

I cautiously led the mare through the streets, heading for the building that I had left my companions in. It was slow going, as raider traffic had been steadily increasing over the last few days and we had to avoid three groups of heavily armed pony scum. The army in Stadium was growing more and more by the hour, kept in check only by Massacre’s discerning eye and crushing hoof.

It took an hour by my count before we reached the building. It looked just as it had when I’d first seen it and opened the back door we’d used to get in. Leading the way upstairs, I rounded the last corner and opened the door to the bedroom where I’d last seen them watching me leave to take action on my plan.

Ash's grinning beak, Fluster's shy gray eye. The dual colored eyes of Shade and a loving hug.

None of these were in the room.

There was nothing.

They were gone.

Of course they were.

Fuck.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as a setting.

Took me longer to write than I expected, let me know what you think, and as always
fav/track/comment/rate at your leisure.

Chapter 7: Ivory

I looked frantically to see if there was any sign of Ash or the girls. No bullet casings, no signs of struggle. It was like they'd never been here. I could only think of one place they'd go: back to Underhoof.

Why hadn't we come up with a meeting place? Note to self: make that a part of all future plans.

Ivory stood in the middle of the room, that cold look still in her eyes. I was sort of surprised that she wasn't charging across the open killing field to try and get to the traitorous buck that had killed her brother.

I was fairly certain that Wires was already dead, slain by Massacre for coming back empty handed, but I knew better than to assume somepony was dead until I'd seen them with my own eyes.

Like I had been until Wires had likely brought confirmation that I was alive.

Thinking about it though, Cinder had very likely reported back to the Paragons that I was still indeed up and kicking. That removed most of the anonymity I had enjoyed and could only mean future hardship for myself and every creature around me, pony and griffin alike. The Paragons would be really gunning for me, especially after killing one of their own and infiltrating a fortress run by Massacre.

Priority right now was finding my companions. "They're not here. We gotta go." Ivory looked at me before glancing at the window, Stadium visible through the holes in the sheet. I got her attention with a stomp. "Forget about it, you wouldn't stand a chance. Let's get to Underhoof. It's safe for now."

She opened her mouth to protest but I held up a hoof to silence her. "Listen, I know you're mad. I don't think Bone Black would want you getting yourself killed without a reason."

A hoof smacked me across the face. "I know that... it's just... I'd really prefer it if you not say his name." Message received. I nodded and tilted my head towards the door.

"We should really leave though. We've got one gun and a bit of a walk, staying around here in the daytime doesn't seem like a great idea." Still, she looked uncertain. "Okay, when we get to Underhoof I'll help you out. I want that little shit dead, not as much as I'm sure you do, but I'd like to see him die." Wires had betrayed both of us, but his betrayal of her was so much deeper than mine.

Letting out a long breath, the pale mare nodded. "Okay... you're right. I'm not ready for this." Glancing at Stadium sidelong, I saw her mouth the word "Soon." Shortly after, we were back on the street and heading towards Underhoof, it's location conveniently floating in my E.F.S. Once I had figured out how to set it. Finding the one specific door would have been nearly impossible without my map, everything in Hornsmith looked exactly the same.

I noticed quickly that Ivory was squinting constantly and avoided looking up. Not having goggles was really bothering her; who knew how long she had gone without seeing any real light? Luckily, the constant cloud cover cut down on the natural ambient light of the sun, which I had never really seen from what I knew, but assumed that it was rather brilliant. Perhaps I'd see it one day.

The streets were blissfully empty as we hurried down them towards the distant door and the promise of relative safety. I had all of six bullets in the revolver and enough for two reloads in the belt holding it. I was not that great of a shot, even with the magical assistance provided by the S.A.T.S. spell located in my PipBuck. If we encountered hostility, I'd probably be better off using my hooves to beat my

enemies to death. I wondered briefly how well Ivory would handle a gun but thought better of it. I didn't know the pale mare well enough to give her that kind of trust.

“So... you're Two Kick Rip?”

Fuck. Knew that was coming sooner or later. I'd been working it over in my head, what I would say to this pony who's life and home were changed forever when I'd first come into it, however long ago that had been.

“Yes... I was. It's complicated.” I hoped that that would be enough. The decision had been made that putting my past behind me was not even an option anymore. I'd hurt countless ponies in the years I'd torn a bloody path through the Hornsmith region and I was going to have to apologize to or fight every pony that had been effected. It was the curse I now walked with.

Just kill anyone who questions you. It worked before, it'll work now.

Glancing to the side, I saw that look in Ivory's eyes again. This wasn't going to be dropped anytime soon. It would probably just be better if I came out with it.

“I don't remember. Bits and pieces mostly, but I'm not him anymore. He died when Hate shot him in the face. I'm just the pony wearing his corpse around.” That came out a lot more morbid than I'd have liked it to. The thought of being a walking corpse made me think of the gnashers beneath my feet, ponies that had long ago lost themselves to insanity, mindless ghouls existing only to kill. I would not become one of them.

“Whatever he did, I'm sorry. I'll do whatever it takes to make things right. I owe so much to more ponies than I can even guess at.”

There was a long pause as we walked down the street, sticking to the sidewalk and relative cover given by the coarse gray buildings.

“You killed our mother.”

I opened my mouth a couple of times, but words would not come. There was nothing I could say that would make this right. I stayed silent, the mare staring hard at the ground in front of her. It was starting to rain again, each drop stinging slightly on the exposed and filthy flesh of the burn across my shoulders and back. I thought of how Crimson Knife might react to my current condition and knew that I had another forced cold shower to look forward to.

I heard Ivory sob lightly. “Now Bone Black is gone too. I'm alone.”

Walking was the only thing that I felt comfortable doing. She kept pace and stuck near enough to me we didn't risk being separated, but she didn't speak to me. I could hear her mumbling to herself underneath her breath and could really only hope that she wasn't planning exactly how to kill me the first chance she got.

Kill her first. It's the only way to be sure.

Celestia, why won't the voice go away? It had been increasing in volume and frequency, filling the corners of my mind each time it spoke, urging me to kill and rape. I was starting to get twitchy as well, my body feeling oddly sluggish. Pain had been getting sharper as well. The burn and my bruised and broken body were combining to have me in a constant feeling of aching discomfort.

She'd go down so easy. Do whatever you liked. She'd be yours before you killed her.

If only I had some Med-X on me.

Stampede.

Stampede was always an option.

“No!” The shout was reflex more than a conscious action, and I felt the smaller mare step away from me in concern. I’d just agreed with the voice, but I couldn’t explain it to her. If anypony knew that I was constantly fighting a voice telling me to drug up and start murdering, I’d have no one by my side.. I realized then what was the matter with me. The last time I’d taken Stampede was when I’d fought Sweeps. With the thoughts that had filled my head at the time, it suddenly occurred to me that I was going into withdrawal from the drug. Two Kick had taken it so frequently that he’d never had to deal with the withdrawal.

After the rush of strength and that feeling of invulnerability, I’d always felt pretty good for a day or two afterwards, but then I’d take another hit and keep going. The drug had been out of my system for a while now and my body was reacting negatively. It was letting the voice in, knowing that he was quite in favor of me taking the drug, giving him the control I knew that he so desperately craved. If that happened, I wouldn’t be in control of what happened and Ivory would probably die at my hooves. I was not going to be responsible for this entire family dying.

Add Ivory to the growing list of ponies for which I would die before seeing hurt.

Fuck you. You’re so boring! Let me in, come on. It’s cramped in here; I need to get out and stretch my legs.

Anything to get rid of that voice aside from what he wanted. Anything. I needed to find Shade. She always calmed the voice. Kept Ripple from becoming Two Kick. I needed that.

Celestia, please let them be at Underhoof. I know I’ve already asked more than I deserve, but give me this one. I’ll stop asking after this, I swear.

“Rip? Are... are you okay?”

The pale mare’s voice was unusually loud in the soft rain. I guess I’d been quiet for a long time as we walked. “Huh... oh. Yeah. I’m fine.” Was I? No. No I wasn’t.

“You’ve been twitching and mumbling for a while now.” Great. So on top of having killed most of her family, now I looked mentally unbalanced. She’d composed herself quite well from the last time I’d looked back at her, the sobbing mare grieving for her dead brother. All of the ponies that had survived Stadium’s fall seemed to be like that. Jackleg had been dismissive about the whole thing and Ivory and Bone Black had seemed, for lack of a better word, content.

“I’ve just... got a lot on my mind.”

The mare snorted lightly in response to me. “I doubt that.” She let out a light laugh, and we kept walking. We were finally nearing our destination; I noticed with a glimmer of hope. There, just down the street, I could see the door. It looked like every other door, but my E.F.S. was pointing right at it.

“This is it.” I stopped at the unmarked door set into a dull grey building underneath that rusted metal awning. There were many doors, but this one was the right one.

The mare looked curiously at the door. “There’s a town back there?”

I nodded. “It’s a bit of a ways in, but yeah.”

Pulling the door open, I held it for Ivory before heading in myself. I heard her sigh pleasantly as we got back into the darkness. It wasn’t bright outside, but she had an affinity for dark, underground spaces. It seemed all the “normal” ponies I encountered anymore did. Aside from those in Blank, all the surface ponies I’d encountered had been slavers, raiders, and assorted other evils.

Looking around as we walked and taking the lead again once we reached the bottom of the stairs and

into the tunnels proper, I nodded with satisfaction. Most of these tunnels looked the same, but this was definitely ringing some bells. Underhoof was just down this tunnel.

Shade was hopefully just down this tunnel.

Plenty of victims are just down this tunnel.

I set off at a rapid canter, eager to reach the end. I couldn't really remember how long the tunnel was, only that it was a straight shot. Before long, I saw the metal door and slowed as I approached it and stopped short.

What was the knock? I'd heard Fluster use it once and Rail Spikes hadn't exactly told me how to get back into the town. I thought about it and lifted my hoof. One tap and then three. I waited for a minute and then repeated. Did I have it wrong?

A small hatch on the door flipped down and I looked at it in time to see a gun barrel poke out. "Down!" I dove and knocked Ivory out of the way; she'd been standing right in the weapon's sights. It fired as I hit her, grazing my leg and drawing blood. We hit the ground out of the killing field provided to the weapon and I lifted my head to shout, hoping they could hear me through all that metal..

"Don't shoot. It's Ripple! Rail Spikes knows me!"

The hatch slammed shut, and I helped Ivory to her feet. She looked offended that I'd tackled her and stepped away from me, brushing herself off. I turned my head to check my injury and saw that it was only a flesh wound. It stung like a bitch, but I'd had worse.

With a loud clank and a whir, the door began opening. I saw Rail Spikes and two other ghoul ponies of the Guard ready to fire, the usual greeting I got. Behind them, I saw a sight that filled my heart with what I could only assume was joy, a strange feeling. A small robed form was walking out of Gristle's, her gray eye looking into the metal at her feet as she walked. I pushed past the ghouls, Rail Spikes giving me a glare that I'm sure he would have wanted to cause pain as I passed. Ivory gave them a wide berth as she followed, looking nervously at the rotting ponies, more used to gnashers than the civilized sort, and the two of us trotted towards Fluster.

Nearing the hooded pony, I saw her eye search upwards at the movement headed towards her, meeting mine and I caught a glint of light as her teeth caught a reflection. She was smiling. Trotting towards me, she gave a small wave. When we reached one another, I opened my mouth to ask why they'd left, but she shook her head and pointed towards the big red knife on the wall.

"Ash will tell you. I've got business to handle. Great to see you're still alive though."

She brushed past me with a small nod and a curious glance at the mare I'd brought into the town with me, but clearly had more important things on her schedule than to stand around and mingle. I approached Crimson Knife's clinic and entered, half expecting to see Crimson teleport directly in front of me. Bracing myself, I walked across the threshold and stood in the small front room.

I'd expected to see Ash there, but the room was empty. I could hear a running shower in the back and made my way into the rear of the clinic. I rounded a corner into the shower room, the first time I'd gotten there under my own power, and found exactly what I was expecting.

Ash was leaning against the wall and watching with mild indifference as the red unicorn was scrubbing Shade's mane underneath the running water. It seemed to be almost a rite of welcome to Underhoof, the unexpected cleansing.

Crimson Knife was the first to see me and her eyes widened at the state I was in. Both myself and Ivory had been through a massive explosion after rooting around in unused and filthy tunnels and could not have been clean in the red mare's eyes. I must have been especially bad, since I still had whatever we'd

caked on to give me the look of a raider. She flashed out of existence for a split second, appearing next to us and stripping off what little we were wearing. Ivory let out a small shriek and I grinned, having not warned her about this on purpose.

Then water was running over me. Crimson Knife almost seemed to be overtaxing herself, cleaning the accumulated filth and grime from three ponies at once. Ivory was wide eyed and staring at the mare that was getting a little too personal with her, while I sat there, used to this by now.

I realized suddenly that I was next to Shade and I looked over, expecting to see those dual colored eyes staring at me. No such luck, she had her eyes closed and was humming softly. She'd not even noticed my arrival.

"Did you miss me? I tried using a soft voice, hoping not to startle the mare.

She took a little bit to snap out of the trance she'd worked herself into and her eyes fluttered open slowly before turning to look into mine. There was the look that made this all worth it. She hugged me around my neck and I couldn't help but sigh a little. Then I felt her pulled away from me and heard the medical mare behind us scolding me.

"I've just spent twenty minutes cleaning her and now you've gotten her dirty again. Please refrain from contact until I have finished." Crimson Knife was looking rather concerned as she scrubbed at my back and sides, trying to work through the mixture of unknown goo, blood, and dirt that I was sporting a coat of. The smudge had worked its way onto Shade. Ivory was getting the same amount of attention, but she had been fairly clean to start with.

I must shower more than anypony in Equestria.

Once we were clean and dry, I found that the front room could get fairly cramped when you put four ponies and a griffin in it. Crimson Knife was going about the business of checking on my leg. Magical healing was great, but it still hurt as she poked and prodded at the swollen limb. I took this time to catch up with Ash.

"Kick, sorry about leaving you like that. We had something of an emergency in the morning and couldn't wait around." The griffin had his arms crossed, an apologetic shrug accompanying his explanation. Shade was avoiding looking at me when this subject had been brought up and I could only assume that she was somehow responsible. She'd even given me a bigger hug than usual until she's started hurting the raw burnt skin on my neck.

He nodded towards the detached mare. "Your marefriend there passed out. Couldn't wake her up. Apparently she hadn't eaten since right after you woke up back in Blank. Had to bring her back here to find that out. Tiring by wing, the trip."

"You left me in Stadium and came all the way back here because she was hungry?" That was the worst reason I'd ever heard. Fluster had food on her and I was sure Ash did as well.

Another shrug. "Hey, I didn't know what was wrong with her. Figured you'd be none too happy if you came back and I'd let your girl die on my watch. Though now that I see what took you so long..." His eyes locked onto Ivory who was sitting near the door, looking out into the community with a look of both wonder and nostalgia. "I guess you've got a new marefriend."

I would have hit him. The jealous glare that I got from Shade made me want to hit him all the more. "What? Ow... could you be a little careful there, Knife? Ash, no. I managed to make it out of there with her help. Brought her back here to help her start a new life."

The griffin laughed. "You really are taking this whole nice pony thing to heart, aren't you? Anyways,

did you get what you were looking for?” He pulled the black case from his bag and waved it at me, expecting me to pull out a cube of horrors.

“It wasn’t there. It was moved, up to Maremack from what I read.” Shaking my head sadly, I watched the red pony begin placing a brace on my leg. Apparently it was healed enough that I didn’t need the cast. Ivory was looking at us now, caught into the conversation.

“Ivory, this is Ash and Shade. They’re my... friends I guess would be the word for it. They helped me infiltrate Stadium.” Ivory greeted both of them but received a cold stare from Shade. There was that jealousy. I’d need to have a talk with her.

My line of sight was suddenly filled with Crimson Knife’s eyes. “Ripple. Listen to me. Do not go anywhere for a day or two. You need time to heal. If you leave, I’m not helping you next time.” This was a different Knife than the one I’d encountered so far. The medically mumbling mare that had been so busy all the time would never have spoken like that. It got my attention and I nodded dumbly.

I was reminded of Intensive Care, the pony that had told me he’d never treat me again. If I lost Crimson Knife, I was likely shit out of luck, and I got hurt a lot. Couldn’t risk that.

She pointed a hoof at Shade. “I helped her with what I could but what she really needs is food. Go, take her and get some food. I’ll be talking to Rail Spikes about keeping you here.” With that, she backed up and shooed us out. We were all set from her point of view. As we filed out, I heard the small pop of her teleportation and she was gone again.

Strangest mare I’d ever meet.

Once on the street, we stopped in a small group. Ash was standing on two legs again, looking this way and that down the large tunnels that made up the main area of Underhoof. “Fluster’s got your stuff Kick, does she know you’re back?”

“She does.” As if on cue, the robed pony was in the circle. None of us had seen her approaching and her sudden appearance caught us off guard. Ivory shrieked and jumped back a few feet, Shade took cover behind me as I recoiled. Even Ash let out a very avian sound and raised an arm.

“Celestia! Fluster... make some noise when you do that...” We recollected ourselves and took a minute for our collective hearts to come out of our throats. Fluster was patiently rummaging through her robe, which by now I could only assume was riddled with pockets or hiding a couple saddle bags.

That reminded me. “Shade? You have my... hoof thingies. In your bag.” Her eyes lit up and she turned, opening the bag on the right and taking out the familiar weapons. Taking them from her with a nod and a smile, I slipped them on and made sure they were secure. It felt better to have them with me. Fluster had at this point brought out most of my equipment, my armor and Broken. Ash excused himself briefly and ran off towards the inn. They’d been here longer than I had thought, but it made sense if Ash had really flown here as he’d mentioned.

The griffin came back with my saddlebags. I was armored up and fully armed, feeling right for the first time since the previous day. Putting on the saddle bags, the transformation from dirty, broken pony to armored warrior badass was complete. “Let’s get something to eat.”

Now that I had time to wander Underhoof, without being hustled off to go fight gnashers or rushing off on a wild goose chase, I took in the town. We’d all eaten an hour before and gone our separate ways. Ash had... gone somewhere, probably somewhere with alcohol. I’d sent Fluster off with Ivory to get her some barding and a weapon, giving them most of my caps to do so. I’d last seen them entering the Emporium with echoing shouts from the diminutive buck welcoming them to his store.

That left Shade and myself some time to walk around the town. Not that I think I could have gotten away from her, she was sticking to my side as though she'd been attached there with wonderglue. It was pleasant and the voice had been driven off, but something was still bothering me. Since we were alone, I felt that now was as good a time as any to voice a growing concern.

"Shade, why are you really sticking around me? Is it because I saved you? Do you feel that you owe me?" Looking into those eyes, I wanted to stop questioning immediately and just enjoy the warmth I felt when I saw them. Trying to shake off the feeling, I reminded myself that this was important. If she was hanging on to me for the wrong reasons, it was safer for her away from me.

I think she'd figured out the power her eyes had over me, as she kept looking at me. Eventually, she gave up and sighed, slumping a little. "Ripple... I said before that you're the only pony that's ever been nice to me. That is still true. You... you're my hope that ponies can get better. That Equestria can get back to what it once was." I had expected her to declare her undying love for me, or at least mumbling out something unsure. That was very to the point.

"So... you're here to make sure I don't... what? Fall?" Was that what I was to her. A symbol of hope? I could have laughed out loud at that one. The bloodthirsty pony in my head would have been laughing right next to me.

Shade just nodded at me. "That's right."

I just nodded. Interesting. I couldn't exactly tell her to leave then, could I? She'd just come back. I was everything for her at this point, her purpose for living. That doesn't put a lot of pressure on a pony. None at all.

Nope.

We walked for a while, until we'd seen all that Underhoof had for us. I began weaving our path back towards Gristle's shop, hoping to check in on Ivory and see if she was getting along with Fluster all right. She had enough of my caps on her to buy a barding, weapon, and enough ammunition and supplies to do whatever she wanted. I just hoped to head her off before she rushed out into Hornsmith, dead set on laying a one pony siege to Stadium and the army within.

When we entered the Emporium, I saw that Fluster had really worked her economic magic on Gristle, providing the mare I'd brought into Underhoof with what she needed. Ivory was wearing armor heavier than my own, covering most of her pale coat with layers of metal and leather. At her side was a heavy weapon, what looked to be a machine gun of some kind. A belt of ammo ran over her back and into a bag at her side. The first thing that popped to my mind was that this pony was loaded for ursa major.

Fluster was still securing ammo for the weapon from the buck, who almost looked defeated as he traded a stack of caps and salvage for a box of ammo. Fluster, for what it counted, seemed as though she couldn't have been more pleased.

Stepping up next to the now heavily armed Ivory, I looked her over approvingly. "I expected you to get barding and a shotgun maybe. You planning on taking down that army all on your own?"

She scoffed and tossed her mane. "I'm simply doing the most with what was given." That seemed to be the way of Stadium ponies. Take what was put before them and turn it to an advantage. Ivory, Bone Black, and Jackleg had all taken a raider invasion, a situation few ponies survived, and turned it into a way of life. It was a rather admirable trait, if just a little selfish.

Ivory was looking at herself in a cracked and dirty mirror hung on one wall, checking from all angles. She frowned and shook her head before turning towards Fluster. "Fluster, could you see if he's got any paint?"

The paint was traded for and Ivory left the Emporium, smiling happily. Fluster turned and followed her, leaving the little buck with only a smile and a wave. That left myself and Shade standing in the Emporium awkwardly.

Nodding at Gristle, I left as well, Shade by my side. I heard him mumbling as we left, sure that he'd just been ripped off. That made me smile, knowing that I had access to Fluster, at least when it came to transactions.

I trotted quickly after the two mares, my longer legs making the distance in no time. "Ivory, do you know how to use that thing?" I couldn't imagine it would be entirely easy to just start using a battle saddle with a weapon of that size.

The mare turned her head towards me, shrugging as she did so, the saddle and equipment hindering the movement slightly. "How hard can it be? Point and bite this, right?" The trigger mechanism within easy reach of her mouth held the promise of death.

I'd never used a battle saddle before, but she did seem to have the concept firmly grasped. She would need practice before I would feel comfortable unleashing her back into the wasteland fully armed. "I'll find you in a little bit, Ivory. I gotta check something out."

Ivory and Fluster continued on their way while I turned towards the Guard station. The door was open and I could see light movement inside. Somepony was home and I hoped it was Viola instead of Rail Spikes, she seemed to be more likely to accommodate what I needed of her. The gruff head of security did not seem to be my biggest fan.

Sticking my head into the doorway, I saw that with luck it was the gas mask adorned mare, cleaning her rifle on a table against one wall. I knocked a hoof against the doorway, and she turned her covered face towards me, audible breathing filling the room.

"Ripple! What can I help you with?" Much nicer than Rail Spikes.

"I was curious if there was somewhere in town we could get in some target practice. Crimson Knife has us grounded, and we can't leave without her cutting off service."

The ghouls' eyes lit up with a laugh, a muffled chuckle escaping from the mask. "Yeah, she does that. Hmmm...." She paused in thought for a little bit, rubbing the gas mask in a pondering gesture. "Well, there's nowhere in town that you're allowed to fire weapons, but I think I could get you into one of the lower tunnels without anypony noticing. Gnashers down there, but what's better for target practice?"

Had to admit that she had a point. Gnashers were the best target practice, and Ivory had already spent a long time in the tunnels dealing with their kind. I grinned at the ghouls, thanking her. She finished assembling the weapon and slid it into its place on her battle saddle. Turning, she walked past us and out the door, gesturing that we should follow.

"So, target practice? It's not for you, is it?" Her eyes went to the shotgun at my side and then to the pistol that Shade was carrying. "Is it for her? I can't imagine you need practice, what with taking down all those other gnashers already."

Shaking my head, I gestured out at the town, "It's for the mare I brought into town. Don't think she's ever used a saddle mounted gun before. Just... gotta find her."

Looking at Viola's battle saddle, I noticed that instead of the bit in front of her, there was a wire running up into her mask. She laughed a little and tilted her mask up a bit. "Can't bite into it with this thing on, it's voice activated. Custom built a couple years ago. It is tricky to get the aim in unless you actually practice though, not like pulling out a gun and firing."

We strolled around Underhoof for a little bit, keeping our eyes out for Ivory and Fluster. They'd made

themselves scarce in the time it had taken us to walk to the Guard station and back out, but before too long I spotted them down a side street, huddled around something on a table.

When we reached the two mares, I saw what they were doing. Ivory was painting her barding and new weapon. She had chosen matte black, with Bone Black written down one side in red. Artistic interpretation was not my thing, but if I had to guess, she was choosing to carry her brothers memory with a physical representation.

She looked up as she finished, finding the three of us standing near her and Fluster. She eye Viola warily, still clearly not used to ghouls that weren't trying to kill her. She put down the crudely built paintbrush she was holding in her mouth. "What? I'm just personalizing."

I laughed at her, she thought that the Guard was here because she was in trouble. "It's fine, Ivory. We've just found a way for you to get some practice in. This is Viola; she's one of the locals."

The ghouls eyes smiled. They were very expressive for a ghoul, and she nodded politely towards Ivory. "Nice to meet you, Ivory. I know just the place that you can get in your target practice." Ivory was putting her barding back on as it dried, still shying away from the ghoul.

"It's okay. I'm not going to bite. The targets I have in mind might, but they're not nice upstanding ponies like myself." As the words left Viola's mouth, a grin crept onto Ivory's face.

"Okay, Viola. Lead the way." Shrugging the machine gun's ammo belt into position, she gestured for the ghoul to take the lead. They began walking off and a thought struck me. I turned to Fluster and Shade.

"Fluster, show Shade around the town. I'm gonna go help Ivory with practice." Shade's eyes opened wide, and I ran a hoof down her neck. "It's fine. I'll be fine. Just go have some fun, get to know Fluster. She's a good pony." Well, good enough. Shade's eyes softened a bit, and she nodded.

I turned and went to catch up with the ghoul and the heavily armed mare as Shade and the robed mare headed the other direction. As I got closer, I heard that Viola was running Ivory over the finer points of battle saddle use and maintenance. "...with that, you're gonna want to keep your mane shorter in the back, don't want it to tangle up in the feed."

Ivory was making an effort to tuck her longer hair into the armor to keep it free. I'd already seen her fussing with her hair more than anypony I'd met back in Stadium and wondered if her possibly having to cut it would be an issue. My own mane was much shorter now than it had been when I'd started on this journey. Having it burnt and then trimmed had taken a sizable bulk of it.

"This is it. Follow through quickly." We'd come to a metal door, which Viola was unlocking as she spoke. The door creaked as it opened and she stepped through, Ivory and myself following. Viola shut the door behind us and flipped a switch on the wall.

Lights flickered on from large spotlights, similar to those that I'd first seen on my first trip into Underhoof, revealing that we were in a long, low room. Several tunnels fed off of in multiple directions, but what I noticed more immediately were several skeletons laying scattered around. Viola checked that her weapon was loaded with a kick to an autoloader built into the saddle and nodded towards one of the far tunnels.

"We used to use this as a secondary entrance until gnashers started showing up too frequently for it to be a good idea anymore. Not sure where they came from, but it's always from that tunnel. Just make some noise and we'll get some attention."

So this was her plan? Bring the gnashers to us, drawing them into a killing field. I was already checking that there were buckshot rounds loaded just in case any got past the longer range weapons of

Viola and Ivory.

“Whenever you’re ready, Ivory, take a shot. Grip the bit and bite down. They’ll come running.” Viola motioned at the bit and Ivory took it in her mouth, tensing her entire body as she bit down. The weapon kicked and fired, a burst of five shots ricocheting down the tunnel. She let go in surprise, and I could immediately hear the beating of hooves on stone.

I floated Broken low, ready for anything. I could see Viola tensing into a stable firing position. The first gnasher tore into the tunnel, running full out. Ivory fired again, missing the creature entirely. Trying again, she aimed lower from where the bullets had gone and fired a burst, hitting the gnasher in the chest.

The burst of bullets punched a series of nasty holes in the pitiful beast, stitching a line up his chest and neck before taking a chunk out of his face. He hit the ground and slid for a few feet, leaving a trail of dark ichor. Ivory let a small whoop of victory and waited for the next.

With each progressive gnasher, her aim got better. After two, she was missing only with the last bullet or two. By the fifth, she was putting clusters of lead into closely bunched patterns of lethality. Each gnasher that came into the room died in roughly the same spot, sliding into their fallen brethren, creating a grisly pile about halfway into the room. These things were not very bright.

Viola was laughing lightly as she watched each fall in sequence. “You’re a natural. You sure you’ve never used a saddle before?” I could hear genuine admiration in her muffled voice as she lay the praise upon Ivory, who had a huge smile. She’d spent so long letting other ponies handle gnashers that being able to do it herself must be quite liberating.

Ivory kept her aim on the tunnel but turned slightly towards Viola. “Never used one. I’m liking it though.” She shot a grin at me, which I returned.

We waited for a little bit, but nothing more could be heard from the tunnel. Viola nodded towards the pile of corpses and tilted her head towards me. “Ripple, check the bodies will you? Never know what a gnasher will have on them.”

Eying the heavy weapon mounted on the side of the pale mare who’s mother I had killed, I was a little apprehensive of getting into her line of sight. She did look to be in a good mood though... maybe she wouldn’t take this chance and kill me. Arming her may have been a bad idea...

I stepped slowly down a row of stairs leading to the floor and made my way towards the pile of dead gnashers, Broken aiming towards the tunnel. Viola and Ivory likewise were aimed at the tunnel, but the silence continued. Reaching the pile, I holstered Broken and used my telekinesis to rummage through the remains.

A few caps, some spare rounds of assorted ammunition, a healing potion. Not bad for not actually having done anything myself. Once I was finished looting, I turned and trotted back up towards the two mares, still expecting a wave of gnashers to pour forth from the tunnel and rip me apart.

Nothing. My luck held, and I reached the elevated position I had watched the slaughter from. Viola was opening the door and ushering us through. Ivory was slow to turn, still keeping her eyes hopefully on the tunnel. She’d been enjoying herself. I stepped through the door, and Ivory eventually joined me before Viola stepped through, turning off the lights as she went. The door locked securely, and she nodded towards the two of us.

“Well, it’s been fun, but I can’t be gone from my post for too long. You both have a pleasant day.” She trotted off, leaving Ivory and me near the now locked door. The pale mare turned towards me, smiling broadly.

“Thanks for this, Rip. I’ve never felt that sort of power before; I like it.” She was giddy, as though she’d just received her cutie mark.

“It was the least I could do. Don’t make me regret this by getting yourself killed or anything though.” I was stern with her. If she died, I knew that I would feel responsible. I’d been the reason for so much of her pain that if she died because of me it would just assure that I would never truly be a good pony. I’d be a monster in the skin of a good pony.

“I know that I said some things earlier... but you’ve really helped me out. I’d be dead already, and Wires would have gotten off without any retribution. You’ve given me the means to get my revenge, and for that I’ll be eternally grateful.” She kicked at the ground lightly as she spoke before quickly leaning up and kissing me on the cheek.

Shade hadn’t even gone that far, and I felt my entire face turn red. She smiled and turned, leaving me there by the door as she headed back into Underhoof proper.

I would never understand mares.

“Hey... Kick my friend!” Ash stumbled drunkenly out of the bar as I returned to the main thoroughfare. He was gripping a bottle in one clawed hand, the glass scratched up quite thoroughly from his talons. “Come on in here, gots ta’ get a drink with your griffin buddy.”

I shrugged and headed over towards him, following him into the bar. He slumped heavily into a spot at a table that already had several black feathers scattered about it. He slid a bottle to me and I took it, tasting it carefully. It burned and it tasted like ass, but it was alcohol and that was good enough. I took a long swig, feeling the burning warmth spread to my gut.

I was really starting to enjoy this downtime.

Over the next hour, the griffin and I matched each other in drinks, building up an impressive bill that Ash kept paying with caps, and drawing several other patrons into our merriment. I made friends and we all laughed. A good time was had by all.

“This is to make up for the party that never happened in Blank.” The griffin was giving me something that I had not even thought about. His promise to bring me back to the bar in Blank had been sidetracked as Sweeps had attacked. I grinned fondly as I found that not even thinking of Sweeps’ could bring me down when I was drunk.

At some point, Shade showed up and Ash somehow convinced her to drink some as well. Fluster was there too, but she stayed away from us and got a salad made primarily of mushrooms.

I found out that drunken Shade was very affectionate, giving me a few kisses on my cheek, much as Ivory had very recently. I didn’t mention this. I’d witnessed that Shade was the jealous type, and being draped about my neck she was in a very optimum position to met out punishment for any infidelity.

Was Ash right? Was Shade actually my marefriend? I’d have to ask her sometime, preferably somewhere where we were alone and not surrounded by drunken ponies whose names kept escaping me. My memory was going to shit as I went further and further under the influence.

Sometime in the next few hours, I made it to the room that had been mentioned. I was supporting Shade, who was stumbling quite badly. Ash had gotten two rooms: One for himself. One for the two of us. He was really pushing for this.

I set Shade down on the mattress in the room and started making my way towards the bare floor. “Ripple... come back.” The slurred demand from the mare made me pause, and I turned drunkenly towards her. She was reaching a hoof out to me, and I shrugged, returning and laying down next to her.

She cuddled up next to me and sighed contentedly as she placed her head against my chest. I had no idea what I was supposed to do, so I lay there frozen in place. “You’re such a nice pony... helping everypony out when most wouldn’t. That’s what I love most about you. Ripple is such a nice pony....” As she spoke, her voice was slowly dropping in tone and she quickly dropped off to sleep, snoring lightly against me.

I got comfortable and closed my eyes, a happy grin crossing my face. I followed her into sleep shortly, for once my mind not swimming with images of those I’d killed or betrayed. The only thing in my mind were her eyes.

The morning came too quickly and my head immediately began punishing me for the previous night. Lights hurt. Sound hurt. My face scar ached with a steady rhythm. I groaned and held my hooves to my eyes.

I could feel that Shade was still at my side, snoring away gently. I did not envy her what she would feel when she woke up; she had drunk quite a bit and had a much lower body mass than I did. I lay there for a few minutes, waiting for my brain to stop trying to escape and enjoying the warmth of the blue mare.

Slowly, I got to my hooves, doing my best to not interrupt her rest. As I shrugged on my barding and saddlebags, I had one pressing issue on mind: I really needed something to drink.

Making my way into the hall, I found that the door to Ash’s room was wide open and the griffin was nowhere to be found. I wondered if he’d even made it up here last night, but then I saw that there were signs of habitation. A feather on the bed, claw marks running down one wall where I could only assume he had fallen and tried to catch himself.

Making my way out onto the street, I paused as I came into the artificial lighting of Underhoof. I suddenly wished that my Red Dogs goggles hadn’t been shattered in that explosion, they would really have come in handy here. I stumbled my way down the street towards the bar, knowing that they had liquids other than alcohol.

Getting inside the building, I was greeted fondly by the mare that ran things during the day. From the look in her eyes, she had heard of the previous night and was amused by the sight of me. I asked her to give me anything that would help a hangover and after a short time of mixing, she slid some horrible dark sludge towards me in a glass. I eyed it warily but slammed the drink anyways.

It was horrid. Absolutely horrid, but I immediately felt it kick in. My head started clearing and the pain started subsiding. “Celestia! What’s in this?”

The bemused mare shrugged. “Med-x, a couple plants, assorted secret ingredients. That’ll be five caps.” I slid the payment across the counter while trying to work the taste off of my tongue and turned to leave. Once on the street, I paused and stretched, working kinks out of my neck and back. I checked my PipBuck and found that it was the morning. It was really hard to tell time naturally underground and I was getting more and more thankful for the chunk of metal attached to my leg.

“Hey, Rip.” Ivory was sitting at one of the tables in front of the joint, eating a small salad. I’d apparently walked right past her in my quest for salvation from the hangover. I nodded towards her and sat down as she offered a spot.

The mare laughed at me as I sat there, running my teeth along my tongue, trying to get the flavor off. It

just wouldn't come off. She slid a bottle of something towards me. "Here, try this. It's good."

Taking the bottle, I looked at the faded label. Sparkle-Cola. I'd seen the bottles before, but never one with actual liquid in it. I drank it and a pleasant flavor washed over my tongue, replacing the specter of horror that had been there seconds before. I looked at the bottle again. Carrot flavored. I'd never had carrots before that I knew of, but I had to admit that I was now a fan.

"Thanks, Ivory. That helped." I put down the bottle and slid it back to her. She was munching on assorted vegetables and tilted her head slightly in acknowledgement. Swallowing, she tapped a hoof on the table. "So, I was talking to your griffin friend last night."

I snorted in laughter. Ash had been too drunk to see straight last night. "Yeah? How'd that go?"

"Well, he told me about your ill-aimed mission. You two are seriously just hoping to inconvenience Hate in every way you can? Don't you have a real plan?" I couldn't really read the look in her eyes. It wasn't kind, it wasn't joking, but it wasn't hard or critical either.

"I heard some things while I was working for Massacre in Stadium. Rumors mostly, but most of it seemed to have real substance. Do you have anyplace on that map of yours called Orchard?" I shrugged and pulled up my leg, checking the PipBuck.

"Yeah, I do. That's not even in Hornsmith though, what's important about it?" It was a point far to the north, a day or two's walk from where we were right now.

"Well, quite a few of the raiders that came to Stadium were being sent out there. Almost a third of them. Supposed to be something really important up there, from what I heard. Supposed to be two Paragons working that location, but not as a dig like Stadium. More like a siege."

Now that was interesting. There was somepony strong enough to fight back against a raider army and do well enough to warrant that much attention out there. Sounded like somepony I wanted to get to know.

Ivory nodded as she saw the look in my eye. "Exactly. I did a lot of thinking on this, and I don't stand much chance of revenge on my own. You though, you can help me and have just as many reasons, if not more, for hating the Paragons. If we meet up with whoever is fighting, we can really bring some hurt to Neighwhere and Stadium."

That... was a good plan. Much better than what I'd have come up with, I wasn't even planning on going that far out of my way, but Ivory was making a good point. Whoever was up there fighting would probably stand a better chance against an army of raiders led by a group of unusually powerful ponies than the ragtag group of well intentioned individuals that had formed up around me.

This would probably be one of my better chances at killing Hate.

"That sounds really good Ivory. I'm sure the others won't mind, you seem to be getting along well with Fluster." She was nodding as I spoke and took another bite of her salad.

When she finished chewing, she swallowed and posed another question at me. "What about Shade? She seems to be rather protective of you."

Oh crap, that made me remember that she was probably about to wake up with a massive hangover to find me missing. "She'll be fine, she reacted the same way with Fluster. Anyways, I gotta dash, forgot something I have to take care of." I stood and turned towards the open door of the bar.

"Hey, Rip? Thanks for everything you've done."

I smiled at her. "No worries. Oh, right, we're heading out tomorrow so make the most of Underhoof. We won't be back for a while." She nodded as I spoke and went back to eating her salad.

I rushed into the bar and ordered another of those horrible drinks and two Sparkle-Colas. Shade would be needing this miraculous cure, and I was sure the both of us could enjoy drinking the carrot beverage. I payed up and trotted out the door with my purchases tucked into my saddlebag. When Shade awoke, I would be ready to help here deal with the repercussions of the night.

That day passed by faster than I would have liked. When Shade woke up, she had a headache that I'm sure her descendants would be able to feel. The drink did the job though and before long we set out into the town to enjoy the day.

One of the only real items on the agenda was to get Shade some proper gear. Swinging through Gristle's, I did all that I could to convince her to armor up like Ivory had. She was having none of it, however, and I only managed to talk her into getting some barding. Anything to get between her and hostility was better than just going naked.

When it came to arming her more properly, she was steadfast in her refusal. She didn't even want the pistol she had at her side, there was no way she would be talked into carrying another weapon. Eventually, she won out and I backed down. Gristle was snickering and I shot him an unfriendly glare as Shade and I left the shop.

We found Ash eventually, locked in a jail cell at his own request. Viola explained that he'd put himself there after thinking about eating a pony as a snack. I agreed with his decision. He decided it was best if he spent most of the day in there, just to be sure and requested we brought him one of the hangover cures that the two of us had already "enjoyed".

Throughout the day, we spotted Ivory. She was enjoying all the Underhoof had to offer, as I'd suggested. She spent much of it talking to Viola and Gristle on the finer points of saddle maintenance. At one point she disappeared entirely and I could hear the faint echo of gunshots in the distance. Gnasher target practice, I could only assume, though I was a little distressed that she had apparently gone off on her own until I'd seen her returning with Viola.

Fluster we saw once. When asked about what she was up to that day, she had explained that she was properly preparing for the longer trip and setting many of her affairs in order. Ivory had filled her in on where we were going. Primarily, setting her affairs in order meant clearing out stashes of salvage she had in the surrounding area and trading them for supplies and caps to be used out in the waste. She'd set aside a number of these caches for a time such as this.

Before I knew it, the day was over and I gathered everyone together to prepare them for the coming trip. Ash looked worn, but ready for anything, his feathers messed up rather than slicked back like usual. Ivory looked great considering she'd been blown up the day before. Fluster looked how she always looked and Shade was still attached to my side. She'd really been enjoying all the time we'd spent together.

Sitting around one of the tables in front of the bar, they all looked at me as I began laying out our destination. "Our next stop is a bit outside of Hornsmith. Up north, place called Orchard. We gotta be ready for anything, we'll be heading in the same direction as a lot of raiders from what Ivory's told me. She'll be coming with us, also. The more guns the better."

Ash was nodding at that last statement, and Ivory had a wide grin. She'd really taken to her gun, even having painted the barrel a bright red sometime in the last day.

From here... I didn't really know what to say. Seemed like a bit short for a meeting. "So... yeah.

Everyone get some rest, and we'll set out in the morning.”

With that, the meeting dispersed. It seemed odd to actually have forethought go into where we were headed next, but it did help to remove the near constant feeling of insecurity that I hadn't even really known I'd had.

I headed towards the room, feeling good about how things were going. Three ponies and a griffin helping me was sure better than doing this all on my own. Who knew, perhaps in a few days if everything went well we would have much greater numbers, enough to stand a more substantial chance at stopping whatever Hate was planning.

As I lay down, this time on the bed first, Shade snuggling in next to me, I smiled. Two days in a row I hadn't been knocked unconscious. It was starting to look like I'd never go to sleep naturally for a while, but looking at the mare that was already drifting off to sleep, I knew that this was right. This was how it was supposed to be.

I slept peacefully that night. The next few I might not be so lucky.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as a setting.

Also thanks to ErrantIndy for reading/editing through this chapter and giving me some pointers. All previous chapters have been worked over now for easier readability and continuity, should be improved.

As always, if you like it fave/comment/track/rate.

Chapter 8: Bone Forest

Morning came far too quickly, ushered in by a swift tapping sound on the door to our room. Shade mumbled as her eyes half opened from the sound, "...but I want to ride the pony." Right, wasn't going to ask, as tempting as it was.

The tapping came again, followed by Ash's voice. "Kick, get up, bronny, time to get going... unless you're getting in some morning delight of course." In response, a milk crate that had been serving as a table slammed into the door. I hoped that Shade hadn't heard that, and I sighed softly as I saw she'd snuggled in closer at my side, still asleep.

"Shade, time to wake up." I lightly nudged her into consciousness, the mare stretching and yawning as she came to. Once she was up, I stood and began putting on my armor and equipment. My saddlebags were weighed down from ammo and supplies, comforting for the trip ahead.

Shade was pulling on the barding that she'd acquired the previous day before holstering her pistol as I walked to the door and opened it. Ash was on the other side, leaning against the wall. He was bright eyed and attentive, a wide grin slathered across his face. "Have fun?"

"I wonder, what sound would a griffin make when you pull out all his feathers?" I leaned towards him and gripped a single feather with my magic, causing him to back up laughing.

"Okay, message received. Anyways, hurry up. The girls are waiting out on the street, and we're burning daylight already." Halfway through speaking, he turned and began walking down the hall towards the exit. He was gone in seconds, leaving me to wait for Shade as she finished figuring out how to get her barding on and secured.

Once she was ready, we left the building. Ash and the girls were indeed waiting out on the street. Ash had started taking ammo from his bag and loading it into the belt holding his revolver for easy access. Fluster looked bulkier than I remembered, meaning that she most likely had done more trading and was loaded down with supplies. Ivory had somehow gotten her armor and self looking pristine, a shining jewel in a sewer. First spat of trouble, I knew, she'd be dirtied up again, but looks seemed strangely important to the now heavily armed mare.

"So... everypony ready?" Stupid question, I knew. Of course they were. They'd been waiting for me.

The nods of three heads and we all turned, heading towards the main gate out of Underhoof. We had a bit of a walk ahead of us. Viola, conveniently enough, was running front gate duty and let us through with a polite nod and a muffled "Good luck."

Once the gate closed, we were back out in the hostility of Hornsmith. The tunnel was uneventful, meaning that Ash and I had done a good job of clearing out all the gnashers. There wasn't even a stream of water running down the middle, which I took as a sign that the rains had ceased.

Upon leaving the underground, I found that I was right. It was the wasteland equivalent of a bright and sunny day. Better and better. Looking at Ash as he brightened up considerably, I realized why he'd spent the last two days in a bottle. It had been so obvious. Ash hated being anywhere confining, the open air was his domain.

He was already letting out his wings and giving a few test flaps as we filed out into the street, closing the unmarked door behind us. I was checking my PipBuck to set Orchard as the location and Ivory was pulling out a new pair of goggles I could safely assume she had procured at Gristle's.

We were ready for this. Whatever the wasteland had to throw at us, we could handle it. We would go to Orchard, make new allies, and march on Neighwhere to end Hate's reign of terror across the greater Hornsmith region.

That was the plan at least.

Our path to Orchard luckily kept us well away from the western half of the city; away from Neighwhere and Stadium. Hopefully, it would keep us away from the paths that the raiders Ivory had mentioned would be using to get to the distant locale.

Ash took point, giving his wings a flap and propelling himself up onto a rooftop. The rest of us started walking. Fluster and Ivory were walking side by side, chatting amiably. I could hear occasional snippets of what they were saying. They were bonding over the times they'd both spent in tunnels, searching for salvage and living the scavenger life.

That left me with Shade; not that I could complain. I'd spent the entire previous day with her, but there had not been much talking, we'd just enjoyed each others company. As we walked, I thought of what I could say to her. There was still so much I didn't know about her, and with as close as we were getting it would be a good idea to learn.

"So... tell me about yourself, Shade. I feel like I don't know anything about you."

She blushed slightly, but was smiling. It seemed that I would be getting some answers despite my very blunt approach.

"Well... I'm not really sure what to say." She leaned into me as we walked, answering my question of if she could get any closer. Blunt seemed to work with her.

I shrugged. "Where were you born, do you have any family, stuff like that. You know about me, it only seems fair." She knew more about me than I did.

I could see her looking at me out of the corner of her eye, that judging look I'd seen a few times coming from her. Then she smiled. "Well.... I grew up in Anchor. My dad was a mechanic, he taught me everything he knew." Her voice was low, but confident.

I was checking my PipBuck. "Where's Anchor? That in Hornsmith?"

She shook her head sadly. "It's Neighwhere's old name."

Oh. Well that's unpleasant information. I shook my head sadly before replying. "I'm... sorry to hear that."

She laughed nervously, shaking her head. "I remember the day the Stable door opened. All that time living outside a Stable, we always talked about what it would be like. What the ponies inside would be like." She kicked a rock on the road, sending it skittering to bounce off of a low pile of rubble.

"At first, things weren't so bad. The Stable ponies set up businesses and established trade routes. It was a golden age, honestly, for the first year. Sure, some of the Stable ponies... like Massacre, Cinder, and Holepunch, were a little unhinged, but Hate kept everything in line. You were there to keep them in line."

She sighed. Bits of what she was saying was ringing bells in my head. It sounded familiar, but I wasn't getting any real clean returns. Just that nostalgic feeling I'd gotten when seeing Sweeps and Cinder, that I knew them but nothing about them.

"After about a year, though, something changed. Hate changed. He wasn't called Hate before then, his name was Crackerjack." That name I knew, it had been in Sweeps' audio entry. I'd been putting off listening to the others after how depressed the first one had made me.

“He started calling himself Hate and called all his closest friends the Paragons. You were first in line. The raiding started slowly, hitting caravans here and there from some of the smaller communities in Hornsmith. Weapons, supplies, water. Before long it went to ponies and entire caravans started getting enslaved as soon as they showed up. Some of the crazier Paragons would head out into the wastes and just slaughter anyone they ran across.”

I wondered if I had done that. I'd heard that I spent most of my time cooped up in Neighwhere, keeping the peace and playing the arena, but I couldn't help but wonder.

She hesitated before continuing, a small waver entering her voice. “Ponies like me... ones with skills from outside the Stable... well, we were turned into ‘servants’. We were slaves, but they would never sell us outside of Neighwhere. They thought that it would strengthen another community if they did. Hate caught on that I was good with mechanical stuff and put me to work on weapons. Odd stuff, special requests from the Paragons. I built those.” She gestured at my back legs, at my hoof guns.

My mouth dropped open. Shade had made the weapons that had gotten me my name? Why hadn't she mentioned that earlier. Thinking, I floated out Broken. “Did you make this?”

Shaking her head, she looked at the ground ahead of her. “No... I don't know where you got that.”

Oh well. Can't solve all the mysteries at once.

“So you knew the Paragons pretty well then, didn't you?” It would be helpful to know who I'd have to fight in the future.

She shrugged. “Not all of them. I saw a few and heard some names, but I only really knew Hate and Sweeps. You were always busy in the arena or out enforcing Hate's laws. Cinder Trails spent most of her time with you... I never liked her.” That jealous look. She must have known that Cinder was my old marefriend. The look faded shortly and she continued. “I worked with Holepunch, a few times, on some of the bigger weapons in Neighwhere.”

“Holepunch, what's he do? I mean.... who is that?” With a name like that, I couldn't really make guesses, other than imagining a pony punching a hole in another. Wasn't far fetched at all, I could practically do it.

“He's a mechanic, like me. Came out of the Stable though, so he always took priority whenever he was around, threw me out of my workshop. He's clever but not very creative.”

Didn't sound that bad. Not like Cinder or Massacre, I'd seen what they were capable of. It would probably just be best to not underestimate any of my former comrades though; for all I knew Holepunch could shout his enemies to death.

“Any others you know of? Ash said there were more than that.” Remembering back, the griffin had said there were ten or so of them. Not counting me and Sweeps, I had the names of five in total: Hate, Holepunch, Massacre, Cinder Trails and Skyline. I knew what two of them could do. Better than nothing.

“Not that I can name... I was kept in the Stable most of the time, none of the Paragons liked being in there.” Still, better than nothing. I had one final question on this subject for now, I could tell that it was making her depressed. Seeing her frown was causing a strange pain in my chest.

“When... uh... when Sweeps saw you, she called you Dusk?” After I spoke, the blue mare at my side looked to be deep in thought. That question had tripped something in her head that she had to work through, if I had to guess.

Walking along for a while, she eventually nodded and slowed her pace a bit. “That's my name. My real name. I gave you Shade because I wasn't sure if you were a raider or not.... I'm sorry.”

“It’s okay. So... do you want me to call you Dusk?” That would be odd, but I’d adjust.

She smiled and looked me in the eyes, those bright orbs filling my heart with a warm feeling. “No, I’m... I’ve been thinking about what you did. Change who you were. Dusk the slave is dead. Shade the free pony is alive. That’s who I am now.” When she finished speaking, she kissed me on the cheek. I was wondering when she’d get to that point, because I sure wasn’t going to make the first move.

I nuzzled her neck lightly, and she giggled a little. She was really starting to come out of her shell, and I was definitely liking it. I was liking it a lot.

We’d been walking for hours with naught but a hint of raiders heading in the same direction as us. Several times I double checked the map, just to make sure that we were not headed in the completely wrong direction, since it was surprisingly easy to get lost in Hornsmith.

Nope. On track every time I checked, headed north.

A few hours into our trip, the group was mostly silent, most avenues of conversation long since exhausted. Ash had been silent the entire time, a strange turn of events for the usually wisecracking griffin. I guessed that everyone was just on edge, expecting raiders around every corner. I knew I was.

Ivory was beginning to meander as she walked, her head moving to music none of us could hear. Fluster kept going straight, only avoiding when Ivory’s path came close to impact. The robed mare had been getting along quite well with the now heavily armed Stadium pony, which I assumed was the reason she was walking down the middle of the street with us instead of flitting from cover to cover, shadowing us down the street as had been her way until now.

Then I noticed it.

Through the blips on my E.F.S. that showed friendlies ahead of me, I saw a flash of red before Ivory’s moving dot covered it up again. I let out a short, sharp whistle and everyone stopped to look at me. I nodded my head towards our front and they all looked with me.

I saw nothing. The street was clear, though we were approaching a fork in the road with a four story building sitting in the divide. Taller than most, it would be the perfect vantage point for snipers to cover this road. I couldn’t see movement in any of the windows and I was sure that Ash hadn’t or he’d have started shooting already.

Shade looked at me, and I nodded towards a hunk of metal on the street that must have been a carriage at one point. She took cover behind it and found that Fluster was already in hiding, scrounging through a pile of rubbish within the shattered carriage.

Once the way was clear, I counted three red dots behind the door leading into the building. Ash and I approached the door, much as we had gotten used to in our time spent in the underground, taking up on either side and waiting to go in, guns blazing. Ivory stood nearby, looking quizzically at us. The griffin held up three claws and slowly dropped them.

Three.

Two.

One.

He made to open the door, but Ivory kicked it in before either of us had started moving. Inside were three raiders who looked up suddenly from where they sat eating some horrid looking food, shock etched into their faces. In one corner lay the desecrated corpse of a mare. That was apparently all the justification that Ivory needed.

The pale mare opened up, the machine gun roaring in the doorway as it threw hot lead into the interior. The raiders had just begun standing and pulling out their weapons as the first bullets slammed into them, ripping into flesh and shattering bone.

They were dead within seconds, but she sprayed bullets into their bodies just to make sure.

“Ivory! IVORY! That thing is really loud!” I shouted her name over the din, trying to get her attention away from the twitching lead sponges. Eventually she stopped, laughing to herself a bit as the smell of cordite filled the entryway.

“Wow, that is so much more satisfying to do that to raiders.” The grin on her face was one of a deep felt blood lust. I’d sort of expected her to react differently at killing a pony, but this was understandable considering her history.

Fluster slipped past us quickly as we sort of stood there, gaping at Ivory and the shredded raiders. Ash was the first to speak as I watched the robed mare begin picking through the leaking pony corpses. “So.... yeah. It would be great if you told us before you did that next time.”

We’d built how we would handle the wasteland entirely on the basis that only the Ash and I could fight. Ivory was an not part of that. It had just come as instinct to Ash and myself, both of us being seasoned fighters, but Ivory had surprisingly little dealings with non-gnasher hostility. This mare was new to how the surface world worked and had to be taught.

I shook my head slightly. “Ash, I think it would be good if you taught Ivory how we do this.”

The griffin, arms crossed and a skeptical look on his face, slowly nodded in agreement and pulled the pale mare to one side. Fluster trotted back out into the street, her looting of the corpses complete, and I saw Shade approaching me from her hiding place behind the rusted hulk.

Once Ash and Ivory returned from the impromptu strategy session, it was deemed by myself and the griffin to clear out of the area as fast as we could. Gunfire would attract the attention of any other raiders that happened to be in the area, and it had now been revealed that Ivory was a bit of a loose cannon. The last thing we needed was a drawn out engagement.

At our increased pace, it was a short while before we came to the edge of Hornsmith. Unlike the east, where there was a long stretch of nothing, there was what looked to be a forest just a short distance past the edge of town. I’d never seen a forest before, not a real one, but part of me knew I’d seen one in picture books as a young colt. This one was not like the book though. Where the book forest was green and vibrant, with happy animals running through it, this forest was dark and dead, filled with nothing but shadows and menace.

Shade and Ivory stopped and gasped, their jaws wide open. Ash chuckled and waved a hand out at the forest. “What, never seen a forest before? You should see the Everfree, this is nothing.”

Ivory took a bit of time to close her mouth before she answered him. “I’ve... never been outside Hornsmith before. I knew it existed but... it’s just, wow. It’s so big.”

Ash snorted back a laugh and looked at the mare with a wicked grin. “If I had a cap for every time I heard that...” Ivory gave him a curious look while Shade began blushing deeply. I chuckled slightly. Fluster shook and rustled, which I could only assume meant she was laughing silently.

We burst out laughing, even the usually silent Fluster. Shade even let out a few nervous chuckles. As we began walking into the expanse of land between urban and forest, Ivory followed after us.

“What’s so funny? Tell me!”

Entering the forest was like being on a completely different planet, one made of bone and ashes. Most of the trees had been bleached white, dead for centuries and with no sign of continued life. The balefire radiation had completely killed this land, leaving only the scoured skeleton of a once beautiful forest.

The wind had picked up, howling through the trees in a mournful wail. The rattling of tree limbs and the calls of some distant creature completed the ambiance.

This was the creepiest place I'd ever been.

There was a thin layer of damp ash covering everything, piled against trees and forming small dunes against what had once been bushes, a soft gray paste. It was here that I first saw how many raiders had passed this way. Even with the wind, the passage of a good many ponies could not be hidden and I found dozens of trails. They were just so obvious.

"So.... we really have to go through this? Can't go around?" Ash had not been liking this forest. He'd muttered something about his people being born for the skies, much as he had when we'd entered that elevator in the headquarters and had muttered occasionally during our time in the underground. I had thought that being out here would help his fear, but the strange feeling of being outside yet still contained was quite pervasive out here.

Lifting my leg and checking my PipBuck, I nodded to the skittish griffin. "Yep. Orchard's still a ways, but it's a lot faster to get there through here." Pointing straight ahead through the trees, I tried not to think about how big this forest was. If it weren't for the PipBuck, somepony could get very, very lost in here.

Ivory trotted ahead of us, tossing her mane as she went. "Come now Ash, it's only a couple trees. I find it rather cozy, certainly better than all of that open sky.."

I caught the glance he threw towards her as she led the way, a warning glare. So this was what I was going to have to deal with. A creature of the skies and a pony that grew up underground. A winning combination.

Sighing, I felt the warmth of Shade as she leaned into me. Looking at her, I noticed her eyes were wide and darting about at any movement in the forest. With the wind and the branches, there was a fair amount. I nuzzled her neck slightly and smiled at her.

"Hey, don't worry. We'll be fine."

I was trying to convince myself as much as I was her. If these woods were filled with raiders or who knew what else, there was a good chance we wouldn't be.

As we walked, I kept a careful eye on my E.F.S. The bleached trees were easy enough to see around, but so many of them in every direction made it hard to see for very far, and if there were hostiles I'd probably not even see them until they were right on top of us. Magical assistance was the only way I could see that happening at this point.

Ash had been nestling his rifle in the crook of his arm, walking upright. I'd never understand why he did that. It just seemed more natural to me to walk on all fours. It must be a griffin thing. Though I understood why he had his rifle out, he wanted to be ready for anything. His other clawed hand was hovering near his revolver, twitching slightly at every sound.

Fluster had run ahead a bit to walk alongside Ivory. Right now, she was the only one of us that was unarmed and was probably better off standing near the armored earth pony, just in case the bullets started flying.

Still, the silence remained broken only by the sounds of the forest.

I only had a flash of red in the corner of my eye as warning before something hit me in the side, throwing me into Shade and knocking her over as I tumbled off of the path, whatever had hit me still clinging to my side. Rolling in the damp ash, my vision was obscured as the goopy paste covered my eyes.

I felt teeth sink into my neck as we landed in a crumpled pile, and I heard both Ash and Ivory open fire, but not at what had hit me. I punched my front hoof at the thing biting into me, hoping to gain enough purchase to push it off or at least get its teeth out of my neck. I kicked up with my right leg, placing a blast from my kick gun into the thing, finally dislodging it.

Pulling myself to my hooves and wiping the muck from my eyes, I saw that we were being attacked by big dogs or something. They looked like they were made out of the same bleached wood as the forest and did such a masterful job of blending into the environment that it was no wonder they'd gotten so close before I'd detected them.

There was a pack of them, circling and taking runs at us. I pulled Broken and snapped it out quickly, firing at one of the creatures as it launched itself at Shade who was pulling herself up off of the ground. The buckshot tore into the thing's face, shredding the wood and spraying sap over the two of us.

Ivory's weapon was making its distinctive chattering sound as she fired bursts at anything that moved, while Ash's more trained eye was picking out his targets with the revolver he had pulled from it's holster, the rifle now slung at his back.

"The fuck are these?!" The griffin shouted out over the roar of the heavy weapon. He'd spent more time in the wasteland than any of us, I didn't know why he would ask us if he didn't know.

I heard Fluster shriek and looked around quickly for her, not seeing her at first but eventually spotting her robed form being dragged off by a larger tree dog. I made to go after her, but another impact from behind me threw me off of my feet. I rolled with this one, springing to my hooves and blasting the offending beast in the face with Broken.

Looking back at where she had been, I saw that the beasts were cutting their losses and pulling off. They were disappearing quickly into the trees now that they had gotten something out of the attack. Desperate animals taking desperate measures to get a meal.

They were not going to keep their prize.

"They got Fluster!"

I began running in the direction they'd gone, Ash and Ivory doing the same. It had only been a short time since she'd shrieked, but I couldn't see her anymore. The creature was moving faster than I'd expected with the smaller mare in it's teeth.

We kept running for a few minutes before finally slowing, the trail all but lost.

"Fuck! Fuck this! I am not failing this job!" Ash punched a talon into a tree, breaking off some of the smaller branches up above with the sudden impact. He was training his neck out, trying to find any hint of the path that our scavenger pony had been dragged along. The retreat of the beasts had left so many paths that it was hard to tell which direction they had really gone.

I saw tears streaming from Ivory's goggles as she came frantically into the clearing. She'd just had her new friend stolen by a pack of vicious animals. She was running around, looking for any sign.

I tried to calm myself, the voice at the corner of my conscious yelling at me despite Shade's proximity to leave the stolen mare for dead and keep moving. I told it to fuck off and went about trying to calmly search for clues.

Surprisingly, it was Shade that found what we were searching for. “There’s blood here!” We gathered around and sure enough, there was a spatter of blood and slight drag marks just off of the clearing we’d stopped in. It looked like Fluster had put up a fight at this point but had been overpowered.

That gave us a direction and we immediately started after Fluster.

Please, please let her be alive.

We began spotting the corpses of other ponies that had come into the woods before too long. Ranging from skeletons to recently shredded corpses, they grew in increasing number as we kept on the path we’d found. None of this was making me feel anything but increasing panic and rage. I could tell that Ash was livid at the prospect of having the pony he’d been hired to bodyguard along with myself stolen and brought to this killing ground.

I remembered to reload my weapons as we went, noting that it would be very bad to run dry while fighting these things. They were fast and damned near invisible until they were right on top of you. Combined with the teeth and the weight they put behind their impacts, I didn’t fancy fighting one up close again.

They also splintered like a bitch, I thought as I pulled several long shards of wood from my neck and flank where I’d been attacked. I was bleeding, and Shade had briefly tried tending to my wounds as we hurried, but had given up as I kept ahead of her. I knew she cared about me, but every minute we wasted there was an increased chance that Fluster would be made into food.

We came upon the cave at the same time that the pack came back to us. Hints of movement heralded their return right before they launched themselves at us, getting a lead response. Four went down immediately, torn apart into so much mulch from the combined fire of three weapons.

Another came at Ash, but he snatched it from the air by the throat with one hand and slammed it into the ground, pressing his barrel against its head and firing. The bullet blew the bleached wood apart, decapitating the beast messily.

Broken fired again and again as I cued up S.A.T.S. I was not a great shot and the time it gave me to line up was a great help. As the world slowed, I could pick out the details on each creature as they came at me. Roots forming into muscle, thorns for teeth, dead leaves as what could pass for fur, glowing yellow eyes. These things were unnatural.

Unnatural or not, they died all the same.

Before long, the attack ceased. It had been much more violent than the first one, but seeing the cave had made me think that this was their home. They were attacking us to protect their home, but they had also taken and likely killed one of us.

An eye for an eye.

Kill them all. Revenge can be so much fun.

The cave entrance was quite dark and I could hear only a faint sound coming from it as we entered its yawning opening. I turned on my PipBuck light and swept Broken around, even as I loaded fresh shells into the breach, looking for any more of the creatures to blow apart. The cave was empty, at least this part of it was, but I spotted a bright red spatter of blood and ran ahead into the depths looking for our companion.

I spotted the crumpled form of Fluster huddled against one wall. Approaching her, I couldn’t help but smile as she turned her head towards me, her gray eye shining brightly in the glow of my PipBuck. I

was smiling because she was alive.

“I found her!”

Her hood was pulled back and in the light I saw her face for the first time. She had a black eye patch over one eye, with a wicked scar peaking around its edges. Much of her skin was covered with cut marks, but only a few were recent, bleeding from her ordeal. Most of the cuts were very old, scars from previous injuries. Scars she did not look accidental. They had been inflicted upon her purposefully.

Her head alone made me look unmarred in comparison. I shuddered inwardly imagining what the rest of her was like.

I took a step back in surprise. “Celestia.... Fluster, what happened?”

She started to speak, a weak voice even for her, but the rest of the group began to arrive. Ash already had a potion out and was holding it to her mouth as soon as he was there, which she drank greedily from, clearly thankful for the help.

Ivory lay down next to the mare, crying steadily but with a huge smile on her face. Another loss so soon after her brother probably would have broken her.

Fluster had long deep cuts in her neck and a dark bruise was starting to form from where the creatures jaws had gripped her. The wounded mare coughed and smiled at us as we gathered around her.

“Timber wolves.... haven’t seen them in a long time....”

The potion began working its magic quickly, many of the smaller cuts closing up before our eyes. She shakily tried to get to her feet, but wobbled and fell.

“Dragged me by my neck... I’ve had worse.”

For the first time, Ivory seemed to notice the scars covering her friends exposed coat. “Fluster... what happened? There are just... so many scars.”

Fluster sighed visibly, wincing slightly. “I had a rough childhood. Abusive sister. I don’t... don’t really want to talk about that right now. Let’s just get out of the den before they come back.” She reached back and pulled her hood back over her head, obscuring her face and many, many scars from us once again. I now knew why she kept herself covered so thoroughly, which dismissed my theory that she was doing it for increased sneakiness.

Ash helped her to her hooves and we escorted her from the cave, back into the bone forest. There was no sign of any more timber wolves outside, save for the bodies left over from the brief fight. We stood there for a minute, gathering ourselves up for the continued trek through the forest, Fluster visibly regaining strength. Her wounds had apparently been mostly superficial; I remembered the nail bomb and how little the potion had really helped me.

A sound behind me caused me to whirl around, aiming Broken at the source, ready to blow any predators away with a load of buckshot. I held off on pulling the trigger at the last second as I saw what it was.

A small timber wolf, a puppy... or sapling, I wasn’t quite sure... had left the cave and was staring up at us. It wasn’t baring its teeth or retreating back into the cave, but just staring at us. I felt a brief pang of guilt, but crushed it. They had taken Fluster, they had brought this upon themselves.

Before I could react, Fluster walked past us and held out a hoof to the small wolf. It sniffed at her and gave a small lick with a tongue that looked like a thick leaf. She was being awful friendly with the offspring of what had been dead set on eating her just minutes before.

Mares. They could drive a stallion mad.

Ivory trotted over to Fluster and the wolf, making a small cooing noise. I looked at Ash with a bewildered look on my face, but the griffin just returned it and gave a very animated shrug. Good, so it wasn't just me.

"So... yeah, about that whole leaving thing." I had to remind Fluster of her idea to head back on our way. It was still a bit of a way to get to Orchard. We began walking north again, back through the muck and trees. After that fight and the chase, we were all coated with the wet ash slurry by, which was helping out with our camouflage, just as it had the timber wolves. Well, that was a bonus at least.

Crimson Knife would have a heart attack if she saw us now.

Our formation was changed now, as we walked. Fluster, clearly the weakest member of the party in the eyes of a predator, was walking right between Ivory and Ash. Shade and I were bringing up the rear, as usual. There was a sixth member who had been tailing us for some time now, but I found that it was just better to ignore.

Every time I glanced back, I saw the pup following us at a distance. He had been ever since Fluster had shown him kindness. It still made me nervous, but the little monster didn't seem to be a threat. It had made no hostile gestures and Ash even seemed content to let it follow along.

We were travelling parallel to a raider trail we'd discovered earlier, staying off of the path in case we came across any of the unsavory types that used it. Ash kept glancing over towards the raider trail, his height giving him a better vantage point than the rest of us.

We were in for a few more hours of walking.

The sun, wherever it was, was setting. Ivory had slid her goggles up onto her head, the faded light much more to her liking. We'd have to stop and rest soon, probably for the night. I didn't want to be wandering aimlessly through the woods in case we stumbled across another den of timber wolves. They'd been hard to see in the daylight, in the dark they must be almost completely invisible.

"Keep your eyes out for a safe spot for the night. A cave, a fallen tree, a three star hotel, anything will do." This had come from Ash. The griffin was apparently thinking along the same lines as myself. The light was fading fast.

Before long, we found a cave similar to the one that the timber wolves had been using as their den. This one was mercifully free of corpses and tree dogs, which was a spot of luck on our part. Entering the cave, I couldn't help but notice that it was much smaller than the other. It didn't go in quite as far and the opening wasn't nearly as large. These were good things though, it made the cave much less of a target for passing raiders who may have the same idea as us. If they couldn't find it, they couldn't find us.

I had my PipBuck light on for the members of the party that were not subterranean dwellers, and we entered the cave. From the entrance, I heard Ash stop and call in after us. "Hey, I'll take first watch. You guys get some sleep... I'll wake one of you up in a few hours."

I knew that that one would be me. Not that I minded.

We lay down in various parts of the cave; Ivory as far in as she could go, Fluster curled up behind a small outcropping that provided her with cover, and myself against one wall. Shade, naturally, curled up next to me, pressing against me for heat and comfort. It was comfortable in the cave, free of the muck that we'd been walking through for hours and protected from the wind that just would not cease to blow.

I fell asleep quickly to the tune created by the three softly snoring mares.

I felt a sharp jab in my side, causing my eyes to snap open and Broken to float from its holster, pointing into the face of my attacker. It was quickly pushed aside as Ash's dark face slowly came into focus.

"Whoa, cool it, Kick. Time for you to sit watch, I gotta sleep." He gestured behind him at the entrance to the cave, beyond which was the dark forest. I yawned widely, much louder than I had anticipated, and I felt Shade jerk awake. She looked around in a short panic before her eyes settled on the griffin and me, then she smiled and let out a small yawn. Ash gave a short wave, then walked away from us and lay down against the wall closest to the entrance.

"I gotta go take watch. You get some sleep." Standing, I left the blue mare curled up on the cave floor, watching me as I walked away from her to take up my shift on watch.

At the cave entrance, I leaned up against a rock and floated Broken out in front of me, keeping it on my front legs just in case I needed to get it quickly. I'd been getting better at quick drawing it, but it would never be faster than already having the weapon out.

I couldn't see much in the forest, my vision only cutting a short ways into the trees before everything just became a solid wall of darkness. Ivory probably would have been a better choice for this, but I'd seen how easily the mare could get distracted. Guard duty was not for her.

After a few minutes, I felt what I had been expecting. The warmth that comes from a body pressing up against my side. Shade had followed me out and went back to her place at my side. "I wondered how long it would take you."

Looking back into her eyes as I spoke, I paused long enough to stare at them. I really doubted I would ever see anything as beautiful as her eyes out in the wasteland for the rest of my life, and I'd been taking every chance I could to further burn them into my memory. If I had it my way, they would be the last thing I thought of before I died. If that was tomorrow or thirty years away, I wanted those eyes in my memory.

I looked away after a bit, going back to my duty as a guard. "You should really get some sleep. I'll be right here when you wake up."

She sighed and leaned further into me, curling up. She was asleep in seconds, leaving me alone with the night.

"Hey, Barley, be careful, bro."

The voice caused me to open my eyes, revealing to me several key details.

Detail one: It was morning. I'd fallen asleep on the job.

Detail two: There were three ponies outside the cave, one of them uncomfortably close to me.

Detail three: They were raiders. The one nearest to me had a long, wicked knife in his mouth and he was reaching for my throat with it.

My eyes snapped open and I pulled Broken up, firing it into Barley's lower jaw. The buckshot tore into him, deforming his head and blowing a good chunk of it apart in a spray of blood, brains, and bone. His corpse almost did a full backflip from the impact but landed in a bloody heap with a small squelch of wet ash.

The other two Raiders opened fire on us, but they were really lousy shots. They had bolt action rifles, the both of them, floating next to them with their respective magics. One of their shots grazed along my back, cutting a long line through the skin but not doing any real damage.

Shade had awoken when I'd fired Broken, pulling her pistol with her mouth and firing just as ineffectively at the raiders as they had at me. It caused them to duck slightly as they worked the bolts on their weapons, giving me just enough time to cover the short distance between them and myself.

I could hear shouting coming from the cave and saw the two surviving raiders eyes open wider as they realized that there was more than just myself and Shade. They had hoped that this would be an easy hit that would net them some quick loot and maybe a new slave or two. They were wrong.

Punching my PipBuck clad right leg into the horn of the nearest, I interrupted his telekinetic hold on the rifle before head butting him right in the eye. My horn went in through the soft tissue and pierced bone, driving into his brain pan and spraying me with blood. He dropped to the ground, twitching, dead before he hit the muck.

As I turned to the last raider, he did something I had not been expecting. The rifle thumped into the thick ash and was sucked under with a squelch as he submitted in a position of surrender. I stopped, pulling back before I pulped his head with a kick. Looking back, I saw that Ash and Ivory had emerged from the cave, weapons aimed straight at the cowering unicorn.

“Don't shoot! Okay, okay, I'm beat, just don't kill me.”

I holstered shotgun, which had been floating quite near his head with the trigger partially depressed. Using my magic, I plucked the two fallen rifles out of the grime, tossing them towards the cave where Fluster all but pounced upon them.

Approaching the buck, I checked him for any other weapons. He looked well-fed for a raider, which probably meant he was one of Massacre's on their way to Orchard. Other than the rifle I had already dealt with, I could find no weapons on him though. Raider armor didn't leave much room to hide anything.

Ash approached, holstering his rifle and drawing the revolver. When he got in range of the now shaking buck, the barrel of the weapon was pressed firmly into the raider's forehead, right below the horn. The griffin grinned into the unicorns face, predatory eyes staring into terrified ones.

“So. Where you headed?”

The raider's eyes opened wide as the griffin asked him and he shrank back. He looked to Ivory, then to Shade, then to myself, in rapid succession, possibly asking us silently for help. I shook my head and smirked. Ivory laughed as well and spoke at the terrified unicorn in a low growl. “I'd answer him. He hasn't eaten in a while and he loves the taste of raider. Eats 'em starting at the legs while they're still alive.”

Wow.

Whatever I thought, it worked. His eyes went wide and he started talking. He told us everything he knew. How he and his friends were ordered to head out to Orchard with about a dozen others to reinforce the siege. How there were already about fifty raiders there.

What he told us that I found most interesting, however, was that whoever was fighting back at Orchard was doing a very good job of it, and that the Paragon in charge was Holepunch. When he said that name, I glanced over at Shade who suddenly appeared rather nervous. She didn't like having to face anything from her time in Neighwhere, and the prospect of dealing with a Paragon she knew seemed to bother her quite a bit.

Once he was finished with that and had started telling us about his life before going to Stadium and signing on with Massacre's ponies, I told him to stop. "That's all we need. Now get out of here."

Ash shot me a glance at that, a questioning look in his eye. I shrugged and gestured for him to lower his revolver. He did, but kept it out and pointed at the terrified buck. The raider just stood there, his knees shaking.

I gestured out towards the woods, to the west in particular. "Get out of here. Stop with the raiding, or we'll find out."

He nodded rapidly and started backing away from us. Before he bolted, he slowed and turned towards us, talking rapidly. "What about the wolves? They'll eat me if I'm on my own."

Again, Ivory took the lead on this one. "It's either they eat you or he does! Run little pony, run!"

I had to say, I liked her bloodthirsty side. From the muffled chuckling I heard coming from the dark griffin, he did as well. The raider turned and started running, kicking up ashy goo as he ran. It took him only a short while to disappear into the trees.

Ash let out his laugh and patted Ivory on the head, though she glared at him as he did so. "Nice one on the improvise. I like your style!"

Ivory looked him straight in the face and replied, "What? You don't eat raiders?"

Ash gave her a strange look as she turned and headed back into the cave. I wasn't sure if she was kidding or not; she had shown a naive nature. Eventually, we heard her laughing from the cave, and Ash let the grin creep back onto his face.

Holstering his revolver, he turned to us. "So, let some raiders sneak up on us while we were asleep. Real good guarding there, Kick. Next time, don't let your marefriend cuddle up while you're making sure we don't turn into some raider's plaything." The smile remained on his face as he spoke, but the menace that followed the words made me look away.

Yeah, I'd fucked up. I'd let Shade distract me and had fallen asleep.

"Got it, Ash. It won't happen again." I didn't know what else I could really say, but the griffin seemed to accept it as he nodded his head and walked away. Shade was blushing as she walked over to me and leaned against my side, what was quickly becoming her most frequent show of affection.

"Fluster, anything good?" I spoke to the robed mare who was digging through the belongings of the two dead raiders.

She glanced up at me as she went and shook her head. "Nah, just the rifles and some ammo for them. Low quality rifles, I should be able to part them out when we get back to Underhoof."

I nodded. Whenever that would be, I thought to myself.

"Okay, we're burning daylight. Let's get back on the trail." Ash had rejoined us, having only gone into the cave to grab our bags, which he dropped unceremoniously at the entrance. "Get your stuff, and we'll get going."

I floated Shade's bag onto her and helped her secure it before I put mine on. Ivory had, as far as I could tell, slept with hers on. Fluster... well, I still wasn't really sure where she was keeping all of her stuff.

We set out, leaving the cave to stand watch as the muck slowly sucked two pony corpses into it.

The walk took several hours, but I noticed as we went that the amount of ash mud as well as the

thickness of the trees were beginning to lessen. I guessed that before too long we would be out of the bleached woods and back in the wasteland proper. I'd never thought that I would miss blasted and desolate terrain, but I was getting really sick of these woods.

Fluster, despite my warnings to keep in sight, had spent the last few hours disappearing for short stretches of time, then reappearing with no explanation for where she had gone. I told Ivory to keep an eye on her, but she apparently had not developed the same knack for keeping track of where the smaller mare had gone that I had. Ivory would occasionally just announce to us, "Sorry again," and we'd know that Fluster had slipped off yet again.

After the fourth time this had happened, I stopped the group in a small clearing to wait for the stealthy pony to catch up with us again. It only took a few minutes before she appeared at Ivory's side, looking at us.

"Why have we stopped?"

Ivory jumped and spun in place, facing the mare. "Why? Well, you keep running off? Where are you going Fluster? We're in the middle of the forest."

Fluster looked away for a while, staying silent. Ash stepped up next to her and looked down at her. "With how the timber wolves went after you, don't you think it would be a smart idea if you stuck around. You know, so we don't have to chase after you and hope you aren't getting eaten."

She sighed. "Okay... I'll tell you... well, I'll show you."

Gesturing for us to follow, she headed off into the woods a short distance. We kept pace with her as she looked around. A rustling in the bushes made us stop, Ash and I pulling out our weapons and pointing them at the rustling. Fluster approached, cooing softly. "It's okay. Come on out, Fern."

Fern?

The rustling grew louder slightly and the small timber wolf from the cave emerged as Fluster pulled a small bit of what I could only guess was meat from her robes. The small wolf ate hungrily as she gave it to her.

Ash put covered his eyes with one hand and sighed. "You're feeding it? Great, now it will never leave us alone."

Fluster rounded on him, her single gray eye glaring up at him angrily. "We killed it's family. I owe it this much."

"Owe it? Fluster, its parents tried to eat you. I'm still pulling splinters from that." I didn't like the idea of the timber wolf following us around. It just seemed like it could only bring trouble, if the timber wolves could smell one of their own or something. I didn't know how canines though, I definitely didn't know how plants thought. Put the two together, and it was a complete mystery. Much like Fluster herself.

"Well, I've already named it, so there's nothing you can do about it."

We all sighed, save for Ivory who was already kneeling down and putting a hoof out to the small wolf, who sniffed her while it wagged its tail. Ivory giggled as Fern licked at her.

Great, now we had a pet.

I sighed. "Okay, fine, but keep it subtle. Don't want to get shot because a wolf drew attention to us.

Fluster nodded and went back to Fern. Ivory and Fluster played with the pup for a few minutes before Ash convinced them we needed to keep moving. This time as we walked through the muck, I could

hear a small sound behind us as the wolf made his way through, only barely tall enough to keep himself from being sucked in.

I couldn't help but smile a little, watching Fern keep up. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Shade couldn't help but smile as well as she glanced back occasionally to watch the hopping timber wolf, which was constantly just trailing behind Fluster.

Eventually, I stopped noticing the little creature, and we kept walking towards our destination, which was growing ever closer. My PipBuck showed that we were growing ever closer as well, and we were all beginning to walk just a little faster in anticipation of getting clear of the forest.

Then, just like that, it was over. Walking past a last line of trees, we found ourselves staring out at the broad expanse of the wastes. In the near distance, I could make out a cluster of buildings, most of them taller than the vast majority of Hornsmith buildings.

That must be Orchard.

“Fuck forests. Fuck them sideways.” An unusual amount of profanity came from Ash as he walked ahead of us, stretching his wings and trying to shake some of the caked ash out of them. The rest of us began copying him, trying to get as much of the caked on gray filth off of us as we could.

Even though we'd have to go back through the forest and get just as filthy on our way back. Oh well, we'd cross that road when we came to it. For now, it was all about getting as much off as we could, though Ivory seemed to have a much easier time of it, using the brush that she carried on her at all times to help. Once she was clean, she waited impatiently for the rest of us.

Orchard was just a short walk, and as we made our way there, I sincerely hoped that this trip had been worth it.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as a setting.

Thanks to ErrantIndy for helping with the editing process, he does much and deserves much thanks.

Also, insane amount of props to KibugamiKenzo, who made the first GoC fanart. It's a fantastic piece of Ripple and Kibu gets all of my love for making it. Link is below.

<http://kibugamikenzo.deviantart.com/art/Ripple-Two-kick-finished-288493286>

And then, before I could write the next chapter even, Kibu did one of Cinder Trails.

<http://kibugamikenzo.deviantart.com/art/You-Almost-Burned-Me-289050489>

Amazing.

So yeah, enjoy that art, hoped you had fun reading, and as always, rate/fave/comment/track.

Chapter 9: Orchard

Once, there had been a grand wall surrounding Orchard. Now, it was a long jagged pile of rubble that circled the compound. At regular intervals were the remains of guard towers, mounds of masonry and metal, standing vigil all this time.

Most of the buildings past the wall had held up much better against the corrosive effects of the wasteland. They were not in the design of Hornsmith at all, having a more industrial look to them instead of a bland, uniform one. Pipes ran between most of the buildings, leading to storage tanks and large buildings with smoke stacks.

In the distance, we could hear gunfire. Plumes of smoke marked the location of where, from the sounds of it, there was a heated battle underway. I could make out multiple weapons, ranging from the sharp crack of rifles to the concussive detonations of some seriously heavy ordinance.

Making our way over the rubble was no issue, though Fluster was lagging behind slightly in making sure that her new pet could keep up. Ash kept shooting looks back at her, clearly unhappy about the new addition slowing us down, but I had faith that if Fluster really fell far enough behind us, she would catch up. She seemed to have a talent for staying safe and finding us in nearly any situation.

As we went over the rubble and into Orchard proper, Ivory voiced what I had hoped not to really think about. “So, we just going to walk around until we find somepony that’s not a raider? Is this just... how do you ponies do things like this?”

“Hey, you’re the one that came up with the plan to come out here. You can figure out how we go about this. I’m not exactly...” I paused, looking for the word that worked in this instance

Ivory grinned and looked me right in the eyes. “Eloquent? You’re not exactly the most convincing speaker from what I’ve seen.”

Ash and Fluster nodded.

“Fine then. You can talk to them, Ivory, when we encounter them. Have fun.” My dismissal of speaking duties made her laugh again, clearly enjoying that she was getting to me. Talking wasn’t really my thing. I’d tried to talk Wires down, but he blew us up. Cinder had nearly burnt me to death. Hell, Shade had punched me in the eye.

So talking to ponies caused me physical harm. Good to know.

Turning to the griffin, who had his rifle out and was in the process of searching for any raiders to shoot at, I gestured towards the air. “Ash, lets find out where the fighting is.” He nodded once and with a beat of his wings he took to the sky.

Ash settled in about a hundred feet up, and was looking down the scope of his rifle when a slash of red cut through the air at him. Acting quickly, he spiralled away from the shot, but more tore up from somewhere ahead of us at him, forcing him to go through a series of aerial acrobatics before tucking his wings and dropping to the earth. We rushed to meet him.

When we got there, he was rubbing at one of his arms where he had received a glancing blow from one of the shots. “Fucking energy weapons... sting like a bitch.” He was mumbling to himself, even as Shade pulled out a bandage and began wrapping it around the wound. “So yeah, there’s some cunt rag a block over with a beam thrower. Good aim too. Can’t be a raider.”

“Why’d you rule out raiders?” Ivory was looking past the griffin, waiting for enemies to come

streaming around the corner so that she could end them.

“Too much armor. I didn’t get a real good look at ‘em, but if I had to guess who it was, I hope that I’m wrong. They don’t have any reason to come out this way, the tower was never finished in Hornsmith.” The griffin was rummaging through his bag, looking for something. “Hope I got armor piercing rounds in here, don’t wanna take on Enclave without something that can go clean through.”

That concerned me. Ash had only shown this much wariness for Paragons and elevators, which immediately placed this Enclave on a level of threat above raiders or gnashers.

“Haha, there you are...” The griffin let out a little whoop of victory as he found what he was looking for in his bag and pulled out a few large caliber rounds, which he slid put into his belt for easy access. He then gestured at the rifle. “Tough bastards, the Enclave.”

“So who exactly are the...” I had only just begun asking the question when a small orb bounced off of the wall next to us and landed at our feet. We all looked at it dumbly as it slowly dawned on us that it was a grenade. The red band wrapped around it told me what I needed to know, and I knew that I was not interested in being lit on fire again.

“Fuck!” Ash yelled as we all began diving away from the grenade, grabbing Shade who had finished wrapping his arm, while the rest of us scrambled to get some distance between ourselves and the menacing little orb.

Though we had a small bit of distance between us and the weapon, I still felt about a dozen small bites in my flank as it detonated and peppered the area with jagged shrapnel. Immediately, all that I could think was that I’d had worse. Ivory, however, hadn’t. She started spitting a stream of profanity as blood seeped through her armor in a few places where the shrapnel had gained purchase.

Ash and Shade looked no worse for the wear, having cleared much greater distance than the rest of us. Wings were useful for that.

Then, just like that, I didn’t have time to be concerned for the welfare of my motley band. The raiders were on us, following up their grenade to finish off any survivors.

Surprisingly, none of these raiders had guns or I was sure we would have been killed off almost immediately. They came charging through the smoke of the detonation, screaming and brandishing various sharp instruments of violence. The blacksmiths at Stadium had been busy indeed.

The air filled with screams, bloodthirsty shouts, and gunfire coming from Ivory and Ash. I was still drawing Broken as the first raider to get at me took a swing. I hopped back, the blade scoring along my barding but not doing any real damage. In response, he took a load of buckshot to the face.

I worked the lever, sending an empty casing into the air, just in time for the next two raiders to reach me at the same time. Smart, not coming at me one at a time. Raising my PipBuck arm, I deflected an attack by a wickedly edged slab of metal crudely formed into an axe but staggered under the force of the blow. The second, a smaller, much faster earth pony, managed to get in under my defense and rammed a knife into my shoulder.

The raider let out a whoop of victory, but it was short lived as I slammed my PipBuck down into his head with a crunch. It wasn’t enough to kill him, but he reeled back from the blow, giving me just enough room to make an attack. The raider with the axe was much bigger than his companion and was the much more serious threat, so he was my target.

Swinging Broken around, I smacked him in the eye with the stock of the weapon. His head snapped sideways with the impact, throwing him off balance and sending him crashing into his stunned friend. Broken flipped over in it’s soft grey glow, and aimed directly at the now crumpled pile. Pulling the

trigger, I sent lead ripping into the two ponies, hitting one in the neck and the other in the torso. I chambered another round and fired again, just to be sure. Neither made an immediate attempt to continue their attack on me, so I turned to more pressing matters.

Gripping the blade stuck in my shoulder with my teeth, I wrenched it out. The flash of pain was intense, but brief, and I dropped the blade to the ground with a clatter and spray of blood. It hurt, but it was nothing that a potion wouldn't fix.

Looking back up into the battle, I saw that the raiders had begun fleeing beneath Ivory's withering spray of gunfire. Ash was picking off stragglers, and before I knew it, the fight was over. Shade rushed to my side, checking my cut with the deep concern she had begun showing for all of my injuries. I wasn't sure when she'd designated herself as our medic, being an engineering pony, but she seemed to do a good enough job. Plus, having her near me always upped my mood, which right now had been negatively influenced by the knife that now lay at my hooves.

"A single grenade? I don't think those raiders were very bright..." Ash had begun looting the corpses as had Fluster, who had been absent during the fight. Her little friend was right alongside her, tearing a chunk of meat out of a dead raider. Shade noticed this as well and grimaced before turning her full attention to my knife wound.

I finished surveying the scene before nodding at Ash. These raiders were very underequipped for what I had come to expect. "Maybe they're a scouting party? Not expecting to run into us, but too eager for violence to pass us by?"

Ash covered his eyes and sighed. "Why can't all raiders be alike? Everywhere I go, they act different... Hornsmith may have the numbers, but the quality of crazy is down. You should see the Hoof... Fucking psychos up there."

Shade had finished wrapping my wound and I flexed my shoulder experimentally. It ached, but the magic in the bandages was going to work quickly. I was just forever cursed to be mummified. Her smile as she finished made it all worth it.

Ash tilted his head to the side suddenly. "Hear that? They're coming back.... sounds like they've got friends too."

Ivory perked up immediately at this, she'd been looking a little disheartened when they had turn and run. "Ooh, just when I thought the fun had ended." She smiled and kicked an empty casing on the ground, sending it skittering away.

Ash held up a hand and told the pale mare to be quiet. He listened for a few seconds, the rest of us waiting for him, before he spoke again. "Sorry, pretty mane, sounds like there's a few more than we can handle. I'm guessing they've got guns this time too, so we'd best move on if we don't wanna get killed right here."

She frowned at him, but he stood firmly before slinging his rifle over his back. Then she looked at me pleadingly. "Come on, Rip. We can take them, right?" In response, I glanced at the griffin who was shaking his head and gesturing that we should hurry up.

"I gotta go with Ash on this. He's got more experience with these things than the rest of us. He says it's too dangerous, it's too dangerous." I said this in as conciliatory a fashion as I could, speaking softly.

Despite how worked up she got at the prospect of killing, she took my decision rather well, just huffing a bit and stomping her hooves a few times. "Fine then. We'll just have to kill them later." She flipped her mane and walked past Ash, sniffing derisively at him.

Sigh.

We moved out, deeper into Orchard. As we walked, we discussed what we would do when we encountered whoever had shot at Ash. A pony that heavily armed could be a useful ally, if they weren't Enclave like Ash had guessed. If they were just a group of ponies that had stumbled into a cache of wartime weapons, then they may have thought that Ash was a slaver or a raider. It would make sense if every other griffin that came down this way worked for that Red Eye pony.

Ash, to his credit, was willing to let his recent injury go, but if they shot him again he could make no promises that we wasn't going to turn them into a sieve. The griffin kept flexing his arm as he walked, the bandage hiding the actual injury but I could tell that he was annoyed that it had been magical energy. Those scars don't heal so well. Catching my own reflection in a window as I passed by was proof enough of that.

As we walked, I began noticing an emblem repeating on all of the walls. It was faded, but I could still make out an apple. I was reminded of the starburst I'd seen at the MoAS bunker and the butterflies that I was searching for. "Hey, Ash, is that a ministry emblem?"

The griffin looked at one as we passed it and nodded. "Wartime Technology. They made guns."

Surprisingly abrupt of an answer for the griffin, but it answered what I wanted. So these were Ministry buildings. That was a good sign... now if only I could find those butterflies. Butterflies meant Ministry of Peace, and Ministry of Peace meant whatever Hate had an army of raiders looking for.

Then the griffin's voice cut through my thinking. "Oh, fuck."

I looked up and saw what he noticed. At the end of the corridor we were headed down, a band of raiders was coming into the view. They were heavily armed. Looking behind us, I could make out another group behind us.

We were trapped. Outnumbered and outgunned.

"Oh, fuck." I agreed with the griffin.

"Uh... we can go this way." I didn't even recognize the voice at first. Fluster had not spoken in quite a while. Looking to the side, she was pushing open a door with that big apple emblem on it.

A roar of voices began from both ends of the corridor we were now trapped in and I nodded quickly. A shot skipped off the wall, making Fluster flinch, but then she moved much more quickly and opened the door wide before rushing inside. I pulled Shade through, and Ivory followed behind us. Ash closed the door behind him and immediately went about looking for some way to lock it.

The rest of us were staring at what we'd walked into.

Vast machines filled the space within, none of which I could even begin to guess at the use of. Fluster was trotting forwards, and I could just imagine that her eye was wide with wonder. Shade was the first to speak. "This... this is a weapons factory. I've never seen an ammo press of this size before."

Well, that right there might explain the raider army. Armies needed supplies, and a weapons factory in the wrong hands could do a lot of harm to the wasteland.

If the door was unlocked though... why hadn't they already found this?

I kicked something and looked down, finding a dead raider at my feet. A line of blackened holes were punched into his side, and it looked like he'd been dead for only a few hours. There were other corpses in here as well... all of them similar to the scouting party that had rushed us before. They'd all been gunned down just inside of the factory.

I quickly floated out Broken, scanning the area in front of us. A loud clang from behind drew my attention briefly, but it was just Ash finally engaging the locking mechanism on the large metal door.

His eyes got big as he looked into the room and saw the bodies. Ivory saw them as well and braced herself to begin firing.

“Shade.... Fluster.... get behind us.”

They looked at me and then they noticed the bodies. Shade’s eyes darted up and around the room as she retreated behind us, but Fluster began moving towards one of the bodies to begin looting.

A slash of red barely missed the robed mare and she jumped back a few feet with a small shriek. Coming around the corner was a robotic pony with a glass casing on for a head, a brain visible within. It began firing lethal beams of energy at us, but luckily it had terrible aim.

Ash snapped up his rifle and fired, the heavy round tearing into the brain and destroying it in a spray of metal, water, and grey matter. As the echo of the gunshot reverberated through the building, I could begin to hear metal hoof falls throughout. We’d woken up a 200 year old defense system.

The door behind us began rattling as the raiders reached it. Then the banging started. It was a solid door, but there were a lot of them and it could only resist them for so long.

Ash worked the bolt on his rifle and began walking into the interior of the building. “Come on, we’re gonna die if we stay here. We find a way out, we’ll live longer lives.”

Ash led the way, and Ivory brought up the rear. As we passed the fallen robot, I saw that it had Protectapony written on it in faded letters. Not very creative, but it got the point across.

I was quickly beginning to hate this building. Everything echoed, and we could never tell if another Protectapony was on us until it began firing or we made a visual confirmation. Even the subterranean ponies, being accustomed to the acoustics of a tunnel, couldn’t get a good fix. Every robot was a potentially lethal surprise.

I reloaded as I took down my fourth of the metal monsters. They weren’t very quick, but those beams hurt. They hurt a lot. I’d taken a glancing blow on my rump, which Shade had immediately tried bandaging, but I’d shooed her away.

Then we hit the far wall of the building. It was a blank slab of metal that ran off in either direction with no doors, hatches, windows, or any other discernible way through. As I sighed in disappointment, two things happened.

First, a loud bang echoed through the chamber, from what I could only assume was the raiders finally blowing their way through the door.

Second, a beam of red light sliced out of the darkness to our right and hit Ivory in the face. She screamed and fell to the floor swiping at her face frantically with her front hooves. Ash and I spun and fired into the dark, hoping to down the hidden aggressor before it could do anything else.

Shade and Fluster rushed to Ivory’s side as Ash dropped his rifle and drew his revolver, emptying the chambers in rapid succession. I racked the lever and fired again, this time being rewarded with a flash of sparks and a quick smell of ozone as the robot finally took enough damage to break.

I looked to Ash frantically, yelling at him. “Find us a way out. Any way out!” He nodded and jumped straight up, onto one of the large machines and disappeared from view. I rushed to Ivory’s side, more to make sure that she was still alive than to help. I couldn’t really do anything.

She had stopped kicking and screaming, but was sobbing as Shade made a hushing sound as she gave Ivory a hit of Med-X. Once I saw her face, I sighed in relief. The blow had the potential to be fatal, but the majority of it had been absorbed by her goggles, which were now a half melted ruin laying on the ground next to her. Without them, the beam would have hit her straight in the eye.

At best, she would have received a scar similar to mine. At worst, she would have died instantly. She was missing some fur from right under her eye, a bit of charred flesh visible. That would scar, but it would not be too big. She'd gotten off very lucky, from what I could tell.

From somewhere in the building, I began to hear gunfire and the crackling sound that the Protectapony energy weapons made. It sounded like our hunters had encountered each other, which was good for us. It would thin the numbers, make it that much easier if it came down to us having to fight either.

"Shade, is she good to walk?" We couldn't really go anywhere until Ash came back, but it was important that we were all ready to move when he did find his way back.

The blue mare nodded a bit as she helped the sobbing Ivory to her hooves. "She's just disoriented... maybe in shock. I'm not sure." She leaned in close to Ivory. "Are you okay to walk?"

Ivory sniffed and winced as the skin on her face contorted from the effort. I knew that pain well. Shade began wrapping a bandage over her eye as she wobbled a bit but stood her ground. "Yeah.... I should be okay.... is it bad? My face? Am I gonna look like Rip?"

I snorted a laugh at that. A gunshot to the face and she was worried it had would damage her looks more than anything. "Nah, you won't have a scar near as big as mine. Maybe a little one. Don't worry."

She smiled weakly, tears and blood staining her cheeks. She was going to be fine as far as I could tell.

Then something jumped up and bit me. I yelled and looked at the fresh bullet wound in my side. Fuck. The raiders were now in sight. I aimed Broken down the path between machines and fired at the approaching raiders, sending them scattering into cover as the buckshot ricocheted down the tight alley. The girls took cover, getting as much metal between them and the raiders as possible.

Ivory tried to get into a position to add her fire to my defense but stumbled and fell. Her balance was still off from the wound, which meant that until Ash came back, it was just me against the raiders.

I was not liking these odds.

A small orb bounced once and rolled next to me. I'd been slow to react the last time, but now I knew what to do. I grabbed the grenade in my magic and threw it as hard as I could propel the weapon back the way it came. Two seconds later, I heard a yell followed quickly by a concussive thump as the grenade went off. I was sort of hoping that they wouldn't learn that lesson and keep sending them. Any kills I could make without expending my own ammunition I would take gladly.

The next thing they threw at me were words. "Hey... hey hold your fire! You're Two Kick, right? The Paragon? Why are you fighting us? We're on the same side... aren't we? You're supposed to be friends with Hate."

That made me mad. That made me really mad. I shouted down the alley at whatever pony decided it was safer to try and talk us out of our spot than flush us out with grenades. "Yeah, well if Hate shoots all of his friends in the face, I don't think I really want to be his friend!"

They were quiet for a long time... which was exactly what I wanted. Buy some time. Any time we could get. I had a quick flashback to the last time I'd bought time for Ash to find us an exit. Dragon of fire. Chemical smell. My old marefriend. The bitch that set me on fire.

Shade let out a sharp gasp from where she, Fluster, and Ivory were taking cover, and I whipped around, aiming Broken. Stupid. They'd been flanking us, how had I not thought of that?

A single pony's head was around the corner and I pulled the trigger, blowing it to pieces. The head burst like a balloon filled with bone and meat. I heard a familiar screech and lowered Broken, chambering another round. A torrent of gunfire picked up from back down the alley in response to my

shot, peppering the wall near me with holes and dents.

Ash came around the corner, holding the dead body of the pony, which I could see had had its throat ripped open, as a shield in case I fired again. He poked his head around cautiously and saw me holding Broken at rest. Sighing, he dropped the body softly and gestured that we should follow him. He looked down at Ivory as Shade helped her up and visibly sighed before reaching down and grabbing her up gently.

My concern right now was getting to them. It was only a short distance across to where they all were, but that distance was being periodically filled with flying lead. I pulled open my inventory and started looking for anything. A voice floated into my head and I was surprised to find that it was not the one I'd expected.

It was Traffic. "Buckshot. Slug. Magnum. Incendiary." That's right... she'd given me multiple types of ammo, but I'd been using only buckshot and slug. Right away, I located that I had ten incendiary rounds. All that thought of Cinder lighting me up had produced something fruitful. Thank you, Traffic. I'd have to remember to thank her the next time I was in Blank.

I loaded an incendiary shell and hoped that it would give me the desired effect. I took a few breaths and floated Broken out, low so it wouldn't get hit by a stray shot. Pulling the trigger, I felt the roar of flames that shot down the alley, causing a break in the return fire and a few shouts of surprise.

I rolled quickly across the killing field, over into the safety of the machinery where Ash waited. I nodded at him, and he returned the gesture, before we ran off. He led the way, carrying the armored bulk of Ivory rather gently. That made me think that them shooting barbs at each other constantly was just for show, and that maybe I didn't really need to worry that they were going to end up shooting each other.

What he had found was a wide staircase leading down. It was better than nothing, but as Fluster led the way down I noticed he was lingering at the top. "Oh come on, Ash. It's either down here or die, remember?"

He sighed and began down the stairs after us. I noticed that at the bottom of the stairs, Shade was looking up at us with her hoof resting on the wall. Once Ash was clear of the entrance, she pressed something and two metal doors slid out of the walls, slamming shut and plunging us into brief darkness before several orange lights flickered into being. She pressed another button and the light around the panel she was at went red. I hoped that meant it was locked.

The tunnels were completely different than what I'd gotten used to in the underground of Hornsmith. These ones were much more... industrial. Wires and cables ran all along the walls, faded signs pointed towards different locations. I began looking at them curiously, before a sharp pain drew my attention away.

Oh right, I'd been shot again. Shade was worrying over the bullet hole in my side, wrapping bandages around it to stop the blood flow. I made a note that she should get some actual medical training... maybe I'd leave her with Crimson Knife for a while. Right after I had the teleporting mare dig a bullet or two out of my side.

I went back to looking at the signs. Surprisingly, Fluster appeared next to me, looking at the signs as well. "Huh... these would have helped around Underhoof." She was the expert on tunnels after all. As she looked at them, she stood on her hind legs and tapped a hoof on one of the signs. "Ministry of Peace. This is the one you're looking for." She dropped back down, but as she had reached her hoof out I couldn't help but notice that her leg was just as scarred as her head had been. My theory that she was almost more scar than pony was starting to get a little more fleshed out.

She nodded at me before sticking her head into her robes. I heard a munching sound, which continued after her head had popped back into view in the hood. I realized suddenly that I hadn't seen Fern in a while. She had him in one of her... whatever she had in the robe. She'd just fed the little monster.

I grinned at that though, which got me a strange look from her. I wasn't going to bother her if she was perfectly comfortable keeping a monster that close to her body. She turned and began trotting away from us, down one of the tunnels.

"It's this way. We'd better hurry before they find a way through that door." Ash nodded in agreement with the robed mare, and once he was sure that Ivory could walk, he began following Fluster.

I turned to Shade and gestured towards Ivory with a tilt of my head. "See to her. I'll be fine. She needs your help right now." I nuzzled her neck lightly, and she returned the gesture before trotting off to give the pale mare somepony to lean on. They started trotting down the tunnel after the griffin and robed mare, so I brought up the rear. Those doors were pretty solid looking, and I suspected they'd used most of their heavy ordinance getting the factory doors open, so we should be good for a while.

Still, the possibility of more of those pony robots lurking about down here kept me on my hooves, and I loaded slug rounds into Broken. They just seemed like they would do more damage to the metal bodies of the potential robots.

One thing I was glad of is that Orchard seemed completely free of gnashers. I'd not seen one sign of the beasts, and that was a small comfort. Having to face killer robots, murderous raiders, and an unknown side that had already shot at Ash was all a lot easier to handle without a horde of ravenous once-ponies trying to eat my face.

"This should be it." Fluster's light voice echoed down the tunnel towards me, and I picked up the speed to catch up with everypony. She had found a metal door, exactly like every other one we'd passed down here, save for the fact that it was emblazoned with the triple butterflies. Ministry of Peace. Wonderful.

Shade left Ivory, who still looked rather wobbly but had a smile on her face, and approached the terminal set into the wall next to the door. Activating it, she tapped at a few keys before sitting back and putting her fetlock to her chin.

"Something wrong?" Ash was looking over her shoulder at the terminal. I had no idea how those things worked, for the most part, so it was best if I just sat back.

"It's more complicated than I had thought. I can get it though." She sat there for a few minutes, opening and closing the terminal every once in awhile.

Eventually, the door let out a loud, echoing click. Shade let out a small cheer and stepped back from the door, which Ash pulled open. I held Broken ready, just in case. Ash opening doors always had mixed results.

The open door gave us no surprises, luckily. Inside was the clean white that I had come to associate with Hornsmith MoP facilities. I took lead, walking past everypony, the overall cleanliness of the hall amazing me. In a world of filth, places like this were rare.

Then we came to the elevator.

Glancing back at Ash, I saw that he was nervously itching at his bandaged arm, staring at the elevator. "Ash, we're not all gonna fit in there, so you stay up here with Ivory and Fluster. Keep them safe; we'll be right back."

I pressed the button for the elevator and it arrived after only a few seconds with a pleasant ding. As the doors slid open, Shade and I entered. I looked through the options, and I chose level B4, Research. That's where I'd found the first cube back in the regional headquarters.

Shade sighed and leaned into me. It had been a while since we'd had time to just stand still, and she was taking every chance she could to be near me. I smiled, enjoying this brief interlude. I had no idea what would be waiting for us in the research lab, and it suddenly seemed like a very bad idea to bring Shade with me, pleasant as her company was.

Why did I never think these things through?

A ding heralded the opening of the door, and I braced myself, stepping in front of Shade slightly. Through the door came... nothing. No killer vines, no unstoppable gnashers, just a the slightly antiseptic smell of a Ministry of Peace building.

I took a few cautious steps out, Shade following warily. She was eyeing me strangely, not used to me using actual caution. I grinned at her and began trotting much more confidently down the hall leading to a large room.

I smiled even wider as I rounded a corner and found exactly what I was looking for. There, floating in a magical field much like the first I had found, was a Black Cube. The field meant that it was in stasis, like the first, so I looked around for the head scientists office.

Vines breaking ribs, tearing flesh, crushing bone. Pain, pain, oh so much pain.

I shook my head as the thought slammed through my defenses. Right, I'd forgotten what being around a cube without the safety of the box was like. The one in my bag had given me no issues since I'd placed it the case. Shade normally had an effect that I couldn't explain, but the Cube cut right through it and let the voice out.

You're getting near another one? The fuck is wrong with you?! Do you remember last time! The vines! How can you not hear that noise?!

Shut up. If Hate wants the Cube, I want the Cube. You won't be able to stop me. Once I get it in the box and in my bag, I won't even hear you anymore.

Your little marefriend. I'd sure like to take a tumble with her sometime. How is she? She looks like a screamer.

I began moving faster as the voice started describing, in great detail, what he'd like to do to Shade. Each word made me hate him more.

There, a door with Dr. Ink Quill written on it. Very similar to Blooming Leaf's door. It slid open cleanly, revealing the messiest room I had ever seen. Paper was strewn everywhere, writing covered all the surfaces in the room, even the meager decorations had words scratched into them. That... that seemed a lot more on par with the rest of the Black Cube stuff I'd seen.

"Wow." Shade's voice made me jump, and I found that she was standing next to me in the door entrance.

It would be so easy. You're alone. Go for it. I'll watch, give moral support. Have some fun.

No. That was not going to happen. Shut the fuck up.

I trotted into the room, weaving around stacks of books, piles of scrolls, and heaps of paper. These buildings must have some magical way of stopping decay, or all of these would have been mouldering piles of mush after two hundred years. I could still read what was written on everything... all of it was completely over my head, but the fact remained.

I stepped around the table and found the terminal was luckily the one thing that Ink Quill had not written on. The screen was scrupulously clean. I hit a button on it, bringing it out of sleep mode.

>>Project Brighteyes

>>

>>Good Morning, Dr. Ink Quills

>>

>>Please Enter Password

>>

Well, shit.

“Shade, we need to look for a password.” I started making my way towards the nearest stack of paper, but she coughed lightly and I looked back. Her hoof was pointing at a spot on the table where I could make out something carved. Password: Vivid.

Wow. Ink Quills was the least secure pony ever.

I returned to the terminal and tapped that in. The machine beeped at me and scrolled new text.

>>Project Brighteyes

>>

>>Current Status: In Stasis, Awaiting Transport

>>

>>Menu

I hit menu, pleased that the Cube was already packed up and ready to go. I’d be able to get it from the terminal attached to the pedestal it floated over.

>>Personal Letters

>>

>>Unlock Safe

>>

>>Communication

I grinned and hit the option for the safe, hearing a light click behind me. The last one I’d opened had held the black case built for the Cubes, and I couldn’t help but wonder what treasures awaited me this time.

Inside the safe was single solitary orb. I paused, looking at it for a long time. The image and feeling of the vines was fresh in my head, as the voice was still reminding me of what had happened. He was really desperate for me to get out of here, leave the Cube, and do some fairly unspeakable things to the pretty blue mare at my side.

I shook my head again and carefully rolled the orb into my bag. I’d watch it later. Going back to the terminal, I opened the section called Personal Letters and discovered, much to Shade’s giggling amusement, that Ink Quills, a stallion from what I could make out, was in a rather complicated relationship with a pair of twin pegasi. Glancing through the first email made me blush rather heavily. He was not exactly subtle on what he did with each of them.

“Okay, that’s all we need here.” I stepped away from the terminal, though Shade lingered briefly, her eyes reading the text with her mouth agape. I cleared my throat, and she looked up, blushing deeply. She smiled and trotted over to me. The look in her eyes was an odd one, almost predatory. Great. I couldn’t even tell if my ‘great’ had been sarcastic or not.

Mares.

Approaching the center of the room, I felt a deep sense of unease creep into my head. That would be the cube. It wasn’t as strong as Greenhoof had been, but I assumed it meant that Brighteyes was much

less hostile. I sure hoped that that was the case.

“Ripple... what is that? I... I feel funny.”

I turned to her slightly as I approached the Cube. “Don’t worry about that. It will go away in a little bit...”

I activated the terminal and found that is was indeed what I was looking for. All I had to do was press a button and the magical aura around the Cube went down. Done.

The feeling in the room intensified as the field went down, and I wasted no time in pulling out the black case containing the other Cube. Once I got both in there, I could close it, be free of the feeling and we could get on our way. Ash was surely getting antsy waiting for us to return. I flipped the case open and....

Everything went white.

I stood in nothingness, stretching off into infinity.

“What the fuck?”

My voice echoed everywhere, louder than I had meant for it to be. This had taken me by surprise. Was I dead? Unconscious again? No... I wasn’t unconscious, this didn’t feel like that.

“Well, who do we have here? You’re my savior then? A pony. Such a mess of a pony.”

I looked around sharply, trying to find the voice speaking to me. It was coming from everywhere. I sighed, looking at my hooves.

There were a pair of eyes directly underneath me, staring up into my own. I jumped back and reached for Broken, but found that I had nothing. I was naked. That was not a good sign. I watched as the figure slithered up out of the white nothingness, taking the form of a creature I had seen hints of in a memory orb.

A Draconequs.

“Yes. That is I. My name, my messy pony, is Pandemonium. I am so delighted to finally get a chance to pull myself together enough to introduce myself. I tried talking to the other you, but he would have nothing to do with me. Rather rude, I must say.” The creature stroked a thin beard as he spoke, towering over me. He gestured to the side and I saw myself, but not myself. A wild, drug crazed look, a long mane, covered in bandages. This was the old me. He was shouting something at me, but I couldn’t hear it. Was that what the voice in my head really looked like?

I backed away from Two Kick, but Pandemonium swept in between us and took up most of my vision. He looked quite capable of ripping me apart with no real effort. I stared at the wicked claws tipping one of his limbs. “Where am I?”

He laughed. “Oh, you’re in your head. I’m there too, for now. Well, half of me is, the other half is off somewhere, but I believe that you know where that somewhere is. So no, I won’t be ripping you apart. You can help put me back together.” The creature slithered through the air as he spoke, moving like a serpent in water. Grinning, almost as if at the analogy, he spiralled around me faster than I could react and held me there, putting us face to face.

“You’re what Hate wants, aren’t you?” I glared at him, but I wasn’t sure that I would be able to intimidate this thing.

Pandemonium chuckled. “I suppose. Ever since I stepped foot on your cursed little chunk of land, ponies have wanted what I can provide them. Then...” His eyes narrowed into vicious slits. “Then, they

found a way to actually get me. These cubes. Break me apart, harness my power without my consent.”

Then he grinned, a sickening expression on his face. “You though... you are halfway there. If you get me the other two, I can get out of this fractured prison and leave your accursed race. Of course... I’d reward you quite handsomely.” He snapped his fingers and the white nothingness changed.

We were standing in what I had a strong feeling was Neighwhere. An army of ponies, heavily armed and standing in ranks, lay out before us. Pandemonium put a claw on my shoulder and guided my view towards a tower.

Atop that tower, I saw myself. I was slightly older, but dressed up rather nicely. I saw Shade standing next to the other me, smiling happily. I saw Ash, Ivory, and Fluster. They all looked different, wearing armor bearing a mark of two hooves.

“I could make you a great leader. A king. You could unite the wasteland, bring Ponykind back to it’s former glory.” He snapped his claws again, and this time I found myself in a warm house. Shade was there again, along with two fillies. “I could destroy your enemies and let you live a life of peace. Have a family. Children.”

I reached a hoof towards one of the fillies that approached me before Pandemonium snapped his claws again, bringing us back into the blank nothingness. “I could do so much for you if you put me back together.”

I was in shock at what he had shown me. I wasn’t doubting that he had the power to pull these things off, but I was severely skeptical that he would just reward me and leave. If I had been broken into fourths and used against my will, I would want revenge.

“True, I do want revenge, but it would not be on you. Most of the ponies I want dead are long gone. All that would really hold me up is....”

Then, the white world was gone. My eyes snapped open and I looked up into the concerned gaze of Shade. She held the closed case in her mouth. I couldn’t feel the aura of discomfort. She had put the second cube in the case and sealed it.

“That’s my girl.” I coughed and rolled over to get up. As I stood fully, she ran up and kissed me hard. My eyes went wide, but then I settled into it. It was nice.

When she stopped and backed away a bit, I reached down with my magic and picked up the case she had dropped in her rush to my face. Placing it in my bag, I grinned at her. “So, what was that for?”

She smiled and giggled. “You called me your girl.”

I chuckled and rubbed my mane sheepishly. “Yeah. I guess I did.” We’d never really made us an official thing, but I guess that I just had with those words.

She smiled, but then the smile dropped back into her concerned look. “What happened? You just fell over... I scrambled to get the Cube into the box, and then you woke up. What was that?”

I shrugged. “I guess it just got to me, that feeling. I’ve had nothing but trouble from these Cubes, but I gotta keep at it if I want to stop whatever Hate is planning.” For some reason, I didn’t mention Pandemonium. It didn’t seem like telling Shade was the best idea, it would only cause her to worry more. I’d figure out what to do... how to handle his offer. Then I’d tell her.

It was just a matter of time.

I turned away from the pedestal and gestured with my head that she should follow me. She smiled softly and trotted after me, catching up and leaning into me as we walked. I smiled, but my mind was elsewhere. If I got all four Cubes... I could fix the wasteland. I could get rid of ponies like Hate. I

would potentially be unleashing something much worse... but that was only if Pandemonium was not good to his word. Maybe he really did want to just get out of Equestria. He'd been trapped here for a long time.

"Really, is something wrong?"

Shade. Always there to bring me back to reality. I found we'd been standing at the elevator and I'd been lost in thought. I shook my head. "No, I'm just working out what we need to do next in my head. Lets get back to the others... Ivory's better at planning than I am."

Shade giggled lightly and hit the button to summon the elevator. It dinged open and we walked in. We'd come into the building in the second basement and that was the floor we told it to return us to. As the elevator began ascending, I thought about what they must be doing up there right now.

I assumed that by now Fluster had torn everything not nailed off the walls and shoved it into her robes to sell at a later date. Ivory would be watching this out of the corner of her eyes, while staring into a reflective surface somewhere and making sure that she could work with the damage done to her face. Ash would be pacing, waiting for us to return so that we could get back above ground, as unsafe a concept as that actually was.

When the door opened, I did not see what I had expected. Two grey metal ponies, quite different looking than the Protectaponies were staring at us, the barrels of some heavy duty weaponry pointed straight into my face. Behind them, I could make out one other, as well as Ash and Ivory unconscious on the floor.

I reached for Broken, hoping to get it out before they could fire, but there was a flash of blue light from one of their weapons and everything went dark.

Fuck.

When I eventually drifted to, I found that I was staring into a very bright light. I was tied up. Worst, I was unarmed.

"Ah, you're up. Good, I've been getting impatient."

A mare's voice came from somewhere in the room, but I couldn't see anything other than that light. I tried talking, but I just burst into a fit of coughing instead. My sides hurt, quite a lot. It felt like a rib was broken.

"Oh, don't worry about that. You and the griffin were heavier than the others. We used a robot to get you here, it was a bit bumpier than if one of us had done it."

I calmed the coughing fit and choked out the first thing I could. "Who..."

"Who are we? I guess we really don't have much of a presence in Hornsmith do we. We..." She stepped into the light and I saw a mare wearing that heavy armor from before, but with her head exposed. Light yellow coat, brown eyes, and a brown edged white mane. She had a grin on her face, clearly enjoying the unveil. "...are the Orchard chapter of the Steel Rangers."

I stared dumbly at her. I couldn't do much else. Whatever they'd knocked me out with was taking a really long time to wear off.

"Oh, don't worry. The stunner wears off fine."

I coughed again. "Why..."

She beat me to it again. She was clearly enjoying herself. "Why did we knock you out instead of kill

you? We've been watching since it was reported there was a griffin in Orchard. The band of raiders at the gates don't have quite the clout for that, so we assumed that you were either an elite raider group, meant to get in the sides and take us out with a flanking maneuver.... or you were a random group of scavvies in the wrong place at the wrong time." She laughed a bit. "Oh, were we surprised to find that you were the latter."

A door opened and I heard somepony else enter, heavy metal hoofsteps betraying that the newcomer was armored as well. A deep, gruff voice filled the room. "Knight Lemon Meringue, stop badgering our guest." A third pony entered, much more softly than before, and I saw a robed figure approaching me. For a second, I thought that it was Fluster, but no, the colors were all wrong.

The third pony had a tray of medical supplies and fed me a potion, which I did not fight back against. I instantly felt better as my damaged ribs started healing themselves, and my head started clearing up.

"Turn that off. Get some real lighting in here... you and your show."

I heard Lemon Meringue walking away from us, grumbling under her breath. "Yes, Star Paladin Broken Arrow..."

The bright light turned off, plunging us briefly into darkness, before overhead lights flickered into brilliance, illuminating the room. Star Paladin Broken Arrow was rather more intimidating than Lemon Meringue, though he had his helmet on. At his side was a huge single barreled weapon, a missile launcher counterbalancing it on the other.

"Now, who are you and what are you doing in Orchard? You came here with a purpose, and I want to know what that is."

I took a few deep breaths and found that I could not do it without the coughing fit. "We... we're just scavengers. Heard there was a Ministry of Peace building out here, came to take a look. We just want to find some medicine to take back home."

He chuckled throatily. "You're not very good at lying, Rip. Yeah, already talked to your friend Ivory. She was very forthcoming. You think that we could be allies. We have a common enemy. That's what you came out here for. She was a little vague on what you were looking for in the Peace building, but that's what I want you to tell me."

Fuck. Well, there goes my plan.

"Fine.... I was looking for a little black box."

He looked at me for a while, his eyes obscured beneath the glass of the helmet. "Did you find it?" I couldn't tell if this was a baited question. He'd already caught me lying once, I wasn't sure what he would do if he caught me a second time.

"Yes."

He nodded. I could hear muffled talking coming from his helmet and a few seconds later, the robed pony from earlier came in, carrying the black case.

"So, that would mean that this is what you came all this way for."

I nodded.

"Well then. I believe that we can reach an agreement." He turned and began walking from the room. Opening the door, he turned and looked at me. "Knight Lemon Meringue, take our friend and rejoin him with his companions. Get them fed and cleaned up. I'll be having a chat with them before too long."

I heard the show mare's voice from the hall and she walked in, untying me and helping me to my hooves. She was surprisingly dextrous for a pony encased in a tank. "Come on, lets get you to detention."

She led me out into the hall, which had the industrial feel of the factory we'd found ourselves in previously. As she marched me down the hall, I couldn't help but wonder exactly what we were being forced into.

This was definitely not the alliance I had hoped for.

Fuck the Steel Rangers.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as a setting.

Thanks to ErrantIndy for helping with the editing process, he does much and deserves all of the thanks.

Kibu, the amazing artist that he is, did a picture of our fine feathered friend Ashred as well.

<http://kibugamikenzo.deviantart.com/art/Ashred-the-griffin-291448478>

Then, as always, fav/track/comment/rate.

Chapter 10: Leverage

I wasn't sure why the building we were in had cells built into it. Whatever the reason, there were several rooms complete with thick metal bars and uncomfortable cots never actually designed to be slept on. Most of the lights were burnt out or broken, but the sole survivor against the test of time was doing its best to cast illumination into as many parts of the area as possible.

Pacing in one was a very grumpy-looking griffin. I'd never seen Ash without his weapons before, but the predatory air about him was not at all damaged. Flexing his claws, his eyes darting back and forth, looking for any chance of escape. He was one unhappy bird.

I was thrown into a cell across from Ash's, containing another pony. A pegasus. He was either unconscious or dead, so I stayed away. Lemon Meringue left the room in a huff, angered that she had been relegated to what was essentially a delivery job.

"Ripple!"

I glanced around and found Shade in the cell next to mine, alongside Ivory. Trotting over, I nuzzled her through the bars for a few seconds before looking more thoroughly around. "Are you okay?" She nodded with a small smile.

"We're fine too, Kick." Ash's voice came from across the room, where the griffin had now taken to blending into the shadow. I could make out his golden eyes in one corner of his cell, but not much else was visible.

I nodded. "Good to hear." I was getting to that part. Glancing around, I noticed something was off. "Where's Fluster?"

Ivory responded from the same cell as Shade, where she lounged on a cot, with the dismissive wave of a hoof. "She took off right before the steel ponies showed up. Haven't seen her since."

"How did they get the drop on you guys? Doesn't seem like a pony encased in metal can do much sneaking." Ash wasn't the type to let something get that close to him. The grenade when we'd gotten into Orchard had been a rare lapse in his sensory abilities, but he'd been injured.

"We were just waiting around for Fluster to come back from wherever she'd gone, I assume she went scavenging. A door opens, and these metal ponies come rushing in. They start zapping, that's the last thing I remember before waking up here." Ivory still hadn't gotten up, just laying there. I saw that the wounds she'd gained from the shrapnel had been healed, she had some plain gauze wrapped around her chest, but her eye was still bandaged.

"Come on, can ya keep it down a bit, my head is killing me." I spun at the voice, not being one I recognized, ready to do some kicking. I may be unarmed, but I could still kick with the best of them. The pile of pony in the corner, the pegasus I'd noticed before, was looking back at me. He made no effort to get up, just rubbed one of his eyes sleepily. "I'm a little hungover... the noise isn't helping."

I stepped towards him cautiously. Had he been listening to us, or had he really just woken up? "You would be?"

He stumbled to his feet, wobbling a bit before leaning against the wall. Giving a little salute, mockingly, he introduced himself. "Crash Course. Scavenger." He licked his lips a bit and looked around. "There anything to drink around here? Whiskey maybe?"

I sighed. Great, I was locked up with a drunk. Then his eyes settled on Ivory and opened wide. He

stood, ran a hoof through his mane, and started trotting towards her. She looked at him suspiciously as he got close and started grinning. “Hey there, pretty eyes. What is a beautiful thing like you doing locked up in a place like this?”

Ivory sighed and turned away from him with a snort. I think she was still sensitive about the eye wound. I looked at Crash Course, shaking my head. “Back off. Don’t you have more important things to think about, like how you’re going to get out of here?”

“Hey, Kick, you want to change cells? I haven’t eaten a pegasus in a while.” Crash’s eyes shot open and he glanced over at the griffin, who was now up against the bars of his cell, staring at the winged pony with a hungry look in his eye. I’d seen that look. He was kidding, but I doubted Crash would know that. Crash shrank back, getting the hint.

“So...” His voice cracked a bit as he spoke, but at least he was on a different subject. “What are you folks in for? Don’t look like raiders.... too many pretty mares.” A glare from across the room made him wince. “The Rangers don’t normally take prisoners... I mean, unless they think they can get something out of them.”

True, I was waiting for Broken Arrow to tell me why he had kept us alive instead of shooting us all, but I couldn’t fathom what the Rangers could want from a drunken pegasus letch. Now that he was closer and in the light, I could make out his cutie mark. A brick with wings. Didn’t even need to ask for an explanation on that one. His bronze coat and black mane made him look like a rusted piece of metal.

“We were scavenging scrap. They caught us as we were evading raiders. Similar story to yourself, I believe.” I’d told the Rangers what we were looking for because they could have killed all of us without even trying. I could likely turning this pony into a fine paste. He didn’t need to know about the Cubes or the Ministry of Peace.

“Ponies of a like mind. I like that. Where you based out of? I stop though Blank every once in a while, but most of my haunts are up north. Mostly around Cowloon. Crazy town.” I was beginning to regret waking this pony up. He just kept talking.

Eventually I held up a hoof to cut him off. “Listen, Crash, could you just... stop talking?”

The pegasus halted mid sentence, his face freezing as it was. He looked at me and closed his mouth slowly, nodding. “Sorry... I talk too much sometimes. Auntie Mooriel always said that, then she’d shoot at me. She always missed though, that’s how I knew she was joking.” The look in my eyes made him stop talking. Slowly, he turned from me and went back to his spot in the corner, laying back down.

A few more minutes of being near Shade, that was all I wanted. I got what I asked for, at least for a little while before we were interrupted. Lemon Meringue came stomping through the door, another armored pony following behind her carrying a blocky weapon I couldn’t name. Ash perked up immediately and was against the bars, gesturing with one talon at his bandaged arm.

“You! You shot at me! That hurt, you scrap metal fuck!” If Ash could have torn through the bars and gotten at the armored pony with his claws, he would have.

The pony responded with an amplified chuckle. “Heh, you were just too good a target. Big and fat in the sky. Been a while since I got to shoot at a griffy. Heh, my aim was just a bit off, got soft shooting raiders. I won’t miss next time.”

Lemon Meringue looked back. “Notches, back down. Star Paladin Broken Arrow wants them alive for now. Give it some time.”

Notches, the armored pony with the laser, snorted and stood aside. Lemon opened my cell, and then she opened Ash’s cell, keeping a close eye on the angered griffin. Ash glared at Notches, flexing his claws,

but held back from attacking. Notches just aimed the blocky rifle attached to his side at Ash, practically begging him to make the first move.

With a cough, Lemon broke both of their attention, before she began herding us out the door. Ash and I walked side by side, with the two Rangers following behind us. Lemon guided us by telling us what turns to take, what doors to go through. In the halls, I spotted a few other robed ponies, but very few armored ponies. I assumed they were all outside, keeping an eye on the raider army looking for ways in.

Eventually, we came to a room occupied by the armored Ranger in charge and another of the robed ponies. Our weapons and equipment were laying on a pair of tables, spread out. They'd clearly gone through and cleaned out anything that they deemed we wouldn't need. My shothooves, the black case, and Broken were all there though, which brought a smile to my face. Ash's rifle and revolver were also present. Our medical supplies were untouched.

"That shotgun of yours Rip. Very interesting piece of hardware. My scribes couldn't quite place where it came from. Would you happen to know? Enlighten us?" Broken Arrow still had his helmet on, his voice distorted and amplified. I shook my head, glaring at him. Even if I knew how I'd gotten Broken, I wouldn't tell them.

"You're not very helpful, are you? You're lucky we can use you, or we'd have taken your leg off to get that PipBuck there. It does tell me a lot about you though." He approached the two of us, standing there in the middle of the room under armed guard. "There's only one stable in Hornsmith that we know of. Stable 87. So that makes you an enigma. You should be one of the raiders outside, but you're not. From the intelligence we've gathered, the only of your kind that leave Neighwhere are either running away or one of the leaders of that gang. What are they called, Knight Lemon Meringue?"

The yellow mare with the exposed head spoke quickly. "Paragons, Star Paladin Broken Arrow."

He nodded. "Thank you. Paragons. Two of which we have determined are leading the army at our gates. Now wouldn't it be interesting if a third Paragon happened to have fallen right into our hooves? I wonder what we would be able to do with something like that."

I had a very bad feeling of where this was leading.

"So you're either a Paragon, or you're a runaway that, like you said, has taken to fighting back against the rest of the ponies that came out of that Stable. Either way, you will help us."

He stopped and looked at me. I took this as my cue to speak. "Help you do what?"

"You're going to get rid of the raiders for us. We don't have the horsepower to mount a full attack, and it has been deemed prudent to outsource to ponies with specific skills to alleviate the problem facing us." He nodded his head towards the weapons placed on the table. "You two will arm up, infiltrate the raider camp, and kill the Paragons. Without leadership, the army will most likely scatter to the wasteland. Raiders fall to infighting so easily. The siege will be lifted. You'll be free to go on your way."

Fucker. I'd fought two paragons. The first had leveled a small section of a town, the second had been so powerful we had to run or be burnt to death. To ask us to kill two Paragons... I glanced at Ash and he shook his head gravely.

"Don't think of running either. Rip, I don't believe you are willing to leave that blue mare we have in the cell. You're such a cute couple, nuzzling each other like that." Shit. Fuck. I hadn't been thinking that they'd be watching, and had exposed that Shade was a serious weakness of mine.

The armored head swiveled to look at the fuming griffin. I could see that Lemon Meringue was clearly

enjoying this, and a slight twitching from Notches made me realize that he was chuckling. Broken Arrow continued in that low rumble, taking a few steps towards Ash until he was within claw distance.

“Ashred, I don’t think we have anything to stop you from leaving. I know how you griffins work though, so I can assume that your contract is with one of the ponies you are travelling with. It doesn’t really matter who, as we’re keeping everypony but Rip in the cells until you get back. If either of you don’t come back... well, we’ll see how long they last without food or water.”

Ash was growling, a strange sound to hear coming from a beak. I was clenching my teeth, using every bit of self restraint I had to stop from lunging at Broken Arrow. I was sure that I could get at least one good kick in before I was vaporized, though with the armor I wasn’t entirely sure that it would be lethal. I wanted this pony dead... and I wanted to get away alive. That didn’t seem to be an option right now.

I would kill Broken Arrow. Someday, I would rip him apart with my bare hooves. Ponies like him deserved nothing less.

The despised Ranger stepped back with a sweep of one leg. “You may arm yourselves with your gear. It wouldn’t make much sense for us to send you out on this task without supplying you with the necessary tools, would it?”

I began pulling on my barding, as Ash went about strapping on the belts and pouches that held his weapons and equipment. It was a silent few minutes as we fully re-equipped, interspersed with venomous glares at the heavily armed Rangers watching us.

Sliding Broken, which I could tell was unloaded, into its holster at my side, I was ready to go. Ash was similarly prepared, though he was nervously running a single bullet through his fingers. Notches and the griffin were still having their staredown. Ash tossed the bullet lightly in the air and snatched it, holding it up for Notches to see. “This one’s for you. I’m saving it.” With that, he tucked the bullet into his belt, and turned to me. “Let’s get this over with.”

He hadn’t grinned since before I’d gone down into the Cube chamber. I’d never seen him this mad.

“Knight Lemon Meringue, Knight Notches, if you would be so kind as to escort our friends to the rear entrance, I believe it is time for them to go about the task they’ve been assigned.” With that, Broken Arrow dismissed us, before he turned and walked out of the room.

“Come on then griffy. You and your unicorn friend lead the way.” Notches laughed as he prodded at Ash with a hoof. We left the room opposite of where the Star Paladin had, back into the halls. We walked in silence, Ash likely planning exactly where he would shoot Notches. I was working our predicament through in my head. We were masterfully fucked.

I hadn’t seen too many other Rangers in the halls, but the two behind us were enough that if we tried anything I doubted that there would be much left of our bodies. Our weapons were unloaded, and that right there was enough to stop us trying anything. As long as they held Shade and Ivory, I wouldn’t try anything anyways. I couldn’t put it past Broken Arrow to just kill both of them if I made even one hostile move.

“Here we are. Get the door.” Lemon Meringue was still grumpy at being overruled by Broken Arrow, and nodded Ash towards a small door on one wall. It wasn’t exactly what I expected. Very nondescript. Ash pulled on the handle and large metal bars built into the door slid out of the wall, after which the griffin pushed the door open. No cracking, no flaking rust, no shooting sparks, no noise at all. I don’t know why, but I was distracted by the fact that this was the only door I’d encountered that hadn’t done any of those things.

Then we were outside, the door closing behind us. Both of us immediately began loading our guns. “Kick... any plans? How the fuck are we going to do this?”

I stood there, loading shells into my hoof guns as well as Broken. My shoulders drooped a bit, my voice sounding defeated as I admitted to Ash what I had hated to admit to myself. “I... I have no idea. Two paragons? We had a hard enough time with one.”

The griffin let out a deep sigh, dropping onto all fours. “Remind me to thank Ivory for the whole idea of heading up here.” Ash huffed after he said it, when it hit me. I still hadn’t even told him I found the cube.

“Well, Shade and I found another Cube back before the steel fucks jumped us. At least we got that.”

The griffin nodded. “Well... I guess it’s not all a waste. We’re still fucked though.”

Beaten before we’d even started. This sucked. We stood there for a minute, staring at the ground, before I broke the silence. “How about we find the raider camp at least? Maybe you can pick the Paragons off from a distance, then we can get back here, grab the girls, and get out of here.”

The griffin nodded slightly. “That could work.” Standing on his hind legs, he craned his neck up to look around. He pointed off down the path. “There’s smoke that way. Probably the camp.”

We headed towards the plume of smoke rising into the sky, trying to think of an actual plan. It couldn’t get much worse.

Then it started raining again.

The first raiders we came upon were an easy target. We heard voices through an open door, the building it was set into collapsed and desolate. Sneaking in behind them, we caught the pair completely off guard. A mare and a stallion, sneaking off to get in some private alone time. I would have felt bad about taking advantage of the situation if I wasn’t in such a foul mood. A raider was a raider, no matter what they were doing.

Ash pulled the stallion off of the mare, razor sharp talons biting into the raider’s throat enough to draw blood. The mare found the barrel of Broken floating a few inches from her eye. Looking up into my eyes fearfully, I could only return a glare.

The griffin slammed the Stallion into the ground, drawing out a shout of pain. The mare whimpered in response, and a pang of guilt shot through me. Come on, Ripple. These are raiders. The enemy.

She’s a looker too. Nice and ready. Go for it. You know you want to.

I knocked my PipBuck against the side of my head, the pain shutting the voice in my head up briefly. I had to get back to Shade fast.

Or get some Stampede. It’s been a while.

The mare shrank back from me, probably thinking I was crazy. Though if the raiders that had been chasing us earlier had returned to their friends, it was likely that every raider in Orchard knew that a fallen Paragon was stalking the ruins.

“Do you know who I am?”

The mare nodded her head quickly, squeaking out a response. “Two Kick.”

Fear would get me what I wanted. The voice in my head chuckled and congratulated me, but I responded with a small mental snarl. Shut the fuck up.

Looking down at the mare, I pressed Broken into her neck. "So you know what I can do. Now I want you to answer some questions."

She was shaking now. Her day had gotten bad fast. That seemed to be going around. Shaking her head, she looked over at the stallion that Ash had pressed to the ground. None of his wounds were fatal, but I knew that the griffin could tear through the pony's throat with a light flick of his wrist.

"The Paragons leading all of you. Who? Where?"

For a few seconds, I was afraid that she wouldn't talk. That I'd have to shoot her. Her lip quivered and she started talking in a low voice, almost as though she were afraid the Paragons would be able to tell that she was betraying them.

"Holepunch and Flurry. Holepunch is in an old building we built camp around, west side of the ruins. Flurry... we never know where Flurry is. Now... please, don't kill me. Let us go." I hesitated as she stared up at me, tears in her eyes. I'd told myself that every raider deserved a bullet in the head. I'd been holding that principal close. I'd broken it in the forest... I'd already let raiders go.

I heard a wet choking sound and my eyes shot over to Ash and the pony he held in his claws. One of his hands, the one that had formerly been holding the pony's neck, was coated in blood. Life blood was pumping from the shredded remains of the stallion's throat into a steadily growing pool on the floor beneath them.

"Ash!"

The mare below me started screaming. I flipped Broken over and rammed it into the side of her head, knocking her unconscious. Sure that she was out, but not dead, I stormed over to the griffin. "We could have learned more from them! They probably would have left Orchard if we gave them the chance!"

The griffin snorted, licking some of the blood from his talons. "Feh, you need to drop the act, Kick. You're a killer. Just like me. Your marefriend isn't here for you to impress."

I kicked him, square in the chest. He slammed into the wall, growling curses under his breath. Then he launched back at me with a beat of his powerful wings, slamming into me like a missile. We went over in a pile of fur and feathers, rolling across the floor kicking, punching, and biting.

We came to a stop against one wall. I felt his talons around my throat, the blood of the stallion still coating them, gripping just tight enough to pierce my hide. Broken was floating next to him, the barrel pressed firmly into his throat. A twitch from either of us would end the other.

We lay there like that, each daring the other to make the first move. A noise at the door interrupted us and instantly Broken and Ash's revolver were aimed at the intruder, our squabble briefly forgotten.

Fluster let out a short squeak and ducked out of view. Seeing her caused Ash to let go of my throat and stand, stepping off of me. Holstering the weapon, he approached the door. "Miss Fluster, it's fine; you can come out."

There was the polite Ash I only saw around contract holders other than myself. The one I'd met first. A far cry from the one I'd been close to shooting seconds before.

I stood shakily, holstering Broken and shaking dust and blood out of my mane. Rubbing at my sore neck, I couldn't help but grin as Fluster showed her hooded head slowly from around the door. Once she was sure that the fight was over, she entered the building. Her eye glanced at the dead stallion laying in a pool of blood, then at Ash and I, beaten as we were.

"You two aren't allowed to fight. You're supposed to protect me. That's why I hired you."

Ash grinned slightly, the first time I'd seen in a while. "Hard to protect you when you run off on us,

Miss Fluster.”

Closing her eye, her face all but disappeared within the hood. “I’m sorry... when I came back, the Rangers had already put you down.”

I thought about what she said as Ash rubbed her hooded head playfully. “You know the Steel Rangers?” I’d never heard of them before we’d been taken captive. Neither had Ivory, Shade, or even Ash. Ash, the world traveling griffin, hadn’t known who these armored ponies were. Fluster was a pony from Underhoof. How did she know the Steel Rangers?

She nodded. “I’ve... had dealings with them before. When they captured you, I started looking for a way to get you free from them. Where’s Ivory and Shade?” She looked around the room, looking for any sign of the pale mare with the machine gun or the blue pony that spent most of her time at my side.

Ash’s grin disappeared, and he looked angry again. “Rangers still have them. As leverage.”

Her eye widened, catching the light and glinting brightly within the dark confines of her hood. “Leverage?”

“We get them back when we kill some Paragons and break the siege.” Ash was back to growling, all the joy he had shown gone now that we returned to the matter at hand. The hunt.

Fluster had gravitated towards where the raider couple had piled their belongings and began sifting through it as Ash spoke, more intent on claiming whatever goods she could.

“We got the names off of these two.” I shot him a quick glare, which I think he intentionally ignored. The unconscious mare groaned slightly, and I trotted over to her, pulling out Broken. I didn’t want to be near Ash right now, and I felt it would probably be best if he was kept away from the raider mare, at least for now.

Fluster came out of the pile with a few caps, various weapons, and some loose rounds of ammunition, leaving the rest as garbage. “What were the names? I’ve dodged a few raider parties out here, maybe I heard them mentioned.”

“Holepunch, who Shade told me about, and somepony named Flurry.” Fluster was sorting the loot she had acquired into her robes when Ash spoke that last name. Uttering a small squeak, the smaller mare dropped a grenade she had been in the process of stashing in her robe, sending it bouncing across the floor and rolling to a stop at Ash’s paw, which he picked up. The look on her eye before she composed herself was surprising. Shock and fear. She quickly closed her mouth and faked a cough, but I’d caught the look.

“A name you know?” Ash tossed the grenade back to her, which she snatched out of the air with her mouth and stashed away. Ash and I had the same look on our face as we looked at the robed mare. She’d never made that sound before, at least not as a reaction to anything we’d said. She always just went about doing whatever it was doing, this was the first I’d seen her given pause by anything other than imminent danger.

Shying away from us, she started searching around the room for anything that she could get good trade for. Her voice, soft though it was, carried to us quite easily. “I’ve met her... if it’s her. A sadist. Not anypony I want to meet again.” Continuing on in silence, I got the feeling that that was all that we would get out of her. I’d known her longer than Ivory, but I knew almost nothing about the scavenger that tagged along with us out of mutual benefit.

A cough and a groan drew my attention, and I saw that the formerly unconscious raider was slowly pushing herself to her hooves. Her eyes were unfocused, but they rapidly gained focus on Broken, which I was again aiming straight at her. She just lay down again, tears springing to her eyes as she saw

the corpse of her fellow raider. There was the guilt again... if they'd attacked us, or even been armed, she wouldn't even be alive now and we'd already be on our way.

"So, Kick, how do we handle this then. You know if you let her go, she'll have good reason to bring friends. Just kill her, get it over with." Ash folded his arms, glaring at me. Fluster shook her head and went back to scavenging through the room. The raider just stared up at me, tears in her eyes.

Fuck. Why was this so hard?

Easy fix. Shoot her. Right in the face. Have some fun with it.

I had to shoot her. Ash was right.... the voice was right. Letting her go would a mistake. A huge mistake.

Looking into her eyes, I shook my head sadly. "I'm sorry."

I lowered Broken and looked at Ash. "I can't do it. It's just..." The griffin sighed, disappointed that I couldn't do what was needed. He drew his revolver and fired it in one swift motion. The bullet hit the raider straight between the eyes, killing her instantly. The look in his eyes triggered some primal feeling inside of me, one that I hadn't felt near him in a while. I was prey in the presence of a predator.

"Let's... we're leaving." I turned and walked away from the raider, headed towards the door. Ash replaced the spent bullet and holstered his weapon as I walked past him in silence. Fluster, the room thoroughly picked over, fell in line right behind me. Ash lingered in the room, looking at the pair of dead ponies, before he followed. Over the roofs of Orchard, I could still see the telltale smoke trails of the raider camp's fires. It would only be a short walk, then we could be done with this whole situation and get Shade and Ivory back. Head back to Hornsmith.

Be rid of the Steel Rangers. Of this fucking place.

Fluster led us straight to the raiders, her skills at stealth getting us around several raider bands searching through the ruins. Searching for what, I wasn't sure. Us, the cube I had with me, ways into the Ranger base. Probably all three.

The raiders had set themselves up in an old warehouse, easily one of the largest buildings in the Orchard. The roof had snipers, heavily armed raiders patrolled the perimeter. Our first guess had been right; the weakest and least armed were being sent on patrols into Orchard. The best were being kept here, sent out when they were needed. Pretty clever for raiders... this had Paragon written all over it.

We were in a building nearby. Entering it, we'd found it empty. Completely empty. It must have been cleared out before the war, there wasn't even paper. There was usually paper everywhere. From the second story, we were granted a detailed overview of the raider defense.

"So how do we get in?" I was looking over at Fluster when I said this. We needed something low to the ground, maybe even underneath it. If there was a tunnel, I trusted the robed mare to find it.

She was busy peaking through the filthy windows, looking for something. She didn't answer, her eye darting back and forth, scanning the street. Eventually she let out a small noise and pointed with one covered hoof. "There's an air vent in the street down there. Means there's a tunnel. It looks like it's headed into this building, but I didn't see any entrance."

I nodded at her. "Well, lets look closer, shall we? Ash, keep watch." The griffin nodded at me, humor still gone from his face. Since the fight, he'd only glared whenever he looked at me. I'd eventually need to talk to him about this... we couldn't risk another fight. One of us would probably already be dead if Fluster hadn't interrupted.

Kill him before he kills you. When his back is turn, he won't see it coming.

Shut up.

Back on the ground floor, I let Fluster do her own thing. While I wandered, rather aimlessly, looking for a door or a button, she darted off into a side room. It took only a minute or two before a loud noise rang out from a back room. I dashed towards it, sliding around a corner with Broken drawn.

Fluster stood there, at the top of a staircase. I could see that it had been hidden under a metal door blended quite well into a shadowy corner. I smiled at the mare, who was looking rather proud of herself, as I walked past her to look down into the now open passage. "I knew you could do it."

Standing next to me, she stared down into the opening. "Ripple... are you and Ash going to be okay? When I found you... you looked like you were about to kill each other."

Sighing, I looked down at the little mare, her eye staring out at me from the darkness of her hood. "I don't know. I don't think he likes how I've been acting since... well, since I found Shade in Hornsmith. Like I'm getting too soft to go through with what he signed on with me to do. To stop Hate."

She smiled at that. "I like this you. You've gotten a determination about you that wasn't there when we went down to kill those gnashers. Ever since Shade and Ivory tagged along."

I hadn't thought about that. Maybe it wasn't that I was softening up. It's just that my attention had gone from my need to stop Hate, to help ponies, and had now settled on protecting a few ponies. I'd sworn to protect Shade and Ivory, even if it killed me. Their imprisonment was a failure in that vow. It had set me on edge, a promise to bring my whole world crashing down.

I think that is what Ash saw. I was losing sight of the big picture. I had to agree with him. I'd had a few dreams, in the rare chance I slept instead of being knocked out, about just giving up and leaving Hornsmith. Taking Shade with me. Starting a family.

Pandemonium had picked up on that. Combined with how dedicated I'd seen Sweeps and Cinder to taking me out, I knew that I'd never be able to just leave. The things he had promised....

"Ripple? You okay?" I snapped out of it, looking back down into a grey eye filled with concern.

"Uh... yeah. I'm good, I was just thinking." A life of peace with Shade. Safe from my thoughts, from my past. All I had to do was get the other Cubes and hope that Pandemonium was good to his word.

A rustle from around the corner drew my attention, and I aimed Broken, gesturing for Fluster to get behind me. The robed mare obeyed immediately, my larger size hiding her fully from view. Hearing the padding of paws rather than the clop of hooves, I lowered Broken just in time for Ash to round the corner. It would probably be best for now if I didn't point a gun at him.

"That shook the whole building you know." Ash strode past us, looking down into the uncovered stairway. "Of course, more underground... when we get back to Hornsmith, how about we head to Blank? Nice and open. No tunnels. No elevators."

I nodded, hoping to appease the griffin. "Yeah, sounds good. I'm sure Traffic misses us anyways." Then I took the lead, walking down the stairway into the Orchard underground yet again. Fluster trotted along behind me, and I heard a deep sigh from the griffin before he came down behind us. At the bottom, Fluster reached up and hit a button, slamming the door shut behind us.

The tunnel here was nearly identical to the one we'd found underneath the factory. As before, Fluster was reading all of the signs to figure out where we needed to go. "Robot storage." I voiced it out loud.

The hooded mare nodded as I read the sign. Looking down the tunnel that was indicated, she inclined her head towards us. "I'd say that looked like a storage building. Shall we?" Always so eager at the

prospect of salvage.

At least, if the raiders were there in force, it seemed unlikely that the robots were active. I would honestly rather deal with an enemy I knew how to fight than the cold, unfeeling drones that had taken shots at us in the factory. The scar on my face ached briefly as I thought about what an energy weapon could do.

The tunnel was unguarded, the exit into the warehouse was even wide open. I poked my head in first, checking for any traps. Expecting an ambush. The room was dark... dusty and unused. No pony had been in here in a long time judging from the thick layer of dust coating the ground. I waved Ash and Fluster up after me as I went further into the room. It had been an office once, I could tell that much from the old desk and the broken terminal.

There was nothing here, so I headed for the door. The window, which was still surprisingly intact, had been blacked out long ago, probably when ponies still worked here. Trying the door, I found that it was locked.

“Fluster. Give me a hoof here.” She trotted over, producing the screwdriver and a thin piece of metal, before going to work on the lock. She worked masterfully at it, and the door unlocked with a soft click. I nodded my thanks to the grinning mare before shooing her away from the door. Opening it, I peeked through.

Robots. Hundreds of them. Rows and rows of a model different than what we’d fought in the factory. These looked meaner. A lot meaner.

Each was shaped like a pony, but they had blades on their fetlocks and assorted weapons built attached to their sides. This was an army. Another fucking army.... and here I was thinking that the raider army had been bad news.

Creeping out of the office, I listened for any noise. Any sign of ponies. Nothing. I slowly made my way to the nearest robot and looked over it. Series P-27 was stenciled onto each in white letters.

Did the Rangers know that these were here? I doubted they did or they would have come in here guns blazing, despite the number situation they were facing. Something like this could turn whoever controlled them into a serious force in the wasteland.

Hate could not get his hands on them.

The high pitched whine of a power tool drew my attention. There was a light on in another office, this one set up along one wall, a few stories up. A staircase led up to it and I began walking towards it. Any pony in this building could not be good news... it was probably a Paragon.

I nodded my head up towards the higher room at Ash, who nodded and pulled the heavy rifle off of his back. Fluster was staying near me, despite the huge amount of potential salvage she was looking at. I whispered at the both of them. “Ash... you cover me through that window. Like at the Relay. Fluster, stay behind me, don’t wander off.”

The two nodded, before Ash flapped his wings, launching himself up onto one wall. We were lucky that the lighting wasn’t good in here, his dark fur and feathers blending quite nicely into the shadows that high up the wall.

The stairs were made of thick metal mesh, and I did everything I could to muffle the noise of my hooves as I made my way up them. The metal of my hoofguns did not help the matter, but for the most part I was making as little noise as was possible. It was still a veritable cacophony compared to the silent whisper of Fluster’s robes.

At the top of the stairs, I paused at the door. There was a voice coming from within the room. I cracked

the door open, just slightly, enough to hear what was being said.

“If I drill here, I’ll be able to directly tap into the power supply. From there, I can turn on the terminal. Yes. Then I can begin diagnostics. Oh yes. Oh what fun.”

Pushing the door open further, I stuck my head into the room. There was that feeling of remembrance. I knew the pony across the room. The name hadn’t run any bells, but if I had to guess, this was Holepunch.

If it was just the tan coat and purplish mane, he’d look fairly average. The harness he was wearing, bristling with robotic arms and various power tools, was what set him apart. He was using one of his arms to drill a hole into a large bank of machinery along one wall, talking to himself as he went.

Every Paragon I’d met, other than Massacre, seemed to love the sound of their own voice.

I fully entered the room, drawing Broken from its holster as I went. I felt more than heard Fluster enter behind me. I had to get closer for Broken to be really effective... I wanted this fight over quickly. Glancing over, I saw that the large window along one wall was not positioned in a way that Ash would be able to see Holepunch, so I had to make this count.

As I took another step close, he stopped drilling suddenly. I looked for cover, but all that I could see were several desks, much closer to the Paragon than to me. I aimed Broken, but he didn’t turn around. Had he not heard me?

“Who have we here?”

Fuck.

He turned his head slightly and I found him looking right at me with one purple eye. “Ah, the errant Paragon. It’s been a while, Two Kick; how have you been?”

He turned fully, stepping away from the hole he had made. Looking at me with a judgemental look, he smiled. “You seem worse for the wear. That scar is rather dashing though. Oh yes. Cinder mentioned that you had a few new scars to show off.”

So she had reported back to them. Just like I knew she had. Bitch.

I couldn’t see any weapons in the array of tools he carried about him on those insectile robot arms, at least none built specifically for that. A cutting torch, a drill, a circular saw.... those were what I could immediately identify. Several of the implements I had no idea of, but they all looked lethal in close range.

Kicking would be out of the question if I wanted my hide in one piece.

“So what, are you working for the Steel Rangers now? Is that it? Oh yes. They’ve been trying to get in here for a while, but the nice little army Massacre keeps sending has helped stave them off.” One of the arms, tipped with a very thin blade, reached down. He began picking his teeth with it, looking a bit disinterested. “I was expecting them to send an assassin, but not you. This is a pleasant surprise. Oh, yes.”

He placed two of his robotic arms on the table and the rest on the ground. I tensed up, ready for whatever he was trying. Then he threw the entire table at me. As I went to dodge, I fired at Holepunch, though the table took most of the the shot, the lead spray pinging harmlessly off of the solid mass. The table just barely missed me but slammed through the door I’d came in. It took out a good chunk of the wall as well as the door, sending them all clattering down the staircase in an avalanche of debris.

Levering the shotgun, I looked up just in time to see that he was practically on me, propelled along by the harness. I leapt backwards, a spinning saw missing my neck only barely. I rolled, bringing Broken up

to fire as I hopped to my hooves.

A mechanical arm batted the weapon off target at the last second, but when I pulled the trigger I was rewarded with a spray of blood as the shot tore into his flank, shredding what I noticed was a nail and hammer cutie mark off of his left leg. Yelling in pain, he slammed another arm into me.

I felt a disturbingly familiar pain as the arm hit me, accompanied by a sharp pft sound. It was the nail gun. I jumped backwards, slowly being driven towards the hole that had once been the door I'd come in through, feeling three nails in my side, grinding against my ribs. It paled in comparison to the dozens that had once been there, but it still hurt.

Where the hell was Ash? Holepunch and I were in clear view of the window by now... I really hoped that he hadn't decided to abandon me as a result of our fight. Levering another shell into the chamber, I fired again but most of it was blocked by several metal arms coming together. Only two shots left before I'd be forced to reload.

An arm came in low, this one some sort of pneumatic punch, which I reacted a little slowly to. It missed, and I'm glad it did because it would have gutted me, but the metal rod shot out into my left saddlebag, throwing it and me out onto the stairs. I hit hard and lost my grip on Broken, which clattered away into the array of robots below us.

Fuck.

Tumbling down the stairs, I felt some ribs break when I bounced off of the door which had wedged itself in about halfway down. When I reached the bottom, I could do little but lay there and catch my breath. I could hear him coming down the stairs after me, but with most of the wall plugging it up, I had a few seconds to spare.

Pulling myself up, I felt that I'd twisted my back left leg. It hurt to walk on, but I limped off towards where I felt Broken had gone. "Ash! A little help?" I shouted out as I made it into the labyrinth of robots, hoping that the griffin was at least still around. He wouldn't just abandon me, would he? I still held his contract... I thought that meant something to his people.

"These robots, aren't they amazing Two Kick? Oh yes. Such grace... such power. If only I could get them moving. They were meant to turn the tide of the war with the zebras, but they just weren't brought online in time to make a difference. Now they're here, for us, for Hate to make a difference."

Holepunch's voice echoed through the vast chamber, from somewhere down amongst the robots with me. I had to find Broken, I had to get it reloaded...

There. Through a row of pony robots I caught a glimpse of my faithful shotgun, waiting patiently for me where it had fallen. I broke into a limping run, my back leg still sending a shooting pain that I could ignore, but couldn't shrug off.

I heard the echoing boom of Ash's rifle from somewhere in the chamber, which let me know that he was at least around, but if he was fighting Holepunch or somepony else, I had no idea.

A flash of metal was the only warning I had. I sprang backwards as the pneumatic punch arm flew from between two robots, missing me barely. The rod that the weapon fired hit one of the robots near me, punching a hole through it and throwing it into the bot next to it. They both fell over with a clatter, impacting the next one, which fell over into the next one, and so on. The sound of metal hitting the floor rang out in increasing frequency as I jumped over a fallen robot and rushed for my weapon.

I could hear hoof falls right behind me, knowing that Holepunch was right on my tail, but my priority was Broken. I couldn't win without it. I snatched it from the ground as I ran, pulling out incendiary rounds from my bag as I went. I'd like to see him block fire.

With three fire shells loaded, I spun to behold the Paragon hot on my hooves. He was being weighed down by all the equipment, the only reason he hadn't caught me. I aimed Broken in his face and pulled the trigger.

He moved to block the shot, as he had before, but fire didn't work like lead. It flowed around the arms, hitting him despite his efforts. His face and mane caught fire and he screamed. His arms flailed wildly, one of which caught me in the chest. The impact threw me up and over a few rows of robots, dropping me in a new row. Every time one of those hit me, I was amazed at how much power was behind them. They were thin, thinner than my front legs, but they hit much harder than I could have imagined. I groaned as I landed, winded again.

Holepunch was there, walking slowly towards me. His face was heavily burnt and his breathing was ragged, but that wouldn't stop him from impaling me, cutting me apart, or doing any number of other things to me. I couldn't stand, no matter what I tried. My legs just would not cooperate.

"That was.... a dirty trick.... Using fire.... like that...." I'd done some damage to his throat or lungs, I could tell that much from how he was talking. "Cinder... would be proud...." He raised his saw arm, the bladed metal spinning up to a lethal rate. Raising it back to strike, he paused. "I'll tell... her about it...."

From atop a nearby robot, a shape threw itself on Holepunch's back, between the arms. He twisted his head to see who it was, but Fluster was already biting and kicking at any wires she could get to. With a flash of sparks, the saw arm went dead, slumping to the ground.

"Stop! Get...off!" She was really latched on, and was not letting go. None of his arms could reach her, so he just kept flailing about, knocking over more robots and shouting obscenities in halted speech. I had to make my move.

My lungs finally did what I told them, and I sucked in a breath of air. It hurt, but it was what I needed. Rolling over, I stood and moved towards the flailing Holepunch. Ducking the torch arm, I got within his arm's reach, but he was not looking at me. His mistake.

"Forget somepony?" I spun and planted a double kick into his chest, triggering my hoofguns. With a thunderous blast, I blew apart his chest, shredding through the barding holding the arm mechanisms on. Fluster and the arms slid to the ground in a pile, leaving the tan pony staring at me in disbelief. I could see into his chest, see the slowing beat of his heart.

"That... Oh no." The light faded from his eyes and he slumped to the ground, a large pool of blood spilling beneath him.

I dropped to the ground, coughing. Everything hurt, but I could handle it. I just needed something to get the edge off.

Stampede. You have it. Use it. You can find the griffin, kill him.

Med-X will do just fine. I floated some out of my crumpled saddlebag and jammed it into my flank, the needle piercing true and spreading a cool numbness through my chest and legs. That felt better. The potion I followed it up with helped even more, and I could feel parts of my chest knitting back together.

It still felt like a rib was floating around in my chest cavity though... when I coughed I spattered blood on the ground. Fluster was there, looking concerned.

I smiled at her. "Thanks... that kill... goes to you. Couldn't.... have done it.... without you." It hurt to breathe. I couldn't help but notice I was now talking like Holepunch had after I'd hit him with the fire.

"Are you going to be okay?" She kept asking me that. Before I could answer, several reports from Ash's revolver echoed across the chamber. He was still fighting. He hadn't abandoned me... he'd been distracted.

I loaded a slug round into Broken and started limping across the warehouse, towards where it sounded like the griffin was. Fluster kept up, amazingly untouched from the battle with the Paragon. Some ponies had all the luck.

Hearing more shots, I started picking up speed. Between my difficulty breathing and my twisted leg, I could only go so fast, but I was pushing it. I needed to get to the griffin. Needed to help my friend.

Coming around a row of robots, I found the griffin. He was aiming his revolver into the air, his head snapping around as he searched for a target. Blood pooled at his feet, he was cut in dozens of places across his chest, neck, and wings.

A black shape streaked past him, drawing a bright red line across his shoulder. A pegasus, I could just make out before the shape was gone back into a row of robots. Fluster ran forward, towards the bleeding griffin. I'd never seen her run into danger before, and before I could say anything the black shape reappeared, heading straight at her.

She turned her head to stare straight at the black blur and shouted at the top of her lungs. "Flurry! Stop!"

The figure pulled back mid sloop, hovering for a brief second. A black coated pegasus. Blades covered her hooves, dripping with griffin blood. An eye patch, opposite the one that Fluster wore. I'd seen Fluster without her hood, just the one time, but it had been enough to tell.

They could be twins.

"Fluster!" The pegasus shouted gleefully before launching back into a row of robots, disappearing from view.

How was this Paragon a pegasus? I didn't think there were any pegasi in Stable 87, at least not from what little I could remember. She didn't have a PipBuck either, which every Paragon I'd encountered had had. Sweeps, Cinder, Massacre, Holepunch. They'd all had one.

"You know this winged bitch?" Ash was bleeding heavily, but he was still on his feet, aiming his revolver in the direction the pegasus had retreated.

Fluster nodded, her eye scanning the rows of robots for any sign of the black blur. "My sister. Flurry."

"Fluster! I didn't know you were still alive? What's with the robe? Ashamed of the scars?"

The abusive sister. The sadist Flurry. They were the same pony. A Paragon.

The blur returned, heading straight at Fluster. A small shriek came from the hooded mare, a long slice cutting through the robe. It was a very measure and exact cut, the robe falling off of her, revealing her fully.

Head to flank, she was covered in scars. The exact coloring of her sister, only the scars and the opposite eye patch set them apart. In place of a cutie mark she had deep, wicked scars. What struck me as most surprising were the wings. Fluster was a pegasus. Her wings were tucked tight to her body. She was also covered in straps, holding pockets, pouches, and saddlebags.

She looked at me, her eye wide with shock, before she glanced down at herself. "No!" She screamed and tried pulling the robe back up around her.

"Isn't she beautiful?" The voice came from behind me and I spun, pulling the trigger on Broken. If I'd had an incendiary round loaded, the pegasus would have gotten a face full of fire. The slug round that flew out of the barrel missed her, however, punching a hole into the faceplate of a dormant P-27. Flurry spiralled past me, hitting me in the face with a wing as she went.

I felt the blood before I felt the wound. Touching my face, I felt a long cut along my cheek. She'd only hit me with her wing, how had it cut me?

A slash along my back snapped me back to the task at hand. She made no noise as she flew, I could never tell where she'd be coming from unless she spoke. I understood how Ash was so cut up.

Fluster was still trying to gather her robes to herself when Flurry dropped out of the air right behind her, hooking a hoof around the scarred mare's neck, holding Fluster as a shield between us and her. Her good eye poked out from around Fluster's head, and the look was rather bizarre as the identical coloring blended the two together. Like two ponies melted together.

"You killed Holepunch? Bravo I say. Wasn't too fond of him... all you Stable ponies are weird. Not like us topsiders. Like me and little Fluster here." As she spoke, her mouth was practically in Fluster's ear, but I could see in her eye that she was petrified with fear. This pony had covered her in scars, cut off her cutie mark, put out one of her eyes. Her own sister.

The Paragon glanced past me, and I heard Ash approaching, the dripping of blood a dead giveaway. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the barrel of the revolver aiming at the pair.

"Oh, you're mad at me aren't you? Is it the cuts? You needed them, you were too pretty. I had to cut up little Fluster too. She was always Daddy's favorite, especially after I lost the eye. A little blood always helps to bring everypony down to the same level." She moved her hoof, cutting into Fluster's neck just lightly enough to draw blood.

"That... that's why you cut me?" Fluster's voice hardened a bit as she spoke, surprising the bladed pegasus. Easing the blade away from Fluster's throat just a bit, Flurry kissed the side of her sister's head.

"Did I never tell you that? Must have slipped my mind. I see that you went and made some friends though. Good for you. I've heard about your stallion friend there. Hate never let me near the other Paragon's until just recently, so I never had the pleasure. Hi there, Two Kick." She waved her wing at me, a grin on her face.

"Let Fluster go. Back away... I'll let you leave." Ash growled as he aimed the revolver. I had Broken out, but if I pulled the trigger I would roast both Flurry and Fluster alive.

Flurry laughed, putting the blade back against Fluster's throat. "You'll let me, will you? I see this ending two ways, honestly..."

She drifted off as she spoke, taking a deep breath in Fluster's hair. "I missed your smell, little sister." She ran her tongue along Fluster's neck. "Your taste. I'm so glad you aren't dead."

"I'm five minutes older than you..." Fluster squeaked out, careful not to move too much, the blade still pressed into her throat.

"I was always the bigger one though. We may look the same, be the same size, but I made something of myself. I'm the bigger pony! I stood up on my own four hooves and took what I needed! Those ponies out there? That army!? They're mine! They do what I say!" Her wings opened wide as she started screaming at Ash over Fluster's shoulder. With each word, the scarred mare flinched.

"Option one! I Bring them in here! You can't fight them all! They'll be pissed that you wasted all their time by killing Holepunch!" Her face softened suddenly, her rage coming to a screeching halt. "Or option two. You let me leave. I send the army back home. Everypony lives to fight another day."

Stepping forward, I glared at her, Broken still floating right next to me. "So call your army. Bring them in here. I don't think you can without letting Fluster go."

She smiled, an unnerving look. She looked exactly like Fluster, but the mare I knew would never smile like that. Like a predator. Like Ash. “You got me there. So it’s really only one option. We have no reason to stay here now, and if I go get everyone, you’ll be gone. We’ll have hundreds of broken robots, but no unstoppable army. I doubt Holepunch could have even gotten them running. He’d been at it for days with no progress. The army’s getting twitchy.”

“So I’m going with option two. I’ll leave. I’ll take the army with me. Providing you give me two things.” Holding up a wing, she dropped all but one big feather. “You let me go. Don’t chase, don’t shoot. Without me, the army will just rampage about.” Raising another big feather, she continued. “You keep little Fluster safe. No pony but me gets to hurt her. I promised Daddy that I’d protect her from the world while I slit his throat.”

I glanced at Ash, who’s eyes were starting to droop. He’d lost a lot of blood... I was surprised he was still standing. It still hurt to breath and I was honestly glad that I’d been standing here for this long. Walking hurt. The two of us were in no condition to try and outrun the army. We would die. Shade and Ivory would die. Hate would win. I didn’t even want to think of what would happen to Fluster at the hooves of her sister. Ash nodded at me, a defeated look spreading into his features.

“Fine. Go.” Two words out of my mouth. I hated saying them, but I had no other option.

Kissing Fluster on the cheek, Flurry spoke softly into the scarred mare’s ear. “I’ll see you around, little sister. Don’t go dying on me... we still have some catching up to do.” With a flap of her wings, she took off into the darkness of the cavernous space. She was gone.

Fluster dropped to the floor, crying softly. I waited for a few seconds, waiting to see if Flurry would launch out at us in attack, but she was true to her word. She was gone.

Holstering Broken, I used my magic to pick Fluster’s shredded robe up off the ground. Draping it over her, I kneeled down helped her to her hooves. She unfolded her wings, for the first time in a long time, and used them to clamp the rags to her body, to cover as many of her scars as she could.

We needed to get back to the Rangers. I’d see what I could do about letting them sticking around to heal, as much as I hated the thought, just to avoid heading back to Hornsmith at the same time as an army of raiders. If they caught us on open ground, we wouldn’t stand a chance. Ivory was the only one really capable of fighting right now.

The three of us began limping back to where we’d entered the building. I stopped briefly at Holepunch’s corpse, copying everything off of his PipBuck that I could. Shade had showed me how. Whatever he had might help us figure out what we needed to do next. Where we had to go...

We’d be heading to Blank, as Ash had asked. We needed a break.

Once back into the tunnels and through into the building across from the warehouse, we took cover in the second story. There was a great amount of noise out in the streets, raiders were everywhere. Flurry had carried through with her side of the deal. They were pulling army back in from all over Orchard, preparing for the trip back to Hornsmith. The ruined city would be much less safe than usual, but that didn’t matter to me.

The only ponies I gave the slightest bit of thought to in Hornsmith were all in Underhoof. Underhoof existed solely because no pony knew it was there.

The night was rough, as raiders wandered around outside. Fires were lit, ponies laughed and joked as they began the trip home, and I watched out the window as they set off during the night. An amazing amount of coordination, I had to admit. I’d thought that raiders were an unruly bunch, going where they wanted, doing whatever they pleased.

Ash had said that raiders came in all kinds. None of them sounded like the type to act like the army I saw through the night. Hate must have promised them the world to get them to follow what he said.

Briefly, I thought that I spotted Flurry. It was hard to tell in the dark. Glancing over at Fluster, I felt sorry for the mare. I'd never guessed that she'd been through that much suffering in her life. She was curled up asleep in the corner, her robe covering her as well as she could get it. I decided then and there that I would protect her as well.

At this rate, I'd be the self-proclaimed protector of every mare in the wasteland.

All the mares around me were deeply damaged. Was it a coincidence that they found their ways to me? The escaped slave. The pony who lost her brother. The scarred pegasus. I couldn't help but wonder who else would find me... and if I would be able to help them if they did.

"You got that look, Kick." I glanced at Ash, who lay against the wall. He was heavily bandaged, having taken much of my supply to stop the bleeding, but even with the healing power of the bandages and a couple potions he sounded weak.

I stood and trotted carefully over to him, avoiding the window. "What look?"

He chuckled, which made me smile. I was glad to see anything other than a snarl on his face. "The one you get when you look at Shade. You falling for Fluster too? Quite the player, aren't you."

I laughed quietly. "Nothing like that. Just deciding that I won't let Fluster get hurt. It's weird, but I just feel like it's my job to protect the girls. They can do it themselves... but they just need a little help."

He punched me lightly in the shoulder, the first time he'd made contact since he'd had his talons around my throat. "I'm sorry for what I said back there, Kick. I know you're not doing this to impress Shade. You're a good pony, but you know that those mares will be the death of you right?"

I nodded. "Probably."

He started laughing, quietly to avoid drawing attention to our building. I joined in, and before long we were sitting next to each other chuckling softly. We'd won, for today at least.

"We pulled it off, Kick. Two Paragons dealt with. The wasteland is a safer place."

"That it is Ash. That it is."

We sat there in the dark, staring out the window at the moon.

The morning came quietly. That was what woke me, I think. The lack of raiders shouting and moving around outside. Standing slowly, I peeked through the window. The streets were deserted. What I could see of the raider camp was abandoned.

"Ash. Fluster. Time to head out."

The two were slow in waking, but before long we were up and about. The Ranger base waited. I did what I could to help Fluster keep her robe on, but it was a lost cause. She'd need a new one. The best we could do was fashion it into a cape, the hood over her head and the sleeves tied around her neck. Her wings were still visible though, as well as her heavily scarred front legs.

Ash looked like the griffin version of myself, swathed in bandages. Standing, he stretched and worked several loud pops out of his back. "This floor isn't comfortable."

He was right. Rock or whatever this was sucked to sleep on. I was sore everywhere, not just my chest and leg. The cut on my cheek had healed up with one potion, leaving only a dried crust of blood in my

fur.

Once out in the street, I found that it was raining slightly. A drizzle, setting a somber mood for the morning. Not that it was much different from every other morning. It was always raining in one way or another.

Using the map in my PipBuck of the local area, I found the door that we'd been let out of. I banged on it with a hoof for a few minutes before I heard the locking mechanism slid open with a loud clunk. The door opened and I found myself face to face with Lemon Meringue. Behind her were two Rangers with their helmets on, their heavy weapons trained on the three of us.

"Wow. I didn't ever expect to see you again. You found a new friend as well!" Fluster was standing behind us, and drew back behind the larger griffin as attention was drawn to her. "Anyways, come in. I'm sure that Star Paladin Broken Arrow will want to see you." She sounded disappointed. Like she'd been hoping we'd die out in Orchard. I was glad to have denied her.

We were brought back to the room where Broken Arrow had told us our task. He wasn't there, so the two of us sat in silence. Lemon Meringue and Notches stood at the door, weapons aimed at us. None of us were in the mood for small talk.

Eventually, the door swung open and the pony I swore I would kill walked through the door. Broken Arrow walked in, head held high, and stopped in front of us. "My scouts have reported that the army has left. You two pulled it off. Surprising." Turning his head towards Notches, he nodded lightly. "Go retrieve our guests. Not the pegasus."

Notches left the room, without any snarky comments at Ash as I had expected. I glared at Broken Arrow for a while before I spoke. "So you'll just let us leave?"

"I am a pony of my word. You followed through, it is only proper if I do as well." I got the feeling he had never expected to see us. He'd been fully prepared to let Shade and Ivory die locked up. I wasn't going to ask him if we could stay for a short time to heal. We had to get out of Orchard, head somewhere friendly. As soon as possible.

I could only say negative things to Broken Arrow at this point. I felt that if I kept my mouth shut, we would be able to get out of here. Ash had either reached the same conclusion, or was zoned out from blood loss. I couldn't rightly tell.

The door opened and Shade bolted through, wrapping her legs around me and kissing me full on the mouth before I could even say hello. Ivory trotted through the door, stopping in her tracks and gasping loudly. "Fluster!" She rushed over to the scarred pony, who was curled up under the table, trying to hide her scars.

"I'm fine too. Thanks." Ash laughed as he said it. It was good to see him lightening up at the prospect of leaving this place.

"Well, now that you've been reacquainted, I'd prefer it if you would be so kind as to leave the premises. We have much work to do, and babysitting some.... scavengers, is not high on our list of priorities." He turned his armored head to Lemon Meringue. "Knight Lemon Meringue, if you would be so kind as to escort our guests to the door. Thank you."

With that, he was gone. Lemon Meringue jerked her head towards the door, which I found that Notches was standing outside of. As we walked past, I noticed that Fluster was all but attached to Ivory, her robe draped over the both of them for cover.

As Ash passed Notches, I heard him hiss through his helmet. "See ya soon, griffy." Ash just glared at the armored pony as he passed. "Not if I see you first."

Then we were herded through the building and unceremoniously seen out the door. Once outside, I let out a sigh of relief. They hadn't shot us all, as I'd sort of expected. They'd really let us go, all of us. Crash Course was still in the building, but I honestly couldn't care less about what happened to the crude pegasus.

"So... where do we go now?" Ash looked at me knowingly. He'd already told me where we were going, but I guess he was playing it up so that it looked like I was making the decision.

"We head to Blank. We can avoid the raiders and get some rest."

Ivory grinned. "I've never been there. Is it nice?" Fluster was still attached to her side, trying her best to hide, even though I'd now seen all that she'd been covering.

I nodded. "I think you'll like it. Both of you."

As we left orchard, there was one pressing thought on my mind.

Orchard sucked.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, an amazing piece fiction as well as a setting.

Thanks to ErrantIndy for his editing work, makes this mess look better.

As always, fav/track/rate/comment. Hope you had fun reading.

Chapter 11: Whitecoat

Walking the edge of the forest was much more preferable to actually entering it again. I wasn't sure what the ash that filled it was from, but out in the open it was all but gone. The occasional patch of grey mush was easily avoided, which made our travel speed much quicker than it had been weaving our way through the bleached trees. The combination of hoof-sucking goo and woodland creatures that we couldn't see until they attacked had set us down the path that had Ash and myself at each other throats.

The griffin was all but beaming now that we were finally in the open, under the endlessly clouded sky. We'd run through most of our medical supplies stopping his bleeding; Flurry had been thorough in her attacks and he had suffered dozens of cuts. None were life threatening on their own, but the number had left him weak, despite the smile on his face. I could see it in his eyes, that he was fighting to stay conscious. I remembered my first walk to Blank. It had been very similar.

Ivory had helped Fluster once we'd made our first stop, out of view of Orchard. The robe was still fashioned as a cape, but Ivory had helped Fluster reposition it so that as much of her was covered as possible. This had involved taking most of her various bags and pouches, which had been spread out amongst the more sturdy of us. Shade had taken her share, and Ivory had most of them strapped about her.

Fern had been discovered hiding within one of them, and was walking along beside Fluster now. She'd kept him on her during the entirety of the time we'd spent in Orchard, and I'd pretty much forgotten about the timberwolf's presence until he had popped out of a bag I had taken from Fluster to lighten her load. I'd nearly shot him in my surprise, but he lucked out by being faster than I was on the draw. It would not have been good for the damaged mare for me to blow her pet all over the wasteland.

My leg was still giving me grief, and I was limping fairly badly. Shade, even with the extra weight from the bags she carried, was helping support me along, despite the size difference between us. She was the only one of us that had not suffered in some way during our stint in the compound, and I was glad to have her help. It was a bit of a walk, and I was not in top shape. As soon as we got to Blank, I planned on everypony spending as much time as necessary at Doc Care's. I tried remembering if he'd refused me service... I knew that Crimson Knife had threatened it, and vaguely recalled Intensive Care doing the same thing.

Ivory was wearing her hair differently, covering the eye that was now sporting a scar underneath it, a smaller version of the sizable wound that had set me on the path I now walked. She seemed fine, aside from a few cuts and bruises. Despite being shot, zapped, and kept in a cage, she was still looking quite pretty.

Fluster was sticking close by Ivory, and anytime we stopped I saw that she was shaking. The cuts in her neck had healed up already without the use of bandages, but she had some wrapped around the thin cuts as a precaution anyways. No, the damage done to the dark pegasus had been emotional. She'd not expected a confrontation with her insane sister, and it had rendered her speechless. I'd not heard her voice since we'd left the Ranger base. She needed a break more than any of us.

We walked through the day, taking breaks occasionally. Ash was the reason for most of the stops, weak as he was. During one of the breaks, Shade was leaning her head against my neck as I was busy taking weight off of my leg. She hadn't liked being locked away from me by Broken Arrow, and was being much more affectionate than usual. I wasn't complaining, and her occasional nuzzling of my neck was a welcome distraction from the blasted wasteland.

I'd thought that the stretch between Hornsmith and the forest was desolate. This was much worse. As far as I could see, there was cracked earth with the occasional rock. To the horizon, there was nothing. Two centuries before, there had been a road where we now took cover beneath a large fallen sign, too faded to make out what it had said. I could barely make out a splash of pink and yellow. Probably Fluttershy. She'd been on every other sign I'd seen.

As I looked around, the muscles in my leg started cramping up, something they'd been doing whenever I hadn't been moving. It hurt to move, it hurt to stay still. I preferred still for Shade's company. I felt her move, nuzzling into my neck. Glancing down, I saw that she was looking up at me rather than keeping her eyes closed contentedly.

"Ripple... you know that you don't have to wait for one of us to ask to stop. We'll stop if you need a longer rest." Her eyes, blue and violet, were filled with concern. Her mouth, however, was smiling playfully. She wanted more time just being with me, without my limping form weighing down on her.

I smiled at her. "I know. It's just that if we keep moving, we can get to Blank. We can rest, heal, take a break." I lowered my voice, though I knew that whatever I said would be heard by Ash. Weak as he was, his senses were still the sharpest of all of us. "Fluster needs to get somewhere safe, lay down for a while. Ivory too. Ash needs a doctor."

Glancing over at the griffin, I saw that even though he appeared to be taking a quick nap, one of his eyes was half open and staring straight at me. He nodded at me, then glanced over at where Ivory and Fluster were laying. Fluster was curled up next to Ivory, who was busy running a comb through the pegasus' hair. Fern was curled up on top of Fluster, fast asleep.

"You're such a nice pony... caring about everypony else before yourself. I knew there was something special in you when... well, when you saved me. You could have left me in that ditch and gotten yourself to Blank, but you carried me. After I'd shot at you." She looked sad as she said it. I gave her a small kiss on the forehead, bringing a smile back to her face.

"Did you know... you're the first pony to be nice to me since the Stable opened? Sweeps was the nicest, but that only meant she didn't yell at me. Or hit me. Or do worse." Her voice began dropping as she talked, her eyes falling to stare at the ground. I didn't like it when she thought about those times. Times when I was still Two Kick.

Using the leg that still had a metal brace on it, I lifted her chin to make her look at me again. "We got out of there. Both of us in our own ways." Looking at her made me think about that. We were out of Neighwhere, true. We were still far from safe. The Paragons. Hate. Broken Arrow and his cronies. The half of a demon I was carrying in my pocket.

"Shade... if I had a way of fixing everything, should I?" She arched a brow, her curiosity piqued. Should I tell her about Pandemonium? Ash would hear if I did, but I had a feeling he'd either be indifferent or supportive about the deal. The prospects that the draconequus had presented were almost too good to be true.

"Why are you asking?" Sitting up fully, she tried to bring herself to my height despite how much larger I was than she. I compensated by lowering my head so that we were at about the same level. I wanted to see her eyes while I said this, if for nothing else than to control the voice in my head. Thinking about Pandemonium's deal was making the voice scratch around at the corners of my mind.

"Well... I think that I can use the cubes to stop Hate. Not just get in his way, but stop him." Ash was wide awake now, the glint of his eyes catching my attention from across the shelter. I decided to ignore him for now, focus on the loving mare at my side. She'd help me with this. If there was anypony in the wastes that could drive me to do good, it was her.

“Ripple, I’m sure that you’ll do the right thing. You’re a good pony.” I was surprised as she said that. She was serious. Glancing over, I saw that Ash was shaking his head. I’d talk to him later about this. For now, the griffin was making a show of standing up.

Standing shakily, he stretched out his wings which had been just as cut up as the rest of him. I’d seen him do this the last time his wing had been bandaged, after the Relay. Any time he couldn’t fly, he’d spread out his wings every couple minutes. Didn’t matter if he was underground or just bandaged up.

Clapping his talons together, he got the attention of Fluster and Ivory. Shade and I were already looking at him. “Well, Kick. Ladies.” A short nod in their direction. “I think it’s time we started off. Sooner we get to Blank, the sooner we can get some rest and relaxation.”

The sooner we can heal.

That night was restless for all of us. An overturned wagon, untouched for two centuries, sheltered us from the rain. Taking the long way back was starting to tax us, but not nearly as much as a tangle with the retreating raider army would have.

Ivory kept first watch, waking me sometime in the very early morning. From the opening to the wagon, I could make out distant lights. They were high up, higher than anything that was in this area. From checking my PipBuck, I found that it was the Relay, but it was still a bit of a walk from our location.

While I had my PipBuck up, I scrolled through what I had pulled in. Mostly technical stuff or information I had no use for. Eventually, I made my way back to the start of the list. Sweeps’ audio files. The first had made me feel sorry; made me regret killing the young mare. If I heard more, I might learn more about Neighwhere. More about the ponies I was fighting.

Pressing play, her voice came back into my ears, volume lowered to not disturb the others in the wagon.

“It’s been a while. Doesn’t matter much now what the Overmare thinks. Crackerjack is in charge now, first thing he did was get us working on opening the door. “

In the distance, I heard the voice of the other mare again. She was older as well. It sounded like this recording was around five years old. Right before the Stable door opened. “Sweeps, stop yacking at that thing and help me out here. Raspberry’s gonna be right back, and I don’t think he’d like it if you were messing around.”

“Gentle, don’t worry. There, see, I lifted it. I can record too. With that, door’s clear. Raspberry can open it and we can get out there into the world. See what we can see. Meet new ponies.”

Gentle chuckled. “I thought you were only interested in Ripple.” I sighed at that. If they started talking about her future plans for me, I was going to turn this off. I didn’t need more reasons to regret killing her. “Aren’t you worried you’ll find somepony new to obsess over?”

A new voice came into range, speaking in a very familiar pattern. “Ah, I see that you girls have cleared the way. Oh yes. Now stand back, I’ll have this door open in ten seconds flat.” Holepunch. Holepunch’s name was Raspberry. I snorted back a laugh. There was no love lost between myself and that psycho. I’d felt no regret when I’d blown up his chest.

There was no talking for the next few seconds, and then a loud shriek of metal on metal. I could only assume that it was the sound of a Stable door opening. “Opened. Oh yes. Crackerjack, I opened the door. You might want to see this.”

A voice, distorted through a speaker, set off every warning bell in my head. “I’m coming down

Raspberry. Stay there, keep an eye on the outside. I don't want anypony from outside getting in."

That was Hate's voice. Crackerjack, before he became the focus of my little quest. Every part of me filled with rage.

Oh, it's going to be fun ripping him apart. Even you'll enjoy that, my friend.

The voice caught me off guard. I was close enough to Shade that I should not have heard the voice...

"Wow... it's so... dull." Sweeps' voice. I could hear the awe, even if she was expressing disappointment. It was the first time she'd seen anything outside of the Stable. Awe was expected.

"Stable 87 has its entrance located in the basement of an old Ministry of Peace building. Oh yes. The historical record held that much." Bored and clinical. Raspberry just kept rubbing me the wrong way.

Gentle spoke next. Her voice held as much amazement as Sweeps' had. "Do you think there will be anypony out there? What will they be like?"

"I cannot guess at what ponies topside after two hundred years will be like. Oh yes. There might not be anypony left. We'll wait for ponies with guns before we head out. No undue risk."

I heard several sets of hooves approaching, then something I hadn't expected. "You got the door open? Good job. Hey there, Sweeps. Gentle." I'd never heard my own voice before, at least not like this. Deep, with a bit of a drawl.

"What are the guns for? You're not gonna shoot anypony, are you, Ripple?" I didn't know who Gentle was, but she seemed overly concerned for me. If only shooting people had been all I'd done...

"We don't know what will be out there. Could be anything." I could just make out the sound of shells being loaded into a shotgun. So I was fond of shotguns before I'd left the Stable. Makes sense. "Oh right, Sweeps, Crackerjack wants you moving freight down in storage to make room. Salvage and the like."

"Oh... alright, Ripple." She sounded disappointed. She wanted to spend more time near me... I could hear that through the speaker. Had old me really never picked up on that? Wow... he was dense.

"Guess I'll continue this later." A click and the recording ended. That was apparently the end of that. I had only one of Sweeps' audio files left, but I would have to listen to it later. The sky was beginning to lighten, meaning we would be setting out before too long.

Behind me, I heard the rustle of movement. I knew who it was as soon as she leaned against my side. "Morning, Shade."

Yawning sleepily, she smiled up at me. "Are you looking forward to getting back to Blank?"

Nodding, I looked back towards the lights which were growing harder to see with each minute. The relay was only a short walk from Blank. "Yeah... Fluster needs a break after Orchard. Blank will be just the place for her."

Looking away, Shade chuckled a bit. "Yeah. I'm a little scared of going back... I didn't tell Traffic I was coming after you."

The image of the stern shopkeeper I'd left in charge of Shade popped into my mind. No... no she would not be pleased. I'd probably even get an earful for not sending the mare back to the safety of Blank.

"Well.... as long as Doc Care will take a look at everyone, dealing with Traffic won't be that rough." I'd still been trying to remember if he'd cut me off or not. It would be great if he hadn't, then he could take a look at my leg. There it goes hurting again.

“Miss Traffic isn’t so bad. You just gotta get in good with her.” Ash, from the side. Glancing over at the griffin, I had to admit that he was looking a little better after resting. He still looked weak, but part of his predatory air was returning.

Just out of curiosity, I glanced over towards Ivory and Fluster. When Ivory had relieved guard duty to me, she’d returned to the pegasus’ side. Fluster was now curled up tightly into Ivory’s side, a dark shape wedged into the bright side of the pale mare. I smiled at how much Ivory had helped Fluster. The two had a connection. It was nice to see, now that I knew both of their backgrounds.

Nodding my head towards them, I spoke softly to Ash. “Mind waking the girls? Shade and I will get ready to go. We can make it to Blank before noon by my guess.”

The griffin nodded, then glanced over towards the lights of the relay. “Yeah, that sounds to be a good estimate.” Standing, he stretched out his wings once and walked softly towards the girls.

Stepping out from under the cover of the sign, I looked up at the clouds. It had stopped raining, but the clouds were still as dark and foreboding as ever. What little light was filtering in I could now see was coming from the distant horizon, where the cloud cover must have been lighter.

Before long, the rest were gathered out in the open, ready to continue our journey.

Today was going to be a good day.

As we neared the relay, I was in high spirits. We all were. Even Fluster was smiling from within her hood, the prospect of being able to trade again and pick up much needed supplies having apparently cheered her up substantially.

I noticed, much to my relief, that most of the defaced MoP posters had been torn down. Somepony had been busy cleaning the place of the filth left by the raiders, which meant that there was a chance they were still around. It would be good to let Blank know we were coming, or at least to head back to Blank with a local to guarantee they’d let me back in.

I had saved the town, but I’d also destroyed a part of it. Two of them knew I was a former Paragon. It was up in the air if I could even get through the gate.

The sound of the pump on a shotgun froze me in midstep, my magic gripping Broken and pulling it out. Ash spun as well, still a bit wobbly but the large revolver held in his talons not shaking a bit. Ivory was slowest to react, only turning her head and then slowly bringing her heavy weapon around to bear.

Three ponies stood ten feet from us. They’d gotten the drop on us, and I had to wonder why they hadn’t already started firing. We would have been killed, they could have looted us and be on their way.

I arched a brow as I looked at them. They were clearly not raiders. Fairly well groomed, each had a weapon that was in respectable condition. Most glaringly was that each wore a white coat of some kind. One had a long coat that ran down over her tail, the others both wore plain white jackets of differing lengths.

“State your business. Don’t try anything funny now.”

Ash, ever the diplomat, lowered his revolver slowly, indicating the rest of us should at least make so we weren’t brandishing our weapons. “Be cool now. We’re just weary travelers, heading to town for supplies.”

The three of them looked at us, their eyes passing over my beaten frame and my limp; Ash and his collection of bandages; the distressed and bedraggled Fluster. When they saw Shade, who was staring at them over my back, a frightened look in her eyes, they lowered their weapons. Guess we looked the

part.

The mare with the long coat nodded, her magic floating a large pistol to a holster strapped to her chest. I caught flashes of metal from within the coat as well, but she turned towards relay before I could tell what it was. "I'd advise you to avoid 108. The relay tower. Whitecoat territory."

Ash nodded, the confusion clear on his face. "Uh... okay then. You have a nice day Miss...."

Looking at him, she nodded curtly. "Willow. Of the Whitecoats. Just be making your way towards Blank and you won't have any trouble from us."

With that, Willow and the other two Whitecoats turned and walked away from us, towards the relay. On her coat I could make out a black tree worked into the fabric. The other two had no such design, and I assumed there that she was in some sort of position of power amongst whoever the Whitecoats were.

Glancing at Ash, I got back only a confused shrug. So our wasteland expert didn't know who the Whitecoats were. Great.

With that, we turned and gave the relay a wide berth, so that we didn't bring down the wrath of these similarly adorned ponies. I didn't know if they were a gang, an army, a cult, or even just a band like us. They weren't raiders or slavers, I could tell that much by them not attacking us. They'd expected us to attack them. Strange.

Before long, we came within sight of Blank. At least, I was sure it was Blank. There had been some renovations since I'd last been here.

The main gate was now much thicker, most of the walls were higher and looked much sturdier. There were more weapons lining the walls, with ponies manning them. Not too many more, but I guessed after Sweeps had walked in through the front door and massacred the two ponies on guard, the town had felt that better defenses were in order.

From one wall, I heard a pony shouting down at us. I couldn't hear him at first, but then I started getting snips of it. "...my dear sirs. Welcome to Blank. As you can see, my brother and I have been busy. We must thank you for steering our motley crew to this wonderful locale, the locals have been most accepting of traveling artisans and those they have deemed to save from the wastes...."

Oh great. It was coming back to me. Bulkhead. The pony that talked. I'd not thought of the slaves that Ash and I had rescued at all. I'd honestly forgotten about them, but I'd had so much happen in the last... had it really only been a week? It seemed like too much had happened to fit into a week.

As we approached through the torrent of words thrown at us from the longwinded pony, the gates opened and we were greeted by the ever surly Ironsight. Standing there, weapon at the ready, he only nodded at me as we approached. Turning to Ash, he held out a hoof. "Kill any raiders?"

I'd forgotten that as well. A deal had been struck to profit off of the deaths of raiders. I hoped Ash had remembered, considering how many we'd killed.

Pulling a stained bag from his pack, presenting it to the guard pony. The bag full of ears, which I had not seen in quite some time. I hadn't even noticed that Ash was still collecting. Bag firmly in grasp, Ironsight nodded yet again. "I'll talk to Traffic. You done good, you'll be rewarded."

Turning, he left us there at the entrance to Blank.

When it had come down to it, Doc Care opened his door to us. To all of us. He told me that he was making an exception for me, just this once, since I apparently hadn't done as much damage to myself as he'd expected. The look on Shade's face as he had contemplated throwing me out on the street had

helped as well.

His look as he took in the burns, the new bullet holes, the bruises, the breaks.... it was not approving. But, in his words, "At least you didn't tear off all of your skin." He was quick to give me a splint and send me on my way with some Med-X.

He went to work on Ash, leaving Ivory and Fluster in the waiting room for their turns. Ivory still had the burn under her eye and I suspected that she had a few bullets in her, but I didn't know what Care would be able to do for Fluster. Her wounds were not the kind you could treat with surgery and medication.

As I stood out in the streets of Blank, my eyes wandered to Traffic's shop. The sign was fully back in place, the broken part of the T repaired with scrap metal. The demolished building nearby had been fully cleared away, an assortment of tents now in place.

I was getting the feeling that the group I had sent here were not the only refugees from the surrounding area to find shelter in Blank. With the raider activity increasing, I was sure that anypony left in Hoofington had been fleeing for their lives.

I began trotting across the street to say hello to Traffic, Shade following with a sense of trepidation about her. As I was about halfway across the road, I nearly tripped over a filly that came out of nowhere. Before I could apologize, she bit me and ran off to who I could assume was her mother, a light purple mare with a disappointing scowl aimed at her filly.

Nips. I could barely tell the bite apart from a gnashers, such was the strength the filly placed behind her assault. It was good to see her running around without chains on though, even if she was taking the freedom give to her and biting ponies with it.

Rubbing sorely at the bite, trying to ignore the look of surprise on Shade's face, I continued on my way, limping more than usual now that I had two metal braces on my legs. Care had mentioned that my front leg was almost all the way healed from what he could tell, it would probably just do it some good to keep the brace on for a little while longer.

Pushing open the door of Traffic's shop, I made my way in. She was behind the counter, sorting through a pile of junk, when she looked up. I'd bet that she hadn't expected to see the two of us, and her eyes betrayed that fact.

"Bandages... didn't expect to see you." Her eyes drifted past me to the blue mare following in my wake and narrowed angrily. "Shade! Where have you been? I had half the town scouring the wastes looking for you, I thought that you were dead."

Then the eyes came back to me. I'd dealt with worse at this point, nothing that she did or said could rattle me. I was a little slow to react to the wrench though, the metal tool hitting me right below my left eye. I found out then that the scar could still hurt if enough pressure was applied to the area.

"Fuck!" I fell over backwards, clutching my face. When I opened my eye, after a minute or so of rolling around the shop flooring shouting obscenities, the two mares were standing over me. Traffic's face was filled with rage, Shade's with deep concern.

"Why didn't you send her back? Do you know what can happen to a lone mare out there?! Do you?" She was screaming in my face, inches away from me at this point.

"Hey... I didn't... ow..... well, I brought her back in as good of shape as when she left." My mind was still swimming from the blow, and I stammered out the best excuse I could think of.

Halting her tirade, she looked at Shade. To my credit, she hadn't been injured while we'd been out. She

was in the best shape of any of us. Ash and I were broken, Ivory was scuffed, Fluster was messed up in ways I couldn't describe... but Shade was pristine.

Traffic nodded slowly as she saw that I spoke the truth. Shade was kneeling down over me, speaking soft and comforting words to me. The angry mare's features softened as she looked at us, then she cracked a grin. "So... there something going on between you two?"

Well... that could have gone worse.

Before too long, we were at the counter of her shop. She'd provided me some more Med-X, free of charge, to help along the head injury she had inflicted in her fit of rage. She wanted to know what had happened out in the wasteland, asking specifically about any forces that Neighwhere had in the field.

I related everything to her that I felt relevant. I left Pandemonium out entirely. I still had no idea how, or if, I could tell anypony about the demon in my pocket. Traffic would interject whenever she needed, commenting on my actions or some result.

Apparently the brothers, Bulkhead and Colonnade, had gotten to work as soon as they got here. They were working for food and shelter for both them and their charges, which I guess I would have already known if I'd actually listened to Bulkhead shouting at me from the wall. They were quite skilled architects, building up the walls and making sure that what had happened with Sweeps would not happen again.

Other refugees had also been coming in, apparently thanks to warnings from DJ Pon3 on the radio. I'd not listened other than that first time, and now wondered what I'd missed in the last week. I'd been either busy or underground, so not many chances to hear what words he had to say.

I was apparently now something of a local legend. I brought the word back to Hornsmith, a tiny beacon of hope. I'd have to tell Ash, he was probably looking for a good reason to get drunk.

I was just getting to Underhoof when Ironsight slammed open the doors. "Uh... you. You need to get to the Doc's place, right quick." He nodded towards me, and I wasn't sure if he didn't know my name or didn't care to say it. It didn't matter, as I was already rushing past him.

Out in the street, I saw several ponies approaching the clinic with curiosity in their eyes. Whatever had happened, it couldn't be good. I heard a sharp scream come from the clinic and started running faster.

Ramming through the front door, I found what was the commotion. Fluster was fully out of her robes and holding a scalpel in her mouth, staring with fear at Doc Care who had a bleeding cut across one cheek. Ivory was trying to approach the mare, but any time she did Fluster would slash at her.

"What the... Doc, what happened?" He glanced at me as I spoke, applying a dressing to his wound as he did so. It was only a superficial cut, but I guess he wanted to be on top of any injuries he had taken.

"Yer pegasus friend... she was bein' a bit twitchy. As soon as I touched her, she started screamin' and attacked me. I was only checkin' her for wounds."

Looking back at Fluster, I noticed that her mouth was moving around the wickedly sharp surgical tool. I leaned forward, straining to hear it but not getting within range of her. If she was swinging at Ivory, she would not hesitate to cut me.

"Never again. Never again. Never again. Never again."

I glanced over at Ash, who was more heavily bandaged than earlier but looked much better. He was hanging back behind Ivory, wary of being cut up by another member of that dysfunctional family. I knew he could hear her as well and I looked questioningly at him.

Shrugging, he scratched at one of his bandages. "I'm no shrink, Kick... but if I had to guess, she's not too keen on pegasi right now."

It hit me then. She'd undergone horrible treatment at the hooves of her sister, one of the only other pegasi I had ever seen down here. When we'd met her, she'd been living underground, not exactly a place for another pegasus to be. She'd distanced herself from her already rare race. Seeing another pegasus, especially one that had a knife, must have been just too much for her.

"Doc... I think you should leave the room." He looked at me, shocked that I should suggest he leave his own clinic. I had to reason him out. "She has issues with a certain pegasi... I didn't think it applied to all pegasi."

Doc glanced at her briefly before nodding. "Some injuries I can't help. Afraid of her own, that's a real shame." He turned and left the room, but hovered just out the door long enough to address Ivory. "Miss, if ya'd be kind enough to join me in the office, I can patch up that eye of yours."

Ivory looked at me, then back to Fluster. She clearly didn't want to leave her friend in this state, but I nodded my head towards the door. Slowly, she stood and walked after the floating doctor, leaving the four of us in the room. Fluster was already visibly calming down a bit now that Care had left, but she still had the scalpel in her mouth, her eye wild with fear.

"So... how do we calm her down?" I posed the question that was looming now in the room, but Shade and Ash just shrugged. We stood there, uselessly, for about a minute, just watching Fluster's breathing begin to slow.

It wasn't any of us that brought her down. From one of the bags that was piled in one corner, where Fluster had piled her belongings before her breakdown, sprang the little monster. Fern walked up to her. I half expected her to cut the little mongrel, and when she lowered her face towards the wolf pup I braced myself.

Fern licked her nose however, and she dropped the scalpel with a clatter. Scooping the little beast up into an embrace, she started crying. The three of us let out held breaths, and Ash snuck his tail in real quickly to remove the blade from the sobbing mare's reach.

"Ash... make sure she doesn't do anything dangerous..." I turned, noticing that Shade had already left the room. Pausing just inside the door, I cocked my head back at him. "Oh, and when Ivory's done, have her look after Fluster, then head over to Traffic's. I'm sure she'd like to see you." The griffin nodded as I turned and left.

Back on the street, I held a hoof to my head in exasperation. I'd thought that leaving Fluster with Ivory would have been fine. Apparently I was wrong.

The swish of a coat and a flash of white interrupted my facehoofing, though. Looking up, I saw the gate closing and the mare from before walking into the town. Willow of the Whitecoats.

I was suddenly struck with a strong sense of déjà vu. This was exactly like when I'd seen Sweeps that first time. An out of place mare walking towards me. An air of menace.

I tensed up, ready for a fight, but the mare kept walking. Striding past me, she didn't even give me a glance before heading for the tavern. I watched after her for a moment before heading into Traffic's shop.

"Oh, you're back. What was all the fuss?" Once again, she was rummaging through the pile of salvage that never seemed to get any smaller. She had yet to meet Fluster or Ivory, but I had a feeling that she would like the two mares.

"Just a misunderstanding between the Doc and our friend." Shade was much more comfortable around

Traffic than I'd seen her around most ponies. It was sort of surprising to hear her speaking to somepony other than myself without the small hint of fear that I could normally pick out in her voice.

Traffic nodded softly at Shade, a little grin on her face. "So, you were talking about what you were doing out in that big world?" She must get really bored, if she had been waiting so intently for me to continue my story.

"Yeah, I'll get to that, but first I have a question." She lifted a brow, her head propped up on her legs on the counter. I gestured out the door and continued. "The Whitecoats. Who are they? Are they with Neighwhere?"

If she'd been drinking something, she would have sprayed it in my face. Once the laughter died down, she wiped an eye and took a deep breath. "Don't let any of them hear you say that. They don't take kindly to being associated with raiders."

Lifting herself up, she gestured around her store. "You see how a lot of my ammunition is gone? They bought most of it. Caps and trade. Been good customers, a real boon to this town."

"So that's why Willow can just walk in the front gate without the welcoming committee?" Glancing around, I noticed that the shelves were indeed a bit emptier than they had been a week before. Substantially so.

"You know Willow already? You just got back, that was fast."

"We ran into her on the way into town. They've settled down in the relay, wouldn't let us near it."

Nodding, she glanced out the door. "Yeah, they might be a bit suspicious, but you should talk to Willow about that. They have their reasons. I think the two of you might get to be good friends."

A glare from Shade made Traffic laugh. "Not like that. Don't worry, Shade. Willow won't try to steal your very special somepony. Trust me, she doesn't have the time for it."

Shade just grunted, a little noise that sounded pretty funny coming from her, but nodded anyways. I couldn't help but smile any time the blue mare was jealous.

The entrance of our griffin companion to the shop interrupted whatever it was we had going on, as he walked in, nodding politely at the smirking merchant. "Good day, Miss Traffic."

The smirk changed to a smile as she beamed up at the griffin for a split second before it devolved into a scowl. "Ashred, what happened to you? Did you let Ripple do first aid?"

Shaking his head with a chuckle, he surprisingly jumped to my defense. "Nah, this was all Intensive Care and Miss Shade here. I got cut up a bit, Kick donated his bandages to the cause of keeping this griffin alive and flapping."

"Well... I guess I can respect that." Traffic's scowl softened, but it didn't return to a smirk. "Your savior..." the sarcasm dripped from that word, "...was just filling me in on what you've been up to this last week."

The griffin went to stand between myself and the merchant, cutting the direct line of sight she had been taking full advantage of to give me the stink eye. Leaning on the counter, he picked lazily through Traffic's eternal pile of miscellaneous scrap. He had his back to me, but I could tell that he was grinning.

"Kick, you and Miss Shade run along. I'll fill in the rest of the story. Go have lunch. Find the girls, make a day of it."

Ash. Always saving the day.

I nodded at his back, took a second to question why I had just done that, then headed for the door with a short, "Always a pleasure, Traffic." Shade stuck to her chosen place at my side, and then we were back out into the street. Glancing around, I spotted a few of the townspories here and there, an occasional coat of white visible.

I always felt weird at times like this. Nowhere to go. No pony trying to kill me. Nothing immediately pressing.

Free time.

"So... want to get something to eat?" Shade glanced up at me, a smile on her face and a nod bobbing her head.

Eating at the bar, which really was the only place for out of towners to get food, was a lot friendlier than the last time I'd been in here. This time, me getting into a battle that destroyed a chunk of the town wasn't weighing on everypony's minds. My turning on the relay and sending the brothers from Trottingham to the town, however, were common topics. I had to turn away several attempts to buy me drinks, and dissuade any mares that wanted to talk to me from doing so. Shade got that look in her eyes any time one of them would approach.

Finally, two mares that she didn't automatically scowl at arrived. Ivory led the way, Fluster slinking in behind her. I could tell that she was excessively nervous, even from across the bar, and had to wonder if it was a good idea for her to be around this many ponies she didn't know.

Ivory had a fresh bandage on her cheek, just under her eye, and she had styled her hair in a way that it was not visible. She wasn't in her armor, her machine gun and equipment left elsewhere, but she did have a bandage wrapped across her midsection. She'd taken shrapnel from the grenade back in Orchard, but I guessed none of it got in very deep, or she would still be at Doc Care's as he cut her open to get at it.

Pulling up to the table where Shade and I were eating, the pale mare smiled broadly at us. "Ash told us you were on a date. Thought we'd come in and check how it was going."

So he tells us to go off and enjoy ourselves, then he sends the girls to check up on us. I facehoofed mentally. Ivory sat down next to me, Fluster cramming herself into the booth across from me next to Shade. Curling up to hide as much of her as she could, her eye was only peaking over the table at Ivory and myself.

"We came to see if we could take Shade off of your hooves for a bit. Fluster needs some new robes, Ash told us we could talk to somepony named Traffic about that." I glanced across at Shade, who caught my eye and nodded.

"Sure. Traffic is a nice pony, I'm sure she can help you out. I think you'll like her, Fluster." Shade spoke softly to Fluster, apparently just as aware as I was of how the pegasus had been handling everything since the run in with her psychotic sister. Fluster nodded slowly, bringing a small growl from one of her bags. Fern, I guessed.

"Ripple... you don't mind if I cut our date short, do you? A girls' day would probably be good for all of us." As if I could say no when her eyes were both on me. I got lost in them for a few seconds, then shook off the nearly hypnotic effects and nodded.

"Sure. You girls need a break, and I've been hogging you all to myself."

Shade leaned across the table, kissing me on the cheek and whispering in my ear. "We'll continue later." A sly grin and she walked off, the other two mares following close behind. Ivory gave me a

knowing wink, and then I was alone in the bar.

Alone for all of five seconds.

The sound of a fluttering jacket was all the warning I got before Willow of the Whitecoats slid into the recently vacated seat across from me. A cold feeling under my chin was all the warning I had to know that there was a rather lethal piece of metal pressed against my throat from across the table.

Willow had a sword at my throat, levitated by a green aura. I hadn't even seen her draw it. The look on her face was deadly serious. "So. I let you pass out in the wastes. Then I find out you're a Paragon. You have five seconds to tell me why I shouldn't open your neck and bleed you out on this table."

Oh yeah. Traffic was dead on. We were becoming fast friends, me and the mare with the sword.

Thinking fast, I said the first thing that came to my mind. "I left the Paragons. Killing me would help them."

Staring at me, a calculating look in her eye, she didn't lower the sword. She also didn't slash my throat, so I had to assume that she was thinking over what I had said. Either she accepted, or I'd be dead. I doubted I could move quick enough to get Broken out or to kick her, considering that I hadn't even seen her draw the sword.

After the longest ten seconds of my life, she removed the sword from my throat. The sword spun in the air and slid into a scabbard at her side underneath the cloak. That explained the glimpse of metal I had gotten. The sword had a twin on her opposite side, both of which were easily concealed by the long white coat she wore.

"Very well. Explain. Leave out nothing. I won't sheath my blade without drawing blood next time."

Today was becoming less about free time and more about recounting the tale of the events that had made up the last eighteen days. There were no distractions, no ponies running in and drawing me away from the white clad mare across the table from me. She sat in rapt attention as I started in the field and went all the way up to current day.

I left out some details, as I had before. Pandemonium. Budding Leaf's memory. My cutting a deal with Flurry. Things nopony really needed to know.

Her face was a passive canvas, only the occasional hint of any emotion or interest. I caught glimpses of a smirk when I talked about the deaths of Sweeps and Holepunch. Slight nods at Underhoof and Stadium.

The most I got from her was when it came to Orchard and Broken Arrow. Sitting back in her seat, put a hoof to her chin, as though pondering something. Her eyes left me and she stared at the table as I talked about the Steel Rangers and the disabled robot army.

"Very interesting." Finally, she smiled and reached a hoof across the table towards me. I placed my hoof against it and we shook. "I'm Willow, it's nice to meet you Ripple."

I sighed in relief. As far as I could tell, she was treating the situation much as I was. Two Kick was dead. Ripple was not the same pony. That just seemed to make interacting with ponies so much easier.

Now that she was smiling and the threat of my neck being opened like a bag of soup was gone, I felt that I could ask her questions. The most pressing one first though.

"So, Willow, who are the Whitecoats? I couldn't get a straight answer out of anypony, other than that you and I should be friends."

I nodded, not wanting to divert from my question. I was concerned by the growing number of

Whitecoats I had seen in the town, hoping that it would not come down to another fight in this quiet haven.

“We hunt raiders. That’s what we do. When the radio turned back on, Pon-3 started warning of increasing raider numbers in Hornsmith. We followed our calling. Came up from the south, killed every raider we could find.”

I grinned. I liked the sound of that. I was also glad that I left out mention of the raiders in the forest that I had let leave with their lives. It didn’t seem that she would take too kindly to my mercy.

“So you all just decided to hunt raiders one day?”

She shook her head gravely. “Every Whitecoat has a different story. Families murdered, atrocities committed. Rape, torture, loss. We were all victims at one point or another. We banded together. Decided to fight back.”

As she spoke, I couldn’t help but wonder what had been done to her. It was fairly obvious what had happened to me, the scar on my face was a permanent reminder of what happened when anypony got too close to raiders.

“You should stop by the relay. Get to know everypony. We can talk. Strategy.”

The way that she spoke was a little hard to follow, but I nodded along. Seeing the relay would be an interesting diversion. I was a little curious how many Whitecoats there actually were, and if Willow ran the entire thing by herself. I couldn’t even run lead our little group by myself, I wondered how a single mare could command dozens.

Leaning forward a bit, I posed another question. “Can I bring a friend?”

She smirked. “Don’t trust us? Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll tell my ponies to not shoot.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I’ve been shot enough for this lifetime.” Tapping my scar with a hoof, I drew attention to that fact.

Both of our attentions were diverted when another Whitecoat entered the bar. I recognized him as one of the ponies that had been with Willow when we’d first met, and he headed straight for our table as soon as he spotted the mare at my table.

Upon reaching us, he glanced briefly before leaning forward and whispering urgently in Willow’s ear. She looked at him questioningly, to which he nodded, to which she nodded back. The buck turned and trotted back the way he came, out the door and into the street. Willow looked after him briefly before turning to me.

“I am needed at the relay... would you like to see it?”

I couldn’t really say no. It seemed that I had found what I had originally gone looking for in Orchard. Allies. Ponies to help me stop Hate. They had numbers, weapons, and drive. I had to see just how much.

Nodding, I answered her in the affirmative. “It’s been a while since I was at the relay. I’m curious to see what you’ve done with the place.”

The Whitecoat nodding, standing up from the table. “Then follow me.” She led the way out of the tavern, with me following behind. I thought briefly of how Shade would react to this, but I’d only be gone for a little bit. I’d go out, take a look at the relay and the Whitecoats, and be back before she’d even know I was gone.

In the street, the pony that had just walked into the tavern to get Willow’s attention was waiting. A

unicorn wearing white jacket with a hood built into it, I could see a chaotic pattern of scar tissue around his neck and head.

The pony nodded at Willow and glared at me as I followed. "Easy Rhapsody. Ripple has my backing. He's coming back to the relay with us."

Rhapsody grumbled, but accepted Willow's word as law, falling in behind us as I walked along next to the mare towards the gate. Ironsight was standing guard over the heavily reinforced entryway and opened it as we approached. Once past, the door closed with a loud clang, leaving the three of us out in the wasteland.

For once, though, it did not feel as though an attack was seconds away. I didn't know why, but I was getting overly hopeful that the Whitecoats were everything they claimed to be. They almost seemed too good to be true.

I'd find out when I got to the relay. I would decide then.

Now that I got a closer look at the relay, I had to give it to the Whitecoats. When first I had been here, I'd walked right through the front door. Now, I couldn't even get within sight of the front door without feeling several rifle scopes centering in on my face. The feeling went away, but only when the snipers saw Willow. The glint of glass on the tops of buildings disappeared, the only real evidence I had to back up my theory of snipers.

The surrounding buildings had been partially demolished, a crude stone wall built around the relay. A large wagon had been claimed from somewhere and was serving as the front gate, rolling off to one side to allow the three of us entry to the Whitecoat compound.

It was like the mirror of the raider encampment surrounding Stadium. The Whitecoats were clean, efficient, and well drilled. I could see several inside the building, as well as a number on patrol within the wall. They weren't messing around.

Rhapsody peeled off from us once we were past the gate, leaving me to follow Willow through the front door. In the back of my head, I could hear the screaming that had heralded my last trip through the door. Part of me was expecting insane raiders to leap out from every side door and hallway, but each time a pony appeared they were well armed and garbed in the general look associated with this organization.

When we reached the center of the building, I was actually kind of amazed. Where once I had fought off several raiders, there was now an armory. Weapons of all size and shape, from pistols to rocket launchers, lay on shelves that had been scavenged from the rest of the building. Around the freight elevator in the middle of the room, which I noticed was lit up and appeared to be fully functional, ponies were working at tables cleaning and rebuilding weapons, pressing ammo, and drilling in hoof to hoof combat.

"Willow, welcome back." A pony with a limp and burn scars that made my own look like a stubbed hoof was approaching from between a pair of shelves loaded down with weapons. Willow smiled broadly at the aged stallion, a look of respect in her eyes. To me... he looked strangely familiar, which in my experience was never a good sign.

"And who do we have here...." The elder stallion trailed off as he saw me, turning into a snarl as he lunged backwards, snatching a rifle off of the shelf next to him and aiming it at me, propping it up on a front leg in a stance I'd never seen before.

"Willow, were you aware that you brought a Paragon with you?" His eye, sighting at me down the top

of the rifle. The weapon was designed to be held like this I noticed, it was not of any kind I'd seen before. Down the length of the barrel, his eye was narrowed with a very hateful look. The shattered remains of a horn sat on his forehead.

The hoof wrapped around the trigger was attached to a burnt leg... on which there was a blackened PipBuck.

Hah. Hey, Uncle Square Deal survived, I coulda sworn he would have died after what we did to him.

Again, the voice knew more about me than I did.

I took a step back, confused. Uncle? I had an Uncle outside of Neighwhere? "Uh.... Uncle?"

The standing pony snarled at me. "Don't you 'uncle' me! I should shoot you right here!"

Willow was suddenly between us, holding a hoof towards Square Deal. "Hold on now. Let me explain! He's not a Paragon."

"Bullshit! He was there, my nephew 'Two-Kick Rip'. He did nothing when Hate had me shot and burnt." His hoof tightened around the trigger, and I couldn't help but be aware that the barrel was aimed just over Willow's head, straight between my eyes. If he fired, it wouldn't matter if she was between the weapon and myself.

"Listen..... Uncle. She's right, I'm not a Paragon. Not anymore. I... can't say that I really remember you, but everything from before Hate shot me is still a blur."

That eye narrowed, critical of my every move, watching for me to try anything. Slowly, very slowly, he lowered the weapon. "So... Hate finally tried to do you in as well? What was it? He view you as a potential threat? Get tired of having you running errands for him? Find somepony better?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just woke up in a field with a hole in my face."

He nodded, a snarl on his lips. "That was mighty nice of Hate. Just shooting you. He set me on fire, then shot me in the back as I ran."

Another pony that had been hurt by Hate. This time, the victim was family.

"Listen. Raw Deal. I didn't know that Ripple was your nephew. I do know that he's not a Paragon anymore. He's helping ponies. Killing Raiders. He's killed two Paragons personally in the last week." Willow approached the buck with the rifle, putting a hoof on the barrel and slowly pushing it the rest of the way down, until the weapon was aimed at the ground.

Sighing, he placed the weapon back on the shelf, with a number of other strangely shaped rifles. Were there other ponies here that could use a weapon like that? It just seemed so... strange.

Dropping back down to all four hooves, the older stallion sighed. "I'm too old for this shit. Willow, show him around, then send him on his way." Turning, he left us behind. As he left the room, I caught a glimpse of another pony intercepting him with a hug, the then two disappeared.

Willow turned to me. "Sorry. I didn't think Raw Deal would react like that."

"He's.... my uncle? Does the name Square Deal mean anything?"

Willow stiffened up as I said it and shot me a quick look. "If you don't want Raw Deal to shoot you, I wouldn't say that name."

I nodded. Message received. It would probably just be for the best that I avoided my uncle. "So... Raw Deal. What does he do here? What was up with how he held that gun?"

Glancing over at the rack of weapons, Willow smiled. "I'm not sure where he learned how to fight, but

he's good. He trains our new members. Turn them from victims into warriors. Proper Whitecoats. We would be nothing without him."

Stepping towards the weapons, I nodded my head towards one. "Can I try?"

Smirking, she nodded.

I picked up one of the rifles with my magic, standing on my hind legs as he had. I did my best to imitate how he had held the rifle, but the first issue I ran into was standing on my hind legs. I couldn't imagine how Ash did this so frequently, I had very little balance like this. Aiming the weapon was next to impossible as I wobbled about on my rear legs.

A choked back sound told me that Willow had started laughing at my attempts, so I snatched the weapon up from my hooves with magic and placed it back on the shelf. Falling back down onto my hooves, I shook my head. "Yeah, I'll stick with magic for that."

"Stay here. I'll be right back." Willow had stopped laughing at me, turning towards a row of lockers. She was only gone briefly, before she returned with a white cloth floating alongside her. Reaching for me, she muttered, "Hold still."

The cloth went around my neck, and I tensed up. Was she trying to kill me? No... she would have used a sword. She stepped back and I felt the cloth's slight weight settle around my neck.

In what I assumed she felt was a very formal voice, she spoke. "With this, you are recognized by the Whitecoats. You won't be bothered as long as you display this token."

I nodded. I'd made my decision. As far as I could tell, the Whitecoats were on the level. Heavily armed, well motivated, they hadn't thrown me in a fucking jail cell. All good points.

"Thanks, Willow. I won't abuse the privilege."

The mare in the long coat nodded, a grin creeping onto her face. "Always glad to bring strong ponies into the fold. Now I have business I must attend to. You can look around, or you can head back to Blank." She tilted her head towards where Raw Deal had walked, but I shook my head. I'd head back to Blank, I really didn't think that my uncle was too keen to see me.

Checking my PipBuck, I saw that I'd already been gone for a few hours. It would probably be best to head back, especially since I hadn't told anypony where I was going. If they asked Ironsight, they'd know, but I wasn't sure they'd think of that.

"I need to get back. I'll be in touch, I need to talk to you about something. Not now, but later."

The mare nodded, and I turned and left. Passing several more Whitecoats in the halls, including Rhapsody, I made my way back outside and through the mobile gate.

As soon as I was out of the gate, the thought struck me that I hadn't been alone in quite some time. There had been the period of time between when I woke up, and when I first met Shade, but other than that I had had at least one travelling companion at all times.

The walk back to Blank was a lonely one.

I could hear the sounds of Blank, primarily that of continued construction as the brothers from Trottingham were leading further reinforcement of the walls. In only a few minutes, I'd be back in town, then I could continue my date with Shade.

I hoped that she hadn't found out I'd left the town with Willow. Thinking back, it might have been a bad idea, considering how jealous Shade got at even the mention of me being near another mare.

Leaving town with one might push her over an edge. I'd really have to make it up to her if that were the case.

"Hey there handsome."

I froze in place, whipping Broken out and aiming it to my right between two buildings. I knew that voice. I did not want to be hearing that voice again.

Cinder Trails.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, allowing us to travel through this land.

Also, thanks to my editor ErrantIndy, for his work. Truly, he is the Most Interesting Mule.

As always, fave/vote/comment/track if you enjoyed reading this.

Chapter 12: Unbound

“Hey there Handsome.”

That was all I needed to hear before Broken was out and aimed. I wasn't going to waste words with her, not this time. I had to kill her.

The orange mare stood close enough that I could smell the harsh scent I'd picked up last time, and that was easily within range of the buckshot I had loaded. I would need to get away from her, load in some heavier ammunition. For now, I had to keep her occupied.

Broken barked as the buckshot tore through the air towards her face, but she stepped to the side slightly as the bullets hit the heat shield that I hadn't noticed shimmering around her. Flashes of flame, and the airborne lead was redirected to the side, peppering a dilapidated building with a few new holes.

She took a step towards me, a pleading look on her face. “Listen, Two Kick, I want to talk. I'm not here to fight you. We can go about this your way, but you'll run out of ammo before I run out of fire. Then I'll make you listen to me.”

I'd only fired one shot, but it looked like she'd learned a new trick since we'd last met. A slight burn scar across her neck showed where Ash's round had hit her, so I guessed she'd looked into methods other than melting to stop bullets.

Fuck.

“Fuck.”

The mare grinned as I spoke out loud. I kept the weapon on her, but didn't pull the trigger. She was still the single most lethal thing I'd met in the wastes, and as far as I could tell I was at her mercy right now. “Good boy. I knew that I could still get through to you.”

Taking a step towards me, she put on the most seductive face I'd ever seen. I smiled for only the briefest moment, thinking of how jealous that look would make Shade, but it was a moment too long. Cinder caught on to the smile and grinned slyly.

“See. I knew that you were still in there somewhere. I've gotten awful lonely without my buckbuddy, you know.” She held a hoof out towards me and patted the air with it. “Now put Broken down, so we can... chat.”

Oh yeah. Come on, put it down. This could be fun.

I felt the air around me beginning to heat up... she'd be able to fry my lungs if I tried anything. I wanted so desperately to kill her right then...

Yeah. Kill. That's the word you're looking for. Right.

Damn it all, shut up!

I slowly lowered Broken to the ground and kicked it away with a hoof. I still had my ballistic hooves, and if I had to lose all the skin on my legs to kill her, I was willing to take that chance. Doc Care would be furious, but the wasteland would be down another Paragon. It would be worth it.

Once Broken was away, I felt the heat lowering, even though she was getting closer. Cinder was now practically nose to nose with me, a playful look in her eyes. I met it with my angriest stare.

I didn't see the kiss coming. I pushed her away with a hoof, but she shook her head with a “Nuh uh, no

fighting.” The air around me jumped in temperature noticeably in just that moment, a warning more than anything.

She returned to the kiss. It was long and deep, and I hated every second of it.

Sure you did. You can't lie to me.

The voice in my head was coming back more and more. It was like Cinder had the exact opposite effect on me that Shade did. His voice was constantly at the edge of my mind now, crystal clear and growing in volume. If I didn't get away from her, I was beginning to worry that I'd lose myself.

Once she stepped back from the kiss, her eyes were hooded and she had a goofy grin. “Oh... I'm so glad I didn't kill you. I missed that. I'd ask if you want to go any further, but... you know. The whole you'll try to kill me thing.”

I sighed. “Get to the point, or kill me.” I'd been lit on fire once already; the experience had not been pleasant. I hoped that if she decided to kill me, it would at least be quick.

“Ah... no foreplay? You always used to like it.”

“Then I died. Get to the point.”

Scowling, she gave a little huff. “Fine. So anyways, I was thinking... I don't hate you anymore. I'd like you to come back, I'm sure that I could convince Hate to bring you back in.” As she talked, she started smiling and bounced a little with each word.

I laughed at her coldly. “If you don't recall, he's the one that shot me in the face. I don't think he'd take me back.” Shaking my head in disbelief, I continued. “Besides... I'm not Two Kick anymore. Why would I want to help a raiding, pillaging, murdering fuckhead?”

“So... you won't come back?” Surprisingly, tears sprung to the psychotic mare's eyes. Her goggles were around her neck, or I suspect she would have filled them quickly. She stomped at the ground briefly, sobbing out. “It's not fair! Why won't you come back?!”

“It's simple, Cinder. I'm going to kill the Paragons. All of you.”

A snap and hiss came from her heat shield, and then I felt a few drops on my coat. Rain. I suddenly wondered how well a fire wielding pony would do in the rain. Would I get the hoof up that I needed?

She opened her mouth to respond, but the sky opened up and unleashed a torrent. It must have been holding back for a while, to drop this much water so quickly. The drizzle turned into a downpour with a great haste, filling the air with a constant hissing as the water struck her shield and flashed to steam. I saw her eyes narrow in concentration, the tears gone from them. “Shit. That's not good.”

I took that as my chance and lunged forward, kicking out with a front leg. As my leg passed through the weakened heat shield, most of it was protected by the PipBuck but pain still shot through my hoof and upper leg as my flesh burned. It was worth it though, as I lay a solid blow on her jaw, throwing her away from me.

Taking my chance, I bolted away from her, towards Broken. As I dove, I grabbed the weapon from where it had landed with my magic, snapping it up and tucking it against me. Landing, I rolled to my hooves and jumped, spinning, further away from her. Broken snapped out from where I'd been holding it at my side as I took a shot at the mare in mid leap. She was standing from where she'd fallen after she hit the wall, and I let out a whoop of victory as the buckshot only changed direction slightly once it hit the shield. It tore into one of her shoulders, throwing a spray of blood to sizzle against the inside of the shield.

Screaming in pain, she sent a ball of flame shooting at me. I rolled, the fireball just missing me and

slamming into a crumbling storefront, blowing out the facade in a rain of debris and glass. I fired again, but she threw up a wall of blue flame which blocked her from my sight. The roar of the collapsing building drowned out everything else, so I couldn't tell if I'd hit her or not.

Despite the pouring rain, the flames continued in both the street and scattered about where the building was settling. A thick fog was also setting in, the rain evaporating in the heat of the fight. As the building settled, it was almost peaceful until I realized I could hear her screaming through the rain.

Her scream of pain turned to one of rage, as she shrieked at me through the noise. "I was willing to give you another choice, and this is how you respond!? That's it, no more chances! It doesn't matter how I feel, apparently, so I should have no trouble broiling you!"

The building next where I thought she was exploded outwards, the mare now covered in her fire dragon as she leapt through the burning debris. Through the flames, I could make out that one of her legs was soaked in blood, bleeding from her damaged shoulder.

I fired again, the buckshot melting rapidly as it hit the dragon. She'd gone back to her less subtle defense, which was not boding well for me. Two shots left before I had to reload, and I doubted I'd get away with kicking her again. The flesh on my front leg was already beginning to blister, most of the hair gone from it, aside from what hair I assumed still remained under the durable PipBuck.

A claw built of fire swept out at me, which I barely dodged. She was fast, and I was only just getting out of the way each time. I'd slip up at this rate, and then it would all be over. I needed something to help.

Stampede. You have it. Use it. Let me in, I'll end the bitch.

Fuck... I'd been doing so well at ignoring the voice... but for once I had to agree with him. I was going to lose at this rate. That feeling was compounded as I dodged a tail made of flame that cut through the wall of the building I was covering behind.

I was still a couple minutes away from Blank, and I was sure that they'd send somepony out to investigate the explosions and gunshots, but by then I would probably be dead. Then what was to stop Cinder from walking up to Blank and leveling the town? Nothing.

I needed to use stampede.

Amidst the clouds of dust being quickly turned to a gooey mud and the fogbank coming off of Cinder as she hunted for me, I slipped in behind an old rusted carriage. Pulling one of the little red containers, I looked at it for just a second.

In that second, every part of my body lit up with withdrawal symptoms that I had somehow managed to ignore. My muscles ached, my brain hurt, my skin hurt. The little red promise of absolute power was just floating there in front of me.

I slammed the needle into my side, feeling the effects of the drug immediately. My body had been waiting for so long for this... I'd been getting slower and weaker every day that I didn't have it flowing through my veins, driving me to new peaks of physical achievement.

The hiss crackle of the fire dragon came into the alleyway where I was letting the world turn red. I could hear her breathing, each individual drop of rain evaporating as it hit the incendiary projection, I could even hear the blood coming out of her shoulder.

Bracing myself between the wall and the carriage, I kicked with all of my might. It was a lighter model, which helped, as the carriage rocketed towards her, catching fire as it neared but still slamming into her. The flaming carriage burst, sending scraps of wood, metal, and one very pissed off pony back into the street.

Screaming in rage, she leapt back into the alley, but I was already there. Sliding in underneath her, our eyes connected briefly before she reacted, sweeping flame in underneath her. I guess she knew me better than I had expected, as she blocked in the exact place that I was aiming my rear kicks. If they had connected, the blast would have gutted her, and this fight would have been done with.

My hoofguns connected with what I could only describe as solid fire. It burned like a bitch, but the weapons still triggered at the contact, launching their deadly payload into the very solid shield that she had thrown at me. There was an explosion, a clap of pressure throwing the mare violently off of me and back out into the street.

The dragon was gone, only a slight haze of heat surrounding her the only indication that she had any magic still going, but even that wavered as she got shakily to her hooves. She coughed, spattering blood across the pavement. She was hurt, but so was I. I could feel, just at the edge of the red that was my world, that that move had really cost me. I was burnt. Badly. Again.

My mouth opened. "Oh Cinder! I missed this. Missed you! You were always such fun. So here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna break your horn, break your legs, and have some fun with you. It will be like old times, just much less pleasant."

I mentally reeled from that. What did I just say? That wasn't me, that wasn't something I'd say.

Oh fuck. That wasn't me.

My body took a step towards her, a sadistic grin slathered across my face. Her face turned to fear and she scooted away from me. "Two Kick? Oh my Luna..." She sounded terrified, her eyes wide as she stared at me approaching her. The fire fully flickered out, leaving her there, cold and alone in the middle of the street. Rain still poured down, putting out most of the fires in the area in seconds.

Is this really what I had been like before?

I had to get control back before I did something horrible. I had to get my body back... especially before anypony else showed up. They couldn't see me like this...

My body flexed and stretched, pausing in his approach to the terrified mare. "Wow, this is so liberating. I've been locked up in here for weeks, watching this dumbfuck stumble around and get in all sorts of trouble." He tapped the side of my head with our hoof, as if indicating me. I was powerless, with no control of my body. Is this how the voice felt all the time? I would do anything I could to get out of here... no wonder he was constantly suggesting stampede. He must have known it would give him an in.

We were standing over Cinder now, where she had stopped trying to crawl away as we caught up, looking down at her as she lay in a puddle in the middle of the street, tears streaming down her face. If those eyes were on any other mare, I think that I would have done anything I could to save her. They seemed out of place on this psychotic arsonist, the eyes of a scared victim. "Please... don't."

He grinned, using my mouth, and leaned down next to her ear. "You know, all the pain that he felt, I felt too. I have a lot to pay you back for."

Let me back in! Celestia, let me back in! Please!

"Stop fighting. This is my time. You had your turn." He spoke directly to me, and then he kicked Cinder in the head, once and just powerful enough to knock her unconscious. She almost looked innocent as she lay there, unconscious, under our hooves. My hooves. Damn it.

He reached down and stroked the side of her face. "Oh, you're not gonna be pretty when I'm done with you." He licked the side of her face, and I found that I could still taste. She tasted horrible. Like acid and ash. Whatever gave off that chemical smell, she apparently bathed in the stuff.

“Ech... you still use that stuff, don’t you? You never were the best tasting pony.” He wasn’t nearly as disgusted by it as I was though, I guess that he’d tasted it before. That led my mind down a path I didn’t want it going, and I pulled back. I had to do something before my body raped an unconscious mare.

Reaching down, he rolled her over so that she was on her back. He licked his lips as he looked down at her prone form, nothing good going through his head. My head. Come on... come on...

An impact from the side threw us off of her, bouncing down the street. Two Kick, clearly more experienced with this body than I was, caught himself on one hoof and kicked, springing up to all four hooves. He fell to the side as he landed though, a sharp pain tearing through him. Through me. Us. This was confusing.

He’d been shot. I’d been shot. It was suddenly a lot harder to breath, and as he looked to the side we saw the hole in our barding. Blood was pouring out. The bullet had hit something major, and I was pretty sure the bullet had collapsed a lung as it went into my chest cavity.

We coughed, a mist of blood escaping our lips, and fell to our knees. There was a sniper out there... a good one. Two Kick was scanning the rooftops, even as our eyelids started getting heavy. “Oh Skyline... you bitch... how could you shoot me?”

He collapsed onto his side and faded out of consciousness, the effects of the drug wearing off as rapidly as ever. Once his eyes closed, however, I fought for all that I was worth in the darkness. Two Kick was out... this was my chance.

I coughed, a deep pain in my side and chest, and opened my eyes. I couldn’t see much, there was too much darkness creeping in on the corners of my vision. Luckily, Two Kick was still out, so his voice was not there, granting me a small bit of piece. Now I just had to deal with the issue at hoof.

I was laying in the middle of the road, a hole in my side, an increasing amount of blood pooling around me, and nopony knew that I was here. Was I really going to die like this? It seemed almost... anticlimactic. Getting taken out by a sniper after a fight like that... it was a waste.

Glancing over, I could just make out Cinder getting up and shaking her head. Another pony shape, this one carrying a heavy rifle on a battle saddle, was running down the street towards her. When the two met up, they turned and headed off, leaving me alone in the street.

Cinder had survived. That wasn’t good... but she hadn’t been raped and tortured. So I could still chalk that one up as a victory I guessed.

Now.... what? I’d just die here and hope that Ash came along to get the box I still carried. It had been pretty stupid of me to go off with the cubes, not telling anypony where I was going.

Though it was sheer luck that Cinder and the other Paragon, Skyline, hadn’t come and looted me. They would have given Hate exactly what he wanted. Me dead, the cubes in his possession, there’d be nothing to stop whatever it was that he was planning.

As I died, again, all I saw was a flash of white fabric sweeping over my vision, coupled with what sounded like a gunshot. Huh, that hadn’t happened before.

I found myself in that field of endless white. It was different from the flash before I went down, but I still knew exactly where I was. I was in my own head. I’d been here once before.

“Hello, my messy pony. Well isn’t this interesting?” The voice, smooth as a razor, purred from behind me. I glanced backwards, finding only Pandemonium’s eyes floating in the air. Off to one side, I saw

the ragged form of Two Kick, unconscious on the ground with a pool of blood forming around him.

“Quite interesting. I try and try to get in touch with you, but your troublesome little box hampers all of my attempts. That and your violent friend there. I guess with him indisposed, I can slip into your head just a bit. Enough to talk to you in your weakest moment.”

“So, what, am I dead?” I was pretty sure that I was dead, but with how many times it had happened, I guess I really could never tell. I’d come back from worse.

“No, you’re not dead. Not yet. You still haven’t pulled off your part of my little proposal. It’s not quite a deal, your little marefriend made sure of that when she cut me off last time. How is she, by the way?” The eyes were just floating around me, narrow slits of golden malevolence.

“You don’t need to know about her. This is between you and me.” I wasn’t going to let him get near Shade. I wasn’t going to let him get near anypony. This was just him and both of me, here in my mind.

“Well, I am half trapped with you. I can’t touch my other pieces from in that accursed case, so you’re all I have. My messy pony. My savior.” His voice, so warm but completely without a hint of kindness, was rather hard to ignore.

“So I’m carrying two monsters with me. Good to know.” I pointed a hoof at him. “You better be able to pull off your part. If I get the other cubes, you end this. End this and then you leave.”

He nodded, or at least his eyes bobbed up and down in what I assumed was a nod, and his voice drifted from everywhere yet again. “Don’t worry, my messy pony. I am a god of his word. You do your part and I will do mine.”

His eyes glanced off into the distance and he sighed audibly. “Very well then. I will be seeing you around, but don’t be such a stranger. Crack open the box occasionally. I won’t bite, and I’ve grown tired of having a lack of conversation partners.”

As if I would open the box for anything other than to put in a new Cube.

Wait, why was he bidding farewell to me?

Ceiling. Wall. A couch. Shade sleeping fitfully.

What was this? The third time I’d woken up on this bed? I lifted a hoof, an ache going through my side. At least it was me doing the lifting. I’d won out on that battle.

Seeing Two Kick broken and bleeding in my mind had given me hope that I would be in control when I woke up, but when it came to how my mind worked, I could only guess. It was getting crowded up there.

Opening my mouth to speak, I could only let out a groan. My throat hurt. I’d been out for a while. It had seemed only to be a few minutes in my head, but I could tell that it had been much longer.

Shade was there, almost instantly, at my side. Her eyes had that deep concern that I loved, but hated seeing since it almost always meant that I’d been horribly injured. She wasn’t hugging me, which I was glad of. There had been a sizable hole in me the last I’d checked, and the area was still rather tender.

I coughed, clearing my throat, before I rasped out. “How long?”

She smiled at me, giving me a quick kiss on the nose, before answering. “Two nights. It’s about noon.” She kissed me again. The she smacked me, just lightly enough to sting but not do any damage. “What were you thinking? Heading out on your own to talk to strange ponies? You almost died!” Tears started welling in her eyes, and I put a hoof to her cheek in what I hoped would come across as comforting.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking..." Then I glanced around. No pony else was in the room, and I couldn't hear anything from outside. Doc Care should have rushed in by now. "I was sure that I was dead... how did I get back here?"

"One of the Whitecoats found ya', dragged ya' back here to bleed all over my waiting room." Doc Care had arrived, as I had expected. Could he just sense when his patients woke up, or did he have some pony telling him? I wasn't sure.

"You saved me again Doc? Thought you were done with that." I tried grinning, but grimaced at the pain in my side. Sighing, he floated over towards me and gave me a dose of Med-X, which helped immediately. Once the pain was gone, he moved away from me.

"I only bandaged yer' burnt leg. Couldn't do much for the hole in ya'. The wound was too severe, normally the only treatment for a bullet in the lung around here is a burial. The damned thing was close to your heart too." He seemed resentful of that fact. He gestured through the door and continued. "Whitecoats pulled in a specialist of their own. Apparently they care enough for ya' to save yer' life. They don't know what an idiot ya' are, I guess."

"Well, I guess I'd better go thank them." I made to get up, but he was there immediately pushing me back down. He was glaring at me.

"No you don't. You're not moving until your surgeon checks on ya' again, gives ya' the go ahead." Turning, he flapped towards the door. "I'll get her. Stay here, don't get yerself wounded while I'm gone."

I lay there, and Shade pulled herself up onto the bed, opposite side from my wound, and curled up against me. She'd missed me, I could tell. I'd scared her badly by going out... I didn't even want to think of what would have happened if Two Kick had stayed in control.

If he'd woken up instead of me...

I focused on the warmth of the mare against my side and let the painkillers wash over me. No more thinking for now. No more pain. Just Shade.

The door opened again after a while, and I glanced at it. My eyes went wide at who I saw coming through the door, however. My coloration, covered in burns, a white coat over all. Raw Deal. My uncle.

He turned once through the door and sat on the couch, glaring at me. I hadn't pegged him for the surgeon type, so I was glad that it wasn't actually him that had been responsible for saving my life. That would have been complicated.

The creature that walked in behind him, though, caught me off guard. I'd seen pictures of her kind, mostly faded and scattered across Hornsmith. Posters extolling her people's evils; how they should never be trusted; how they should all be wiped out.

Zebra.

Approaching me, the rather fetching zebra held out a hoof and pressed against my side. Testing the area around my wound gingerly, she smiled. "I am glad to see you took the stitch, after we found you in that ditch."

I just stared at her, my mouth hanging open slightly. "What?"

Standing on two legs, in a manner that reminded me quite a bit of how Raw Deal had held that rifle, she lifted the bandages slightly to look at the wound. She smiled. "I am checking if my nephew has healed, without the need for bandages peeled."

Nephew? I glanced over at Raw Deal, who nodded his head once. So he'd married a zebra. That

explained a bit.

“So... you sewed me up? Got the bullet out.”

She nodded. Movement next to me told me that Shade had repositioned to get a better look at the mare that was touching my side, but glancing at her I didn't detect the jealous look in her eye. I guess she caught the nephew part as well.

“You may call me Xiera, as that is....” She paused for a long time, clearly thinking on this. Eventually, she slumped her shoulders. “I am sorry. It is old tradition to rhyme when speaking to the non striped, but I never had the knack for words that is required.”

I laughed. “It's alright. The rhyming was... a little strange.” She smiled at me, the look filling me with warmth. Past her, I caught the scowl of Raw Deal. I was quickly becoming more fond of my Aunt, rather than the Uncle that I wasn't sure wouldn't shoot me.

“That is what Deal has told me, but I find it amusing to introduce myself through rhyme. One would think I'd be better at it after all these years.” The zebra laughed, and I caught a smirk from Raw Deal. It was quickly replaced with the scowl though.

“Thanks for saving me, Xiera.” I bowed as low as I could while laying on my back, trying to show that I was really grateful. It wasn't like I could give her a hug, or even get out of bed, so the bow was the best I could come up with.

“Shade has told me much of you. Your uncle and I have listened to the young mare's tales with great interest.” The zebra returned to all fours and trotted over to where the surly unicorn sat. She nuzzled him lightly, but he would not stop glaring at me. Xiera nudge him with a hoof lightly, and he grudgingly stood.

“Look. Good pony or not, you did things I won't soon forgive. Xiera wants me to give you a chance, so I'll try... but fuck up once. Just once.” He glared at me, a look filled with so much hate and distrust that I felt Shade shrinking down behind me to escape it. “I will end you. I won't make a mistake, I won't leave you alive. I will kill you where you stand.”

He turned and stormed out of the room. Xiera smiled at us as she began following him. “He'll come around. Don't worry.” Then she was gone as well.

She popped her head back in for just a few seconds. “Oh, and you're good to move around, just don't do ANYTHING strenuous. No alcohol, no fighting, nothing. I suggest just going somewhere and cuddling.” Her eyes flicked between myself and Shade, a suggestive grin on her face, then she was gone again.

So I had an uncle that despised the very sight of me, and a loving aunt that I'd only just met.

Did I have any other family? Other than the psycho and the monster camping out in my head?

That question was bugging me, even as Shade helped me get to my hooves. “Come on, your stuff is in our room. You should probably spend a bit more time laying down.” She smiled up at me, concern written across her features.

This was the closest I'd come to dying since I'd been turned into a nail depository. That had kept me under for a week... perhaps I shouldn't push this. I think that I'd actually listen to the doctor this time and lay low.

Sure, the first time, I'd been sent out into the wasteland to hunt raiders as soon as I could stand on my own, and from then on it had been near constant beatings and injuries. Concussions, burns, gunshots, bites, stabs... I'd been physically hurt in nearly every way that I could think of. Mentally, I'd felt pain

that had made everything else seem so minor in comparison, but as I looked at the blue mare I thought of another kind of pain that was being caused.

She worried about me. Pretty much all the time, since I'd been unconscious for almost half of the time that we'd been near one another. What was going through her head, knowing that at any given time there was a really decent chance I'd be killed.

I'd been selfish, and my trip to the relay had been the capstone. The single most selfish thing I'd done, and she'd had to worry through it. Wonder if I'd ever wake up again. I could have bled to death in the middle of a street. Maybe she would have come across me as she frantically searched the area around Blank for me. That probably would have destroyed her.

I was a selfish fuck.

I quickly found that I ran out of breath with very little actual movement. It felt like there was a belt around one of my lungs, and for all I knew there was. I could still move, I just had to take shallow breaths. Shade was there, propping me up as I limp on my burnt leg. As we entered the waiting room, I found Care sitting behind his desk, reading a worn and dog eared book. Looking up, he gestured towards where his hooves were propped up on the desk.

Sitting there was a potion, all ready to be consumed. "Yer Whitecoat friends paid for that, and for yer stay. Yer settled up, now get the fuck out before ya hurt yourself again." He talked quickly, his accent cutting through thicker than usual, not even looking up at us.

I took the bottle, downed it, and put it back. The Doc just waved me off with a wing as the glass hit the table. Turning, Shade and I left the clinic, even as I started feeling better. By the time we were in the street, my burn felt so much better, the skin was even healed. It was also just a little easier to breathe.

Back in the street, I noticed that there were even more Whitecoats gathered around, each of them heavily armed. "Uh... Shade, what's going on?" I spotted Raw Deal and Xiera off down the street chatting to a small cluster of white jacketed ponies, and thought that I picked Willow's longer jacket passing through the door into Traffic's.

"After you were attacked, the Whitecoats picked up patrols in the area. They've been all over while you... while you were asleep." Her voice caught, and I glanced down at her. She'd missed me. I smiled at her.

"Yo, Kick!" I looked up and saw a grinning griffin heading at us at a fast pace. Ash was fully healed from what I could tell, not a bandage on him. He was fully armed, with the grin topping off everything. He looked like he did that first day I'd met him, just with a revolver added. He slowed as he got near me, an odd look on his face.

"You look tired. Really, really tired. Weren't you just asleep for two days?" He nudged me with an elbow and chuckled.

"He's headed to the inn Ash, to continue resting." She gave the griffin a hard look, and he backed away from her, talons held up in the air.

"Whoa there, Miss Shade. I wasn't suggesting we go find some trouble, I was just asking a friend how he felt." Looking at me with a discerning eye, he laughed. "Are you ever not beaten all to shit?" Slapping me on the back, which apparently was also a place that hurt, he strode off, in the direction of the tavern.

He paused, yelling back at us across the street. "I'll tell the girls to stop by and say hi. I'll give ya a few hours before I do though. Have fun." He waved and winked at us before slipping into the tavern. I sighed, Shade blushed. That griffin always seemed to think that we were just rutting every chance we

got.

“I gotta ask him to stop that.” I murmured under my breath, just low enough that Shade perked up her ears and looked at me quizzically. I smiled and shook my head, waving off her question of what I’d said.

Once we got to the inn, Radish was waiting for us. “Hey there Ripple, I got the room all set for ya.” I’d never really talked to Radish before, despite having seen her a couple times, but she was gone almost immediately after she had pointed out which room was mine and Shade’s. She always seemed to have errands to run in the town.

The room was simple, with a bit of old furniture scattered about and a bed against one wall. It was a wide bed, designed for two ponies, and I was grateful for that as I pulled myself up onto the mattress with minimal assistance from the blue mare. She climbed up after me and lay next to me, resting her head next to mine. I lay there, staring at the ceiling for a minute or two to catch my breath. Regrowing bits of my lung was really taking it out of me.

“Just laying here sound good? I know I just slept for a while... but it sorta hurts to move right now.”

A kiss on my cheek from the side was followed by her soft voice in my ear. “Whatever you want.” It was much more suggestive than I had expected, but I was really only in the mood for laying there and letting my body continue mending.

I let my body relax, and the pain just seemed to bleed out of me as I lay there, her warmth pressing into my side. This was so much better than being lit on fire or shot. In every instance, I would prefer this.

After a few hours of dozing, I roused the sleeping Shade and got to my hooves. I couldn’t spend the entire day in bed, healing involved eating as well. The streets were fairly deserted as we left the inn in the coming dusk. The tavern was well lit and noisy, as the townsfolk as well as the Whitecoats in town drank and laughed the night away. Since it was the only place to really eat in town, the two of us headed in.

Inside, roughly three quarters of the ponies turned and looked at me as I walked through the door. I heard a barrage of nicknames murmured under breaths.

Paragon slayer. Demolisher. Bandages. Bringer of music. Flamewalker.

I was sort of fond of Flamewalker, I had to admit, even as the recently healed skin around my PipBuck ached with the phantom memory of the searing heat.

One voice cut through the crowd, as the griffin standing at the back of the crowded tavern shouted over the heads of every pony. “Hey Kick!”

The hubbub of the room quickly returned as I weaved the way through the crowded room, noticing that most ponies were clearing out of the way. Either in deference, or fear, I wasn’t sure. Shade and I came through the crowd and found that the taller griffin was not alone. He was with Willow and Traffic.

It had never really occurred to me that the often surly merchant was actually capable of leaving her store, so seeing her here came as something of a shock. She just nodded to me, a mug of hard cider nestled between her hooves on the table.

“Ripple, so good to see that you’re feeling better.” Willow smiled up at me, and I could feel dislike begin to radiate from Shade. Willow glanced at the blue mare softly, her eyes asking for forgiveness. “I’m sorry. I dropped the ball. Never should have let you head back alone.”

“There was no way to know that a Paragon was waiting for me.”

Willow dropped her jaw. “You fought another Paragon? We thought you’d just been jumped by raiders.”

When Xiera found you, there were two ponies fleeing the scene. One was heavily wounded.”

“Cinder Trails. She’s psychotic. I have.... a history with her.” Shade’s look caught my eye, as she asked me silently what that history was. Ah, always the jealousy, but I would never tell the kind blue pony that my ex-marefriend was an arsonist and a killer. Though, since she had spent as much time in Neighwhere as I did, I really didn’t know just how much she knew. She must have heard rumors, especially if she had spent any time around Sweeps. I couldn’t imagine that the late mare’s infatuation with me would have sat idly by, especially as she had been the most talkative Paragon I’d met. Even more than Holepunch, and he hadn’t shut up until I’d kicked his chest in.

“I could have killed her, but she had sniper cover. I didn’t know that until I took the hit.”

Ash held up his claws clenched into a fist. “That was a major hit, Kick. I coulda fit my fist in the hole in your side. How’s that doin’, by the way?” He reached across the table, a whiff of alcohol preceding him, in an attempt to pull at the bandages wrapped around my midsection.

I backed away, fending off his probing hand with a hoof. “Yeah, I’m not letting that many claws near a hole in my side. Sorry Ash, I’ll show you the scar later.”

The griffin seemed to take this as a promise, sitting back with an over exaggerated nod of his head. Traffic inclined her head towards the Whitecoat sitting next to her. “Seems some ponies just don’t know you that well. Willow here paid your tab for the medical supplies in full. I already had a whole job set up on the side for ya as payment too.”

She made a show of sighing, a smile creeping onto her lips. She was just jabbing fun at me, and how I could never seem to pay for my own treatment, always having to go on some ridiculous quest to make my dues.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. With my track record, I’d probably get set on fire again.” I said it in jest, but I was rewarded with a single laughing griffin and three stern mares. Okay, so joking about getting injured while I was still bandaged and aching was a bad idea around these three mares. I felt like Ivory would have laughed, but I hadn’t seen her since before I’d headed out to the Relay with Willow.

Something occurred to me then. Looking at the griffin, who was in the midst of taking a drink, I brought it up. “The sniper that shot me. Does the name Skyline ring any bells? I’ve heard it twice, and I’m pretty sure that’s who shot me.”

He froze mid drink, staring at me. I caught him glance towards Traffic, but then he swallowed and put down the glass. “Skyline... yeah, I’ve heard the name. Don’t know much about her, other than her being a Paragon.”

He was avoiding something. He’d never done that about a Paragon before.

“What? Is there something else?”

He leaned back, cupping his claws behind him and resting his head in them. “Nah, Kick. Anything I’d heard would have just been rumor. I may have met a few Paragons in my time working for them, but it’s not like I got to know any of them.”

I looked from him to Traffic. She was avoiding my glance on this. They knew something... but I didn’t think that I was going to get it out of them.

After a short time of strangely awkward silence, Willow diverted the conversation. In no time at all, they were chatting away, seemingly oblivious to the two of us sitting there at the table.

I found that the three of them had simply been comparing tales of their time in the wasteland. As Shade and I got food and sat down at the table with them, I listened absentmindedly as they compared and one

upped each others stories. I was really just too hungry to focus.

Eventually, the three moved on to heavy drinking, which didn't seem entirely appealing. A walk around town, however, seemed like a good idea. Shade concurred and, saying our goodbyes and stressing that I wasn't leaving the town, the two of us left the tavern.

There was a crude assortment of street lamps strung, bolted, and propped through the town, and the wide variety of types gave the dark streets an odd patchwork of different colored lights. Honestly, it was pretty. I hadn't seen anything other than the occasional mare that I could use that word for, the wasteland was normally a very bleak and dull landscape.

Shade smiled as she looked up at me, staring around. "You like it? I helped with the wiring when we were here the first time. It came together really well I think."

I'd forgotten about the work she'd done. I knew that she'd fixed up the irrigation system and worked on the front gate, but that she'd also rewired much of the town was downright impressive. "Wow Shade. Yeah, that's amazing. Way more than I could do." I smiled down at her and nuzzled her cheek. "You have a real gift for this kind of thing."

"Thanks." Smiling up at me, she caused all of my worries to just bleed away.

Which made me think.

"There's... there's another gift you have. I don't know if you know you have it though." That got a strange look from the mare, who stopped moving. I stood next to her, the two of us in a pool of light.

"There's been this voice. In my head, ever since I woke up." She edged slightly away from me, but I smiled at her, the softest I thought that I could pull off. "Thing is, he goes away whenever I'm near you. Don't know how, don't know why. All I know is that when I'm near you, my mind calms down.

"Do you know who the voice is?" I could tell she was torn. She wanted to comfort me, but she also wanted to put distance between herself and me. Fighting instinct, because most crazy ponies were the kind of thing one just wanted to get away from.

I nodded slowly, focusing on just the one voice. She didn't need to know about Pandemonium. Not yet. She definitely didn't need to know that I'd lost control of my other self, that I'd been pushed to the sidelines for that brief time, but it couldn't hurt to tell her who it was that she was keeping in check.

"I'm pretty sure it's the old me. Raider me. He seems to want to out."

Gasping, she pulled me into a hug. A tight hug, one much stronger than I had thought she was capable of. Sharp pain shot through my ribs, but I bore it. For a little bit at least.

"Shade... that really hurts."

She loosened her grip noticeably, but didn't let go. "Sorry." She stayed quiet for a while, but when I looked at her eyes I saw that she was deep in thought. I wondered if that's why I looked like when I did that... I spent a lot of time lost in thought.

"Scuse us! Comin' through!" We were both pulled out of thought by a pair of earth ponies dragging a large chunk of scrap metal through the street. Probably still shoring up the wall, which had received a bit more work in the two days I'd been unconscious.

We began walking again, strolling through what few side streets we could find. Taking in the sights. Ignoring the dull ache coming from where there had once been a large hole in my side.

It was a good night, once I forgot everything but where I was and who I was with. I had to enjoy the little things in life.

I awoke to a loud banging on the door. It wasn't the sound that Ash made when he knocked, it sounded more like a hoof. I got up groggily, leaving Shade yawning on the bed. We'd wandered the town for a couple hours the night before before going to sleep. She'd curled up at my side and it had been one of the most restful sleeps of my new life.

Then that night was shattered by banging.

I could hear shouting outside, and the adrenaline started pumping. Something was happening in Blank. I rushed to the door, snatching Broken from its place on top of the pile that was my gear, and pulled open the door.

Ivory, fully dressed for battle, was there. She gave a little wave and a nod to Shade, who was much slower in getting up. "Hey there Rip, good to see that you're better. Good timing too, there's something you should see outside. Bring your gear."

Turning with a playful smile, she trotted away from us towards the exit. She had a spring in her step that I was pretty sure meant bad news. It probably involved shooting raiders, which seemed to be one of her favorite things.

I started pulling on my barding, but stopped as pain shot through my side. Okay, so I still wasn't fully healed. I slowed down, letting Shade help me firmly secure it. She already had on her equipment, her pistol holstered and ready for use.

The street was chaos.

Ponies running back and forth, weapons and ammunition being carried by everypony I saw. There were a good number of Whitecoats scattered about, but they were moving much more calmly than the townspies. They were all brandishing their weapons though.

"Kick! Up here!"

I looked around before spotting Ash, perched up on the catwalk running on the interior of the wall. There were a lot of ponies up there, most of them were Whitecoats, which made the dark griffin stand out.

I found the ramp up, limping as I carried all of my equipment. I hadn't worn my barding or saddlebags for a couple days, and they were rubbing in the wrong place on my side. As I reached the top, I caught my first glimpse of what all the commotion was about.

An army. The army. Raiders were setting up camp in great numbers, just out of easy shooting distance. Ash landed next to me; I hadn't even noticed that he'd taken off from his spot further down the wall. He held out a scope, which was detached from his rifle, and pointed out towards the raider camp.

"They showed up about an hour ago. They haven't made any moves against us, but it's only a matter of time." I took the scope up with my telekinesis and held it to my eye, training it towards the army. "Take a look over near Sweeps' hill."

I panned to the left and found the rock I had carved that message into. There was a Pony standing next to it. A huge stallion.

Filthy, a color that had once occurred to me to be that of violence. A pony I had watch beat several others to death with his bare hooves while the rest of us watched.

Massacre.

He was wearing thin body armor that only covered his most vital organs and a mask. At first, it looked

like a gas mask, but then I saw that instead of one filter it had six tubes stuck into it. They were colored differently and all fed directly into the mask. He was still totally unarmed, his thickly muscled legs clad in scraps of metal, but for protection rather than lethality.

Massacre was just standing there, staring down at the stone. He lifted his head, and then as if he knew that I was watching, turned and looked directly at me. Through the scope, I could see the rage in his eyes.

He was going to make this town pay for her death.

I was sort of glad I hadn't signed that gravestone.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, allowing us to travel through this land

Though my editor ErrantIndy couldn't help on this chapter, I'd still like to thank him for all that he's done.

New thanks to Mittens for prereading and helping me out with parts of the story. Mittens gave me the title chapter on this one.

As always, comment/fave/track/rate.

Because Fern wants you to.

Chapter 13: Mask

“That’s Massacre.” I spoke just loud enough for the crouching griffin to hear me. His eyes widened and he sighted down his scopeless rifle at the large stallion.

“Should I take him out? Ah shit, he moved.” Massacre had seen the rifle aim his way, even at this distance, and had moved from the clear line of sight he’d been standing in. Not that I was entirely confident that the griffin could have killed him in one shot... all of the Paragons seemed to be immune to bullets in one way or another. It would never have been that easy.

“Keep an eye on him. If you see another chance, take it.” I floated the scope to him, and he snatched it out of the air and reconnected it to the rifle he had perched on the lip of the wall. A rustling to my right heralded Willow, who had seen me on the wall and was making her way past her soldiers. Each Whitecoat gave her room as she moved, even as they kept their weapons trained on the army past the gate.

As she approached, she jerked her head to the side, towards Sweeps’ grave and where the large angry stallion had been. “That an old friend of yours?”

I nodded, trying to find the filthy stallion amongst the crowd of killers. “Massacre. I’ve met him once, since I woke up. He’s a monster.”

She chuckled slightly. “Well, aren’t all of you?”

I glared at her, and she quickly corrected herself. “Them. Monsters, the lot.”

I shot another quick glare at Willow before glancing back out at the raiders. I took stock of the situation we were in. Outnumbered by a horde of murderers, cut off from our only source of reinforcements, outgunned, and protecting mares and foals.

Not good. Not good at all.

I drew Broken, emptying the magazine of buckshot and replacing it with the longer range slugs. I may not be able to hit anything dependably, but at least having a longer range ammunition would be beneficial. All around me, Whitecoats and the residents of Blank were aiming assorted rifle and other weapons, all of them in varying conditions of repair. The Whitecoats stood out with their higher quality weapons, with less rust and visible patch jobs.

I noticed that several of the Blank ponies had what appeared to be lead pipes rigged to fire bullets. Not something I’d stake my life on personally, but they were making due with what they had.

Traffic was running back and forth along the line, delivering ammunition to any pony that needed it. I wasn’t sure if she was selling it, or if she had already sold it. That she was giving it away wasn’t even a possibility. As she passed by me, she stopped just short enough for a brief conversation.

“Need anything? I’m selling at a discount.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I heard. Do you have any of Torque’s explosive slugs left? They’d come in handy here, especially since I’m not the best shot.”

Shaking her head grimly, she glanced back at her shop. “I’ve had him pressing normal rounds. Those were more a hobby of his, he hasn’t had the time. No such luck there Ripple, I’m sorry. You’ll just have to hit what you aim at.”

Then the merchant pony was off, taking an order from Willow for more bullets to go with the shiny

pistol the Whitecoat was checking and double checking. Her swords leaned against to the wall next to her, ready for action, but I hoped that no raiders would get close enough for her to need them. I was unsure of most of the ponies defending, really only sure that myself, Willow, and Ash could hold our own in a melee. Many of the ponies along the wall had tools, which could be used as weapons in a tight space, but nothing I would willingly take into a fight.

“Don’t worry so much Kick. We’ll hold them.” Ash was grinning at me, even as he scanned the raiders for another sight of their large leader. “Especially if I can take the head off of this snake before it starts.”

He snapped the rifle to the side, cursing under his breath. “I keep catching the glint of a scope out there... I think your sniper is on the other side of the raiders. That could complicate things.”

“Skyline, probably. You see either, take the shot. Only good Paragon is a dead Paragon. I mean, just look at me.” I grinned, but my attempt at a joke just brought a groan from the concentrating griffin.

“You should stick to sheltering damaged mares and hurting things. Leave the jokes to me Kick, they’re not your friend.”

Just then, Ivory pushed her way between us, an almost sadistic glee shining in her eyes. “I hear Massacre is out there. Are these the Stadium raiders?”

I nodded to the pale mare, who had a rather disturbing grin slathered across her face. “Seems like it. They sure look like the army I saw there.”

“Wires might be out there.” As she said his name, she kicked her battle saddle, rattling the feed back and forth. I knew how much killing him meant to her, and just hoped that no Whitecoat got a lucky shot in if the twitchy little buck showed up in the crowd. I’d personally been hoping that I’d been right in my warning to him, and he’d been killed as soon as he’d gotten back from his betrayal.

If Ivory got her chance for revenge though, I wasn’t going to stop her. It would bring some closure to her brother’s death, or at least make her feel a little better. She was still very touchy on the subject.

I nodded to her. “I’ll let you know if I see him. Until then, just wait for the shooting to start before you open up, just to give everypony a little more time to prepare.”

Shifting uncomfortably, she whined a little at me. “But they’re right there. It’d be so easy.”

“As soon as you fire, Miss Ivory, every raider there will rush this wall. Give it a little time, then you can fire to your heart’s content.” Ash, always with the level headed mind. He knew how to talk to mares. Always a help.

I nodded to him, but then my attention was diverted. Somepony had brought one of those old radios out into the street and had aimed it up at the wall, allowing us to hear what was going on.

“...so this is a call out to all of you ponies fighting the good fight down near Hornsmith. That army of raiders is on the move, straight for the good folk of Blank.”

DJ Pon3. Bringing the news to the Equestrian wasteland.

“Now, I know that most of you are doing what you can to simply survive in that bleak grey town, but if you have a gun, try and help those folk out. I know that those Whitecoats are, and they seem alright enough. Help a pony in need out. This is DJ Pon3, wishing all you ponies in Hornsmith good luck and good fight. Now, to help ease the mood, here’s Sapphire Shores, doing her best to raise your spirits and brighten your day...”

Music started playing through, and I couldn’t help but smile. At least now the Whitecoats at the relay would know that there was trouble brewing, since I was sure we wouldn’t have been able to send a

runner, and any individual groups would just run into a force that they couldn't possibly handle.

Scanning the wall, I couldn't find Raw Deal or Xiera, which meant that they had to be back in relay after yesterday. That was good, he'd be able to lead an effective push into the army's side. At least, I hoped he would.

"Willow, can you get in touch with the other Whitecoats?" The mare in the long coat was busy running a stone down one of her blades, sharpening it to a lethally keen edge. I'd already felt the blade at my neck, and wondered how much sharper it could actually get.

Glancing at me, she shrugged. "Not really. Whenever I'm not at the relay, Raw Deal runs things. I'm sure they're listening to that broadcast. The cavalry should be on it's way." So she could really only confirm what I had guessed at, which was better than nothing.

Looking back down into the street, I spotted Shade and Fluster, who had Fern at her side. The two mares were off to one side, watching the bustle of the street as the townsponties geared up to defend their town. When Shade saw me looking, she gave me a friendly smile, which I returned.

The raiders would not get in.

From the camp, a gruff voice that I hadn't heard since I'd stood in disguise inside Stadium boomed out. It was either magically enhanced, or technologically, but it was much louder than even he was capable of.

"Attention, fucks guarding your little shitheap. Open the gate, let us the fuck in!" Glancing to the side, I saw that Ash was hunting through his scope for the large stallion. I was as well, even if I wouldn't be able to hit him at this range. Massacre must have known, because I couldn't see the filthy murderer anywhere. With Ash's lack of firing, I guessed that even his keen eye couldn't find our target.

"You get one chance. Open the door, and we won't kill all of you pathetic fucks." I thought of Stadium, and how'd I'd only met four survivors of Massacre's definition of mercy.

A shot rang out through the morning air, breaking the silence that followed Massacre's demand. All eyes turning to see a pale red mare that I'd seen once or twice around town, but didn't know the name of, who was the source of the shot. Smoke rose from the barrel of a crudely built rifle she'd jury rigged onto a homemade battle saddle, and she lifted herself up onto the wall.

"Fuck you and your whole damned Stable, you fuck!" The words rang out through the air as clearly as the shot had, and we all braced for a response.

The response came at high speed, rendering her head above the lower jaw into a spray of blood and bone, with the follow up clap of a high powered rifle. The mare's body stood there, the ponies near her frozen in shock at being drenched with their neighbors blood. As she slumped and slid off of the wall back into Blank, leaving a streak of blood, everypony on the wall started shouting and ducking.

Skyline was out there, if I had to guess. Though with that shot, I wondered how I had survived. Skyline could have placed the shot into my neck or head, or even hit my heart. I'd been a perfect target, standing over Cinder with my side presented to the sniper, but the round had gone through a lung and out the other side. She'd just put a round into a much smaller target's head at a much longer distance.

Massacre cut into my thoughts as his deep voice boomed and echoed through the town.

"You heard the dead cunt, boys and girls! Gear up, we'll be cracking this shit heap." With those words, the raiders seemed to visibly back down from the readied state that they were in. As far as I could tell, they were going to wait until they were good and ready to attack Blank, which could be at any moment.

"Ripple, follow me." I heard Willow's voice from behind me and found the mare standing practically

on my back. "Get your griffin friend. Meet me down at Traffic's."

I nodded at her, then turned to the ducking griffin at my side. I knew he'd heard her, since he had the sharpest ears of any creature I'd ever met. He just slipped his rifle over his back and hopped down off of the wall, waiting for me. I followed, but taking the longer route of going over to the ramp and walking down. Willow was still on the wall, talking to a few other ponies, so Ash and I made our way to the store on our own.

The store was the emptiest I'd ever seen it. Traffic had either made a killing today, or had made a very generous donation to the continuation of her livelihood. There were still a few items left, here and there. Her constant pile of scrap on the counter, Sweeps' repaired minigun, assorted toys. I would have thought the minigun would have been taken, but I guess I was wrong.

Hoofsteps on the planks making up the sidewalk drew my attention to the door, where Willow, Ironsight, and Traffic entered. Traffic's face was tear streaked, but she still looked as ready for business as ever. She must have known the dead pony.

The five of us gathered around a table in the middle of the room, one devoid of any merchandise. I believed it had once held a good majority of the ammunition that was now held by the defenders on the wall. There were a few spare pieces on the table, but mostly of small caliber rounds for pistols. As we pulled up crates to sit, Ash swept the remaining bullets onto the floor with the quick pass of a wing.

"So. We need a plan. We can't just wait for Deal. The Whitecoats will come, but they must gather first. That's if they heard." Willow sighed, looking much less hopeful than she had on the wall. It had all been a front, to keep the morale of the defenders up. She was worried.

I had no idea what to do in a situation like this. My normal plan would be to go kick them to death... but that just wasn't an option here. I gave a shrug, not entirely sure what they thought I'd be able to bring to this meeting.

"We just gotta keep above them. The higher ground is an advantage, what we've got going right now is good. We just need some patrols along the inside wall and we'll be about as secure as we can be." Ash spoke up, gesturing as he did so. "Now, we do it all the time. Griffins, I mean. We have the wings. Only two pegasi in this town, and I don't think either are good ideas to put in a battle."

Willow and Ironsight nodded along, while Traffic and I just sat there. I was a little surprised, with Ash talking tactics and all. I kept forgetting he was a mercenary, a professional soldier. It made sense.

"Can I borrow your pile, Ms. Traffic?" The griffin gestured towards the pile of scrap, and Traffic seemed to snap out of a daze.

"What? Oh, yes Ashred. Of course."

"Thank you kindly, Ms. Traffic." The griffin stood, retrieved the pile, and dumped it on the table. "Just a minute."

I'd seen him display artistic ability once before, the night that we'd made the contract. He'd carved a pony and a griffin into a table in the tavern, which I had seen every time I'd been in there since. He was rather gifted, for a soldier. Before our eyes, he quickly assembled a rough map of Blank. Being the only one of us able to fly, we had to take his word that it was accurate.

"So the raiders are here." He pointed at the wall next to a piece of metal that was serving in place of the gate. "We've got ponies along the walls here. We need some more here," he pointed at the opposite wall, "and spread out at regular intervals between the two points. Any pony will do."

He pointed at Willow, now that it seemed he had fully taken over this meeting. He was our master strategist in this case. "Ms. Willow, we're gonna need some of your Whitecoats patrolling inside the

wall, on the streets. Keep the peace, show the townsfolk everything's under control."

Pointing at Ironsight, he continued. "We'll need to get the children, and anyone else who can't fight, to a secure location in the town. One where we can defend easily if the wall falls. Somewhere along the main road would be good, so we can fall back to the rooftops."

The stallion nodded almost imperceptibly, and pointed at a building in the town with a hoof. "Radish's. Most room, surrounded by low buildings."

Ash nodded. "Perfect." Pointing at Traffic, he kept going. "Ms. Traffic, I have to thank you for giving out all your ammo. You're a service to your town."

Traffic blushed and looked away at the compliment, a move that looked very out of place for her.

Then, a talon pointed across the table at me. "Kick... you need to take a break. You have a hole in your side. Just lay low, maybe do some patrols. Don't die."

My jaw dropped at the griffin, who smirked. I sputtered a few times, before I managed to get the words out. "That's it? That's all I'm here for? Why even bother letting me sit in on this if I'm just gonna be pushed to the side?"

Ash shrugged playfully. "You've got Shade to look after. You've got your hands full with that mare, I've seen how it goes." Traffic and Willow laughed along with him briefly before he cut them off.

His grin turned serious. "You're looking pale. We don't need you passing out on the wall."

I nodded, pulling another hit of med-x from my bag. The drug worked quickly, and the pain I'd been feeling ebbed away slightly. "I'll be fine, I just hurt a little."

He nodded. If anyone here knew how much pain I was capable of dealing with before it became an issue, it had to be the griffin. He'd been there for most of it, he knew my capacity.

Clapping his talons together, he ended the meeting. "So we're all good then. Get on it, good luck, let's hope we don't all die." His morbid humor pulled a grin or two, but Ironsight and Traffic left the meeting with very dire looks on their faces. This was their home we were fighting for, and if we failed then they wouldn't have anywhere left. Eventually, I was the last one left in the shop, and I took my chance to scrounge through anything left over. I found nothing. The ponies of Blank would be hard pressed for supplies if we pulled this off.

Back on the street, I saw Willow had gathered a number of her Whitecoats off of the wall where they were more heavily clustered, and was pointing at different parts of the town. They were heading off in twos and threes, armed and ready to watch for any ingressions.

Ironsight was pointing groups of ponies towards the other walls as he walked down the street towards Radish's place. Each one nodded and complied, trusting in Ironsight's authority. He was the closest thing they had to law in the town, and they trusted that he knew what was best for the town.

Ash was headed back to the wall, and I followed. Limping back up the ramp, I found my way to my spot, peaking back over. The raiders had barely moved, but there was definitely activity. They were up to something, but I couldn't tell what it was. I just had to wait and see.

We all just had to wait.

After an hour of nothing, most of the defenders had become less tense, and several had put down their weapons, though no pony was sticking their head over the wall. Talking to the ponies around me, I'd found that the mare who'd had her head blown off was the local schoolteacher, which made me wonder

briefly what language the young of Blank had been picking up, but the whole wall seemed devastated that she'd died. Her name had been Pencil Sharpener, and they had already cleaned her blood off of the wall and put her body out of sight until a time they could bury her.

She'd not be alone when she was put under the ground, that was for sure. When this was through, there would be many more innocents dead.

I'd holstered Broken after about ten minutes of waiting, not wanting to tax my magic. I still wasn't at one hundred percent physically, with my side hurting, and I knew that a unicorn's magic could get worn out, especially if they were hurt. I'd felt it before, and I could feel it creeping up on me.

"Are you okay?" I snapped out of it and looked at who was speaking to me. Shade, who I hadn't even heard come up onto the wall. I was spacing out more than I should at a time like this.

"You're pale." I didn't really think to ask how she could tell, considering that my coat was white. I'd take her word on it, especially since Ash had said the same thing. "The wall is fine without you."

She started leading me off, and I couldn't help but follow along. I felt exhausted, and everything hurt. I had to be near the wall though... I had to fight. I felt light headed, but I'd been worse.

Once on the ground, I found another pony waiting for us. Doc Care. "I knew he'd listen to ya', Shade. Idiot doesn't know when ta slow down." So he'd had her come up and get me. I couldn't imagine it had taken much convincing on her part.

Glaring at me, the hovering pony just folded his front legs across his chest. "I've seen how yer movin'. Yer more of a risk up on the wall than ya think, doubly so since I've heard yer no good at hitting long ranges. What were ya gonna do with a shotgun anyways? Just gonna get shot again, then I'd have to stitch you shut. Again."

"The zebra told me to keep an eye on ya'. You do much of anything, ya' might die." Care tapped on my side, and I could feel the impact even through my barding. Instead of a light tap, it felt like he'd kicked me in the side. I flinched out of instinct, and sat down in the middle of the street.

"Fine." The walk back down had winded me, and I wondered if my lung really was all right. It still sort of felt like I was working with one. "Doc, do you have anything to help? More potent?"

"Nothing I'd give you. Knowing your history with stampedede... I'm pretty sure that hydra would rip ya' to shreds. Not subtle, and subtlety is what ya need right now." From his bag, he pulled a potion and gave it to me, which I sipped at as he watched. Made sure I got every drop, then took the bottle back and stuffed it in the bag.

"I know ya'll be fightin' when it comes to it, but if you can get in even fifteen minutes of rest, I'd say do it. Ya need to heal." He was getting a very serious look on his face as he talked, and Shade shared it as she looked at me. I realized suddenly that Urgent Care actually gave a shit if I died. That surprised me. "Keep an eye on yerself for once. Yer basically workin' with a lung and a half here, and yer no good to anyone if you fall unconscious while yer runnin' around gettin' shot."

As he spoke, I felt better. My breathing got easier and the pain in my side dulled, but I could still feel it. Potions weren't going to deal with the damage I'd received... I might actually have to let this one heal with time.

Still sitting, I focussed my concentration. I pulled open my bag as he spoke, searching for a needle of Med-X to take off the edge. I'd been going through a fair amount of the drug, but it made me feel better. Less like I was a broken pony, more like my fully functioning self.

"Yeah, okay Doc. I'll lay low, at least until the attack." I floated the needle towards my side, and into his vision. He reached out a hoof and held the needle back, looking suspiciously at me.

“What? Helps the pain.” Maneuvering the drug around his hoof, I injected the soothing concoction into my side, and felt the cooling numbness spread through. I let out a soft sigh. It was wearing off faster every time it seemed, but I had a decent stockpile built up.

“Just... don’t do it too frequent. Dependency on that stuff can really mess ya up. I can’t help ya if that happens.” He looked at me knowingly. I remembered right then that Care knew that I was an ex-Paragon. He’d known when Traffic had tried convincing him to leave me in front of the gate, the first time that I’d come to Blank. I’d been filled with nails, shot, cut, and my face was still raw with the fresh wound that was now my trademark scar.

He’d told me on more than one occasion that my next injury he wouldn’t treat, and yet he kept doing it. Even when it hadn’t been in his best interest, he’d healed me. Sure, he’d made excuses, but he could easily have just let me die.

“Thanks Doc.”

He nodded, and turned away from me, towards the wall. Trotting off to help other ponies, I felt glad that he was on our side. Well, at least on Blank’s side. I wasn’t exactly good for this town. If it weren’t for me, the Paragons would not have targeted it twice now. There would not have been potentially multiple Paragons outside the city. Massacre I knew for sure was out there, and I assumed that if Skyline was the sniper then she hadn’t taken Cinder very far. Aside from some possible emotional trauma, Cinder had gotten out of the fight in much better shape than I had.

“Let’s get out of the street, okay?” Shade snapped me out of my thoughts, and I realized I’d just been sitting there in the mud staring at a wall. Smooth.

I nodded and we moved to one side, out of the way of the hustle and bustle of siege defense. Glancing back up at the wall, I could pick out my friends. Well, two of them at least. The dark griffin and the pale tunnel pony. I wasn’t sure I could call Willow a friend, not just yet. An acquaintance... a well wisher.... somepony that didn’t wish me any specific harm. Those seemed more appropriate.

Ash kept sneaking peeks over the wall before ducking back down and moving to a different part of the wall. All of the ponies on the wall had their heads down, but Ash kept moving back and forth down the wall and popping up. Either he was still looking for a good shot on any of the Paragons... or he was screwing around with Skyline. I didn’t want him to get shot, but the thought that he might have been giving the sniper a hard time on purpose made me smile.

Ivory looked very pent up. She was pacing in the very short stretch of wall she’d staked out for herself, and kept checking that her gun was loaded. The other ponies of Blank and the Whitecoats near her had given her room and were looking at her with very strange looks. I assumed that she was humming, as she tended to do anytime she was left with her own thoughts. It was strange to not see Fluster near the armored pony, but I’d seen very little of the reclusive pegasus all day. I’d last seen her near Shade, but she’d gone off and hidden somewhere.

I was really starting to question if Fluster would be all right. She’d been off for a few days now, ever since her sister. After the incident with Doc Care, I barely saw her at all, and when I did she was with one of the girls, shying away from anypony she didn’t know. I’d seen Fern around town a few times, but he was always near her. I only saw her smile at the timberwolf pup, and wondered if her view of all ponies was damaged, or if it was just pegasi.

So it was just me and Shade amidst all this chaos and uncertainty. Might as well make myself useful in some way. “Shade, I gotta do something to help, even if I’m not on the wall... care to take a walk with me?”

The mare nodded at me, and we started walking off to the side. As we walked, I noticed that the plan

was in effect. There were a number of Whitecoats patrolling sidestreets and walking inside the walls, keeping an eye out for any attempts to breach the wall. Each was heavily armed, at least compared to the ponies that lived here. How had Blank been here for so long? Other than the gun at the front gate, they were armed with cobbled together weapons or farming tools. Any way I looked at it, they should have been wiped off of the map long ago. Perhaps they were just lucky.

Or at least, they were lucky until I'd shown up.

Each Whitecoat nodded in greeting to me as soon as they saw the white scarf, still speckled with both mine and Cinder's blood. So it was getting me the recognition that Willow had promised, which I had to say was a good feeling. Acceptance. Even if it was from an army of well intentioned killers, it was good.

"Why are they all like that?" Shade had apparently been noticing the looks, and inquired upon them. I hadn't really thought about the scarf until just now, and Shade hadn't asked about it so I hadn't really thought to bring it up.

I grinned down at her as we walked. "Oh, this." I lifted the dirty and slightly singed white cloth around my neck briefly with my magic. "Tells them that I'm their friend. So they don't shoot at me." As I spoke, I absentmindedly started switching the slug rounds out for buckshot. Close quarters weren't good for the solid rounds.

She laughed lightly, a sound that made me forget that we were on the verge of a war. "That's good, the last thing you need is more ponies shooting at you."

That made me chuckle, getting a strange look from a pair of Whitecoats who were hustling past us carrying a pair of nasty looking shotguns. They weren't patrolling, but rather were on an errand if I had to make a guess, and I guess that the sight of two ponies walking along laughing was either out of place or offensive.

"So... this is how the great Ripple spends his preparation time? Chatting up pretty mares?" A voice filled with derision came from one side, down a filthy alley.

I turned to see the pony that was criticizing me, finding that it was the scarred Whitecoat from the other day. Rhapsody. He had a hood up over his head this time, hiding the pattern of scar tissue that had almost reminded me of Fluster. Now with the hood, he reminded me even more of the mare, but in look only.

"The token might mean a lot to the others, but not to me. Willow's word only goes so far out here, especially when your own kin has nothing but bad to say." Stepping towards me, he came face to face, a vicious grin on his face. I glared and pushed Shade behind me slightly.

"Thing is, I trust Deal more than Willow. She's naive. I've heard Deal's briefings on the Paragons. We all did before we came up here." Jabbing me in the chest with a hoof, he kept going. "Two Kick. White unicorn. Blue and grey hair. Green eyes. Hoof shotguns. A vicious murderer, not to be trusted. Rapist. Traitor."

My eyes narrowed as he summed up who I had been. I wasn't going to get in a fight with a Whitecoat... especially not at a time like this. I had to keep cool, try and talk him down. Like that had ever worked.

"Most of us haven't made the connection. To many, you're just Ripple. Bringer of music, Paragon killer, all that shit. They haven't put together that you're a Paragon yourself." He stepped back, pulling a cut down assault rifle from his back. Holding the weapon at the ready, he made his intentions very clear. He was protecting the town. From me.

"Ripple is not a Paragon! Not anymore!" I glanced back at Shade as she spoke up in my defense,

shaking my head. I had to deal with this myself.

“Look. Rhapsody. I say it again and again. I am not Two Kick. He died. Shot in the head. I am Ripple. I may have the same body as him, but he’s dead and gone.”

Rhapsody moved quick, bringing the assault rifle to my chest. “Yeah, heard that. Not buying it. I kill you here, the body’s gone too. Another raider dead and gone.”

The gun was knocked aside as Shade threw herself between us, shoving the dusty grey unicorn back a few paces. She all but screamed in his face. “No! He is NOT a Paragon!” She pushed him, showing a forcefulness I’d never seen in her. “He’s fighting to protect ponies, and you’re not going to stop him! You’re going to walk away and leave us be!”

The Whitecoat looked stunned for just a second, before he snarled at her with eyes narrowed. “Fine. I’ll be watching him though.”

Looking at me over the mare, he growled. “You’re lucky your marefriend was here.” Then, placing his rifle back in its resting place, he turned and stalked off, shooting a dirty glare back at us. I watched as he left, and once he was out of view I turned to Shade.

“What would have happened if he’d shot you? Huh?” Her eyes were wide and serious, intent only on me. As she smiled, the seriousness of the moment shattered, and the look on her face broke me.

I looked into them as long as I could before dropping my gaze at the dirt I stood on. “Thanks for standing up for me. I’m pretty bad at.... at talking.”

She laughed again, a light chuckle. “I noticed.” She kissed me once on the end of my nose, and we continued walking on our patrol of the wall.

I felt like a giant.

Which of course meant that it was time for everything to go to shit.

Massacre’s voice boomed out from over the wall, echoing through the town. “Hit it, you twitchy fuck!” I heard shouting from the wall and a few scattered shots, which told me that it the raiders were finally making their move.

I started running, or at least limping as quickly as I could, and Shade kept pace with me easily. She had her pistol out, gripped in her mouth and ready to go, but as we ran I told her what I needed her to do.

“Shade, you need to get to Radish’s. You’ll be safe there.”

Her eyes connected with mine and she shook her head, a muffled objection coming around the pistol.

“I need you to be safe.”

Her eyes widened a bit as I said it, and she slowly nodded, a smile working it’s way around the weapon clenched in her teeth.

Then the world roared and leapt into the air.

A wall of pressure hit us, and since we were both running and not firmly planted when it happened, it picked us up and tossed us side. Shade hit bounced off of me, driving me to the ground with a searing flash of pain from my damaged side.

A cloud of dust swept through the streets, filling my eyes and lungs with grit, leaving me coughing and groaning in pain as I fought to get to my hooves. Shade was doing the same, but her fall had been softened by me, so she had an easier time of it.

My side felt like it was on fire, and I had to check that it wasn't. Definitely a cracked rib or two though, which I couldn't imagine would make either Xiera or Doc Care very happy. I could still feel the med-x running through my veins, or I'd take more. Sure enough, the pain left in no time at all.

Drawing Broken, I checked that Shade was alright. "You okay?" She nodded, still wheezing out dust, and I let out a dust filled cough of relief. "Get to the Inn. I'll check on you in a little bit." She started to protest, but I shut her up with a kiss. I stroked her cheek, clearing a line through the dirt coating it.

"Don't worry. I'll see you in a little bit."

Then I turned from her and started limping as quickly as I could towards the source of the blast, pulling another potion and med-x from my pack. After taking both, it got to where I could run. So I did.

Clearing a corner at full gallop, I came into view of the wall. Or what had once been the wall, at least.

One side of it was just gone, pieces of wall and dead pony scattered across the town. The raiders had come up with one hell of a bomb to do that, and I knew deep down who was responsible for that. The "twitchy fuck" could only have been Crossed Wires. I knew it, and I was sure that Ivory knew it.

Looking around, it didn't look like many defenders had made it off the wall in one piece, but I couldn't see any pieces that looked like they came from Ivory. I definitely couldn't see anything belonging to a griffin, so I had to assume that Ash was alive as well. I had to.

I heard a yell coming at right at me and barely had time to block the raider that came out of a drift of smoke, swinging an axe wildly with her magic. The blade cracked into Broken, deflecting the attack but throwing Broken off aim. I pulled Broken up towards her as she reeled around to come at me, but a flash of white and red cut in front of me.

Willow spun in place, both of her swords out. The first caught the axe under its head, chopping neatly through the wood and sending the chunk of metal flying off. The second came up under the raiders jaw. The blade punched out through the back of the raiders neck and pulled out sideways, spraying everything with blood.

The raider slumped to the ground as Willow whipped her blade to the side, throwing a crescent spray of blood across the dust covered street. She looked hurt, like she'd been on the wall when it had gone down, but she hadn't been too close or I imagined there wouldn't be much of her standing there. This hadn't been her first raider either. The only other option was that the blood soaking her long coat was either hers or another defenders.

"You just gonna watch? Get killing."

She ran off, towards the next raider that came into view, her blades floating at her sides like outstretched wings. A white bird drenched in blood.

Smoke obscured her quickly, leaving me surrounded by debris and pieces of dead pony. I couldn't see the battle that was beginning to rage, but I could hear it. Screams, gunshots, bloodthirsty shouts.

I chased after Willow, going where the battle was. I couldn't see anything, the dust cloud from the wall still hadn't settled and it definitely smelled like something was burning, since I was occasionally hitting patches of thick smoke.

I popped out of the cloud next to two raiders hacking at a dead Whitecoat with long serrated blades, coated in blood and laughing giddily. They both froze as I came into the middle of them, and I had to admit that I did as well, just for a second. I'd expected more of a warning.

I moved first.

Spinning, I kicked out a back leg, the feeling of the hoofgun going off sent a shockwave of pain

through my side, even through the haze of painkiller I'd tried to keep myself in. What it did to the other pony was much worse, hitting the mare in the side and ripping through bone and organs. She essentially popped on one side, spraying the wall she was standing next to with blood and shredded meat.

A blade flew at me from the other side, driven by a screaming raider, which I blocked with the ever dependable shotgun that never took damage. If I survived this day, I'd definitely start looking into how it did that. For now, I slammed the butt of the weapon into his jaw with a satisfying crunch, before spinning it and unloading a shot into his face. He dropped like the dead sack of meat he was and I moved on, feeling slightly better about the outcome of this day.

I'd been unsure of how I'd actually perform this doped up on painkillers, but it was all going quite well. If only the Doc had known how much I'd been taking in my downtime, he would not have been happy. I would not have been able to move, by my guess, so the trade off was worth it. What pain I could feel was sharp and quick, but was washed away by the chems quickly.

I heard the chattering of a machine gun off to my right, the bullets punching holes through the smoke as they passed by me. I could hear somepony running towards me, and I aimed Broken ready for another raider for me to put down.

I misjudged where the hoofsteps were coming from and a pony flew out of the smoke, plowing into me and bowling us both over in a heap. More pain, again drowned out by the med-x that always just seemed to kick in after that initial burst. I threw the offending pony off of me and snatched up Broken, aiming it at him, but I paused when I saw who it was.

Crossed Wires.

The one pony out there I'd told myself I'd try not to kill, if only to save him for another pony's vengeance.

The twitchy tan pony stared at me through cracked goggles, his coat filthy and ragged. He looked like he'd been beaten, and I saw a long bleeding gash along his side where it looked like he'd been clipped by a bullet. Life had not been easy for the little traitor since he'd blow us up.

"B-b-b-badeye!?"

He was loaded down with grenades and other explosives, almost more bomb than pony. I hesitated for a second, wondering if shooting him would vaporize both of us, but he took advantage of that second and bolted. Darting into more smoke opposite of where he had come, I heard a thump on the ground and looked at the vicinity of my hooves.

Flashbacks of a tin can throwing sparks. Nails, blood, and fire. This was much more sophisticated, but without a doubt just as lethal. I scrambled, dropping Broken and snatching up the pony I'd shot in the face as I threw the grenade away from me. Doing both at once heavily taxed my magic, but it worked. It worked about as well as I could have hoped, at least.

The grenade blew as it arched through the air, hurling shrapnel and flames in every direction. The corpse took most of the blast, but I felt the tingle of fire and shrapnel hitting and digging into my barding and exposed hide.

The pony practically disintegrated in my grip, covering me with even more gore. Then I hit the wall next to where the raider mare had died. "Fuck!" The shout was forced out of me, along with a small amount of blood that spattered onto the shredded corpse from my mouth.

It was like the wasteland was just dead set on breaking my ribs by throwing me into everything it could today, and pain yet again shot through the drug haze. I hit the ground, stunned and deafened. I lay there

under the mangled shield body, his blood oozing out over me, but I wasn't ready to move. Not just yet. After about ten seconds, another pony approached through the smoke and noise, and my hearing was just starting to return as I heard her voice. "Rip! You look terrible. Did Wires come through here?"

Ivory was glancing around anxiously, a hard look in her eyes. Her armor had taken dozens of scoring blows, and blood streamed down one of her legs as well as from over her lightly scarred eye. Flowing around her goggles and streaming down her cheek. The barrel of her gun was still smoking from use, and I guessed that she was the source of the shots I'd heard before the traitor had come across me.

"Rip! Did Wires come through here?!" She was standing over me now, yelling at me as I struggled to my hooves from beneath the corpse. I picked up Broken from where it had landed and took a few seconds to catch my breath and make sure the weapon was fully loaded.

She opened her mouth again, but I cut her off with a nod. "Yeah... little bastard blew me up. He went that way." I gestured with the shotgun, not feeling much like small talk. Ivory must have shared the sentiment because with only a nod of thanks, she rushed past.

Shortly, she disappeared in pursuit of the fleeing demolitionist, leaving me once again to try and make my way towards the wall. At this rate, though, I'd either make it long after the fighting was over, or I'd be killed by the next thing I ran into.

I very nearly was, when when a roar split the din of gunfire and panic. The roar was chillingly familiar. Something at the back of my mind knew that sound, and acted on it. I dove to the side, barely dodging a wall of screaming pony and metal, as Massacre barreled down on me from out of the smoke. He slammed into an abandoned cart in the street, hurling it in a spray of splinters and strewn salvage across the street.

I brought up Broken as quickly as I could, but as I fired he moved just a little faster. The buckshot ricocheted off of a steel plate strapped around one of his fetlocks, and the other leg quickly delivered a blow to my jaw, throwing me from my hooves. As I landed, he was there again, this time with something I hadn't noticed before.

He had hooks on the inside of his front hooves, one of which he drove into my barding. Luckily, it just grazed along my skin, not making purchase inside of me, but it still found the leverage he needed to throw me.

Hitting a wall made of ancient wood, I smashed through into a gloomy household, which luckily was not occupied. I landed on a mattress, which made me chuckle just slightly, before rolling to my hooves. Ignoring the swiftly-fading pain, I aimed at the wall I had come through. Massacre didn't strike me as the type to use doors.

I was right in that assumption, as the filthy giant of a pony slammed through the wall, heading straight at me through an old bookshelf filled with dog eared novels in an explosion of dust, wood, and literature. I fired, ripping through a green book decorated with a swirling plant, and grinned as the shot tore into the chest of Massacre. The grin turned down as he didn't stop coming, and he slammed me against the wall behind me, holding me there with what I found to be his vastly superior strength. The peppered holes in his chest closed before my eyes, leaving trickles of fresh blood in his stained and matted coat.

"Hey there, you fuck." His face was pressed right up against mine, his mask digging into my muzzle. "I should have recognized you. Don't know how I didn't." He snorted and hit me in the ribs with one leg while the other pressed against my neck. I was trying to kick him, but his greater size provided him with a reach that I just couldn't deal with.

“Fuck you. Deadeye. Stupid fucking name.” His eyes narrowed as he looked into mine, something I’d had happen once before. “I don’t know how I didn’t see it. Of course you’re Two Kick... just, the spark is gone. That’s what threw me.” He grunted, leaning in and inhaling deeply through his mask. “You don’t even smell right. Pain and fucking weakness is all that’s there.”

I heard a groan from the wall behind me as he rested more of his weight on my throat. I was starting to black out, which would basically be my end. There was no way he would let me live.

“The twitchy fuck comes up bragging that he killed Two Kick Ripple. Yeah fucking right. I couldn’t do that, even at my best.” Darkness was moving in, surrounding the dilated pupils staring at me with such murderous intent.

“Then I hear you’re still up and kicking. Killed Holepunch, not that I really mind that part.” Another blow to my ribs at least had him lessen the pressure on my neck enough for me to suck a breath of air. The darkness receded, just slightly, but enough that I knew I had a bit more time.

“What do I find when I come this way, but your old marefriend. Cinder was messed up after whatever you did, but she told me you were here. Fucking convenient, it was.” His eyes narrowed and he dug his mask into my face even further, pressing me against the wall even harder which gave another distressed creak.

“Did you do it? Did you kill Sweeps?” I think that I saw tears in his eyes, as he growled out his question.

“DID YOU!?”

He slammed me against the wall once more time, which finally gave. The wall fell away, and I moved as quickly as I could as we collapsed into the next room. I pushed off from him, hitting the ground first and springing away. I landed across the room, coughing and sucking for air, but also looking for Broken. I’d dropped it in the previous room, and saw it laying right past the large stallion who was pushing himself to his hooves.

I was running straight at him before I even realized it. I threw myself into the air, flipping as I did so that I was going at him rear legs first. He lifted one armored leg, taking both shots on his. The blast was at least enough to throw him off balance back into the room, crushing an ancient couch beneath his bulk.

One shot left in one of my hoofguns. Empty in the other.

Snatching Broken up, I turned and ran, looking for a way out. Maybe Massacre had been right. The spark. That spark was Two Kick, that was what I was missing in these fights. That complete lack of empathy, the sadistic glee while fighting. He was the monster, not me. I was just another pony, facing monsters.

I’d killed two of them though. Without Two Kick, I’d killed two of the monsters.

I wasn’t just a normal pony. I couldn’t be if I could still fight them.

I was already a few rooms over when I heard Massacre coming after me. He was just tearing through the walls; he knew which direction I’d gone and was coming for me. I quickly loaded a few shells into my hoofguns as I took cover behind an overturned table. This was a kitchen, and it had seen recent use. There was still food on the counter, and scattered across the floor from when the table had been turned over.

The wall burst, and he was in the room. I snapped off a shot from Broken, hitting him in the neck. Arterial spray painted a wall before the wound closed up rapidly again. Damn it. I’d hoped that that would have worked. No such luck.

Reaching me, he kicked through the table, ripping it in half. I jumped backwards, firing into him from behind, dealing a wound that I don't think any pony would appreciate. Roaring in pain, he spun around and came at me fast. Very fast. A swipe from his hoof threw me across the room, slamming into a cupboard. There were dishes in it, surprisingly well kept for their age, but they exploded at the impact, tearing at my hide and showering down around me as I slumped to the ground.

Fuck, this wasn't going to end well.

His hook found one of my rear legs, punching clean through with a surge of pain that the drugs failed to completely block out. He pulled me up to look into my eyes as I dangled there, and then he swung me as hard as he could. My head and shoulder hit the wooden floor hard, cracking it and throwing splinters into the air.

Then he swung me again. Then again.

Reality flowed into a pain filled blur as he slammed me into the wall... slammed me into an old and rusted refrigerator... ran my head through a boarded up window and back out again.

When he stopped destroying the kitchen with my body, I did the only thing I could. I hung there, limply, in front of him from my back leg. Like a fish on a hook. I could feel dozens of deep cuts, a couple broken bones, and that I had essentially been turned into a giant bruise.

I was about to die. Again. Probably for the last time.

"Did. You. Kill. Sweeps?" He looked down at me, into my eyes. I coughed in response, tasting nothing but copper and feeling blood leaking from my mouth as I tried for the words.

"Yes." I gazed up at him, a rivulet of blood reaching my eye. I tried blinking it away, but it got in and just made half of my vision go red. "I did. I'm sorry."

I expected him to just slam me into the ground like a sack of rocks until I was dead, but surprisingly he slid the hook from my leg and I dropped in a heap. Curling up instinctively, I tried to find a part of me that wasn't in screaming pain. Finding none, I blacked out for a couple of seconds.

When I came to, he was sitting down next to me, looking down at me. Massacre barely looked like he'd been in a fight. How the hell had I beaten him when I'd been Two Kick? I had an incredibly vague memory of beating him in an arena, just a shadow of it, but I knew that it had happened.

I wondered if Two Kick was awake, or if he had died after that shot. I hadn't heard him since, and for once I was actually hoping to hear his voice. Maybe he'd help me out here, give me some hint that I could use to take down the regenerating giant.

"She always liked you, you know that?" Massacre's voice was low... soft almost. I blinked, and groaned a guttural noise in response. "You were the reason she would never be with me. I always hated you for that."

Really? He had me, beaten and broken, a sack of bleeding meat and bones, and he was chatting with me. Damn it, I hated talking to Paragons. I hated it so fucking much. Nothing good came of it.

There was a long pause, him not saying anything and me slowly bleeding to death. It lasted for a few minutes before he continued.

"Now... I have to ask what the fucking point is. They were right, you aren't Two Kick. Cinder said he's in there, but you're not him. You're just another fucking pony. Useless. Weak." He prodded my side with a hoof, which I felt give a lot more than it should have. Yep, those ribs were broken.

Good job wasteland, mission accomplished.

“So easy to kill.” He stood, and stepped over me. Pressing a hoof against my head, he began applying pressure. “Like a fucking insect. I can just crush you.”

It hurt, but I didn't care. Everything hurt. I was sort of looking forward to a break from the pain.

“Sorry... Shade....” I managed to gurgle it out, through the blood. At least I could still talk, if only barely. My lungs were surprisingly no more hurt now than when I'd come into this fight, though it did hurt to breath. That was probably just the broken ribs.

I heard a slam from somewhere else in the building, and the pounding of hooves. Somepony was coming towards us, and they were moving quickly.

Then, Massacre's crushing hoof was off of my head. He slammed bodily into a wall, and I saw a figure leap over me in pursuit. The figure was fast, slamming hooves into Massacre's face and body. I couldn't see much of him, not from my position on the ground, but I could make out two features.

One, the pony was standing on their hind legs.

Two, they had a white jacket on.

A flurry of blows left Massacre stunned, and a follow up haymaker knocked the mask from his face. It skittered across the floor, sliding against me, but I could do little but look at it. Trying to move hurt more than just laying there.

A kick from a rear hoof knocked Massacre through the wall, letting in blinding sunlight from outside. Outside, I heard a further crash followed by Massacre groaning. The pony that had saved me by beating down the giant glanced back at me, and dropped to all fours before rushing to my side.

“Ripple. Ripple can you hear me?” It was Raw Deal. Uncle Square Deal was here to help me. I tried speaking, but he put a hoof to my mouth. “Shh.... uncle's here.” He looked at me, frowning, clearly not happy with the condition I was in. As fuzzy as the world was, I could tell that he was scared.

I'd never heard him talk kindly to me. It threw me off for a second, since I was all but certain that he wanted me dead. Had he come to terms with who I was, that I wasn't the pony that betrayed him. He looked up, past me, towards the door. “Xiera, help him. Use the mask, button on the inside. I'll be fine, I just need to buy some time.”

Deal sprang back up and galloped through the gaping hole in the wall, out into the daylight. I felt a soothing touch on my cheek and looked up into Xiera's eyes as she reached past me with her hooves and picked up the mask at my side. She put it down near my face, looping a strap around my neck from it. “I'm sorry, but I'm sure this is going to hurt.” Reaching in, she pressed a little button built into the rim.

As she put the mask on my face and tightened the strap, the mask sucked itself tight and I felt the needles built into it pierce the skin just under my jaw, going deep. A strange feeling began flowing from it, and that feeling quickly filled my whole body. Everything stopped hurting, and I let out a long sigh of relief. It had been so long since I hadn't hurt, it was like I'd almost forgotten the feeling. It was rather pleasant.

Unfortunately, it was short lived.

All at once, every nerve in my body turned on. Every muscle began spasming and seizing, my skin crawled with a thousand razors, and my bones turned molten. I roared in pain. A pain so intense that the roar just seemed too weak to get the point across. I screamed so hard that my vocal chords shredded.

I'd thought that nothing could have beaten the feeling of being ripped apart from within. The plants in that memory had long been the epitome of what I could feel, and I'd thought that they'd deadened me a

bit to any further pain.

This beat the plants.

This made it feel like nothing, a pinprick. Oh why did I have to think that nothing could hurt more, I really should have seen the wasteland playing a cruel trick on me and delivering something like this.

I felt a few bullets that Doc Care and Crimson Knife had missed, pushing out through muscle and skin. My freshly regenerated eardrums heard the sound of bullets hitting the ground as they rolled off of my quivering hide. Shrapnel from explosives and even a few errant nails worked their way out, ripping and shredding with no care for how much pain they caused.

I started hearing the crunching as my bones forced themselves back together. They tore their way through soft tissue until they were back in place, leaving the shredded muscle and flesh to knit back together in their wake. My ribs floated back into place and repaired, every single shard and splinter returning to its position by some horrible magic. My jaw, which I wasn't even aware was broken, slowly pieced back together the shattered right side where I'd impacted a counter while Massacre was using me as a pony flail.

Every piece was fitting together perfectly. I was a puzzle. I was a puzzle made entirely of pain.

I screamed until I couldn't anymore, and then I kept screaming. My vocal chords shredded and mended, over and over.

I felt Two Kick wake up, and I felt him screaming as well. We both screamed as we were pieced back together.

"...I'm pretty sure that hydra would rip ya' to shreds."

Through the pain, Doc's voice came to me. He'd mentioned Hydra, but I doubted that it could do something like this. The ripped to shreds part I understood fully, but there was no way a drug could heal like this. This was something on an entirely different level.

Slowly, my muscles stopped seizing and cramping up, one by one. Bone stopped tearing paths through me. My skin stopped knitting together dozens of cuts, lacerations, and bruises.

I found that I'd moved across the floor until I was wedged pretty tightly into a corner. Xiera was standing back, far back. I had no idea how long it had been since she'd put on the mask, and suddenly all I wanted was it off. I ripped the mask off of my face and threw up, emptying my stomach contents onto the ground. What little breakfast I'd eaten on the wall, and about a liter of blood.

I lay there, too hurt to cry. Too hurt to move. Too hurt to do anything but lay there.

Slowly, beneath all of the pain, I started realizing that I wasn't hurting. My body was better, but my mind was still working through the overload of pain signals it had gotten. It was like a blockage of pain; so much had happened at once that it was just trickling in, one signal at a time.

".....Fffuuuuuuuuck." I let out a long groan that summed up most of my thoughts.

I tried moving, but nothing worked. Being broken apart, and then rebuilt, was exhausting. I felt for sure that I could move, but nothing worked. I told my legs to go, and they lay there limply. Apparently my muscles had wanted the mask off as much as I had, because they hadn't torn it off on account of anything I'd told them to do.

"Are you okay?"

Xiera was slowly approaching me, a terrified look on her face. She clearly hadn't known what was about to happen when she put the mask on. I suspected that Deal was fully aware of it, and that was

why he had told Xiera to do it to me. He knew the Paragons better than I did.

The mask lay where I had thrown it, the previously filled tubes now empty. I'd taken all of whatever was in them, whatever had kept Massacre going as I'd emptied buckshot into him. The fluid hadn't emptied in the slightest when he was using it, so I guessed that the button had been some sort of purge.

Had Massacre ever gone through that before? Is that why he hadn't given a shit when I'd shot him, other than my lucky shot to his nether region? Had he been rebuilt into a functioning pony without any subtlety or care?

Xiera picked up the discarded mask and put it in her bag as she approached me. As a healer, it must have been quite interesting to her. As she came to me, she leaned down and looking into my eyes.

"You need to get up. Your uncle has been gone for far too long, and I fear the beast may return." Xiera was trying to help me to my hooves, and I did all that I could to assist. I fell against her, but slowly I was able to stand. Very slowly.

Walking was an entirely different matter, and I slammed face first into the ground at the first step.

"C'mon legs... fucking move..." I tried talking to the appendages, but they didn't listen. Not all at once, at least. It still took me a few minutes to manage to make it to the hole supported by Xiera. From the corner of my eye, I saw something that I needed. Mustering every bit of will I had in me, I grabbed Broken with my magic and put it in its holster, wedging the crushed material back into its regular shape.

Then we were outside. It was an alley, where Massacre had gone. Across the way, another hole where I assumed the stallion had crashed through. I didn't see him, or Raw Deal, and I couldn't hear their fight either. I could still make out the din of combat, gunshots and screams from throughout the town. However long my fight and the healing process had been, the battle still raged on. I wondered who was winning.

Wait.

Raw Deal and Xiera being here meant that the Whitecoats had arrived. The reinforcements had gotten here.

"Are... are we winning?" My mouth moved slowly and felt strangely, and I realized that I'd regrown several teeth that I'd lost in the last few weeks. Reaching up, I felt at my face, but the scar was still there. Massacre's mask could work miracles, but it couldn't fix cosmetic damage. I felt just a little cheated.

"The battle has turned in our favor, yes, though the day is not yet won. We must find your uncle." Xiera was supporting me along, a haste in her step being hindered by my lagging form.

"How long?" My voice was rough, and the words hurt.

She looked at me strangely, and I gestured at my face in a circle. She got it, and voiced the question that I was asking for me. My throat still felt like I'd spent a week swallowing tacks. "The mask?"

I nodded at the zebra mare, hoping that I'd only gone through that for about a minute. Much longer left way too much time for something to go wrong, for me to not be there. I had to get to Shade.

"About 15 minutes."

My jaw dropped open. Fifteen minutes of the most intense pain of my life. No wonder everything was running slow. I was sort of surprised my brain hadn't shut off entirely to save itself from my body. That had been way too long for me to be laying in one place and not doing anything.

I had to get to Shade.

I had to.

I broke off from the zebra, who began protesting after me. I limped my way, blurrily and feeling like I was on the verge of collapse, towards where I knew I would find the blue mare. There were bodies scattered across the city, in different states death. Some were dead, some were dying, all were horrifically wounded. Bullets, blades, bludgeons. All of these had seen their use today.

I rounded a corner, tripping over a decapitated raider, when I saw what I had hoped so desperately not to see..

The entire block was on fire. The tavern. The clinic. The inn. It was all ablaze.

“No!” I screamed out, and the sight gave me a rush of adrenaline, giving me the control I needed and my legs the energy they required. I ran. I kicked in the front door of the inn, barreling into the inferno within. I didn’t care if I got a little burnt. I’d had worse.

I still care. Fuck you.

There were bodies littered about the place, but I noticed quickly that they were mostly raiders or whitecoats. I couldn’t find any of the children, or any of those that had taken refuge here. Shade was gone. Everypony that had been here for their safety was gone.

“No! No! Fuck!” I shouted at the building, the building that’s one job had been to protect the innocent. It had failed. It had failed so completely. I had to scream at it.

Haha.

I felt a pair of talons tighten around my shoulders, and I fought as I was dragged out of the building. A beam overhead, wrapped in flames and thoroughly weakened, collapsed, just barely missing me as I struggled to get loose. When finally I was dragged into the open, I was thrown to the ground and rolled around to put out the flames. I still fought, biting and kicking, until a strong backhand to the face snapped me out of it.

Ash hovered over me, burnt and bloodied, but still alive. “Snap the fuck out of it!” He was shouting in my face, his razor sharp beak inches from my face. He jerked his head away from me, snatching his revolver from its holster and popping off a couple of shots to the side. I glanced over, catching a pair of raiders dying on the ground from the gushing bullet holes they’d been surprised to suddenly receive.

“Get your shit together!” He hit me again, this time with the pistol, and it opened a gash on my head, sending blood streaming down my face. I wasn’t sure how much more I could lose, since most of what I’d started this day with was still in the house I’d fought Massacre in.

I stopped fighting, slumping in his grip. He looked me over, a shocked look on his face. “Kick... what happened to you?”

“It hurt.” I was staring at the sky as I spoke. It was grey and gloomy, but at least it hadn’t just failed. Fucking building.

He laughed, a grin spreading across his face. “I’ll bet, you look like shit.” He turned from me, looking over towards where Xiera had taken cover when he’d started firing at the raiders that had come across us. “You okay Miss?”

She nodded, and trotted over to us urgently. “We need to find Deal. He’s fighting Massacre on his own.”

“Fuck. Okay, I’ll look for him. Kick, are you okay to work on your own? You’re not gonna try to burn

yourself to death again?" He looked down at me as he helped me to my hooves. His talons pressed into my skin as he did so, but they didn't puncture the skin like they normally did. I could barely feel them at all.

"I... I think so." As I stood there, my body was giving up the fight to escape control of my brain. I was getting full control back. Testing my magic, I found that it was working as well as normal, which was surprising. It had always shorted out after I'd gone through punishments less than what I'd received, and yet here it was working fine.

Floating Broken in front of me, I nodded again. "Yeah... I'm good."

The griffin shook his head at me before spreading his wings. "You should find a mirror sometime, Kick." With a flap of his powerful wings, he launched into the air in search of my uncle or the hulking stallion. He'd be able to stay out of the reach of...

"Ash! Don't get close to him!" I shouted, my voice cracking. He paused in his ascent, nodded, and took off.

I turned to look at Xiera, who was gazing after the griffin. She must not have seen his kind too frequently, and I knew there weren't many pegasi around. Flight must have been interesting to her. Then she glanced at me, and hurried over. This was no place for a healer.

"Did you..." I had to stop in a fit of coughing. My vocal chords had taken quite a beating. "Did you see Shade or anyone when you got here?"

Xiera shook her head sadly. "No, I've only seen bodies."

I wasn't sure how long my fight with Massacre had been, but I knew that once he'd swung me around for a while he'd taken his damned time, just letting me bleed onto the floor. Had it really been long enough that the raiders had made it in and gotten to the best defended building in town? Had the plan really failed that badly?

The two of us stood there in silence. I was having a really hard time keeping track of how long anything was taking, ever since that first blast. Had it been hours... or twenty minutes? I couldn't tell. Xiera was standing near me, unarmed as usual and looking a little scared. Broken would make sure that nothing happened to either of us.

That horrible, booming voice echoed over the town. "Okay... pull back. Fuck this noise, we're out of here."

Massacre. That answered if he was still alive, and I saw a look of shock wash over Xiera's face. His message did not bode well for Raw Deal, and was potentially bad for Ash. If the Paragon had survived, there was a very good chance that neither of them had. I now knew just how dangerous he was, and I'd thought that not having the mask would lessen what he could do.

I hoped that my guess was wrong.

Looking around, I saw flashes of raiders in back streets, heading towards the front gate. They were staying off of the main street, which made tactical sense. It was essentially a killzone... it had been meant to be a killzone, but I could see that that part of the plan had failed. Every part of the plan had failed as soon as the wall had gone down. As much as I wanted, I couldn't bring myself to give chase. I'd lied to Ash. I wasn't in any shape to fight, I could still only just barely move, unless it was in some suicidally stupid attempt.

I held on for as long as I could. Being beaten that badly, bleeding out, and then the situation with the mask, had left me drained. I was exhausted. My mind hurt. I couldn't see straight.

Once I saw the flapping of wings propelling a familiar griffin over a building, I gave in. Somepony else could take over right now. I had to take a break. My eyes closed and I hit the ground. I heard Xiera shout out, but I didn't care. I needed to stop for a bit.

For once, I welcomed the darkness.

“So numbers. What are we looking at?”

“Ten unhurt. Fifteen wounded. The rest are either dead or dying. We've got a number unaccounted for, but with the blast it's all guesswork. We have several prisoners, they're tied up and being watched by the walking wounded.”

The voices brought me back slowly. I didn't open my eyes, but I lay there and did a quick check on my body. Muscles tensed when I wanted them to, my hearing was working, nothing hurt for the first time in a very long time. I just didn't want to get up.

I opened my eyes, seeing the blank grey slate of the sky. It wasn't raining, but by the smell in the air it was about to or just had. Mixed in with that smell were the smells of death and destruction. The odor of dead ponies mixed with smoke, leaving a bitter, acrid hint to any scent in the air. It was unpleasant.

“Kick's awake, just so you know.”

I looked over at Ash, who was leaning against a wall right next to where I was laid out on the street. He was looking right at me, so of course he had noticed as soon as I'd opened my eyes. He'd probably known since I'd regained consciousness. There were other ponies around, but not a lot. I slowly pulled myself up into a sitting position, finding that my barding had been removed.

Xiera was in my face, almost instantly. She looked into my eyes briefly, and then her hooves went to my neck. I flinched, but her gentle prodding... didn't hurt. “Does this hurt?”

I coughed, my throat still a little raw. “No... why?”

She sat back, checking the rest of me. Each poke and prod felt like just that. No extra pain, no broken bones, no bruises. I felt good.

The others were still talking, and I saw with a rush of relief that it was Raw Deal and Willow. They'd been the ones talking when I'd first come to, I now realized. That did not paint a good picture for the Whitecoats, if they'd really been that reduced in number. I saw Ironsights in the background, talking to a few surviving Blank ponies, and about ten Whitecoats standing around the pony I recognized as Rhapsody across the street.

I didn't see Traffic, Radish, Doc Care, or anypony else that I was looking for.

Then, it was who I didn't see that really caught my attention. I pushed Xiera away and scrambled to my hooves, looking down the street. A chunk of the town was still smouldering, and it looked like most of the ponies left were accounted for on this street, though there could have been more patrolling.

“Where's Ivory? Fluster?.” Slowly, I looked at Ash. “Where's Shade?”

Shaking his head sadly, he shrugged. “I don't know. We couldn't find any of them. Believe me, we looked.” He stepped over to me, putting a talon on one shoulder. “Sorry Ripple.”

I came to a conclusion. One that was horrible, but was better than them being dead. “Neighwhere takes slaves. They must have taken the girls. They took other ponies, right?”

He nodded and leaned in close, talking low enough that the others couldn't hear unless they were listening in. “We talked about that while you were out. It's a possibility, but what can we do about it?”

Then he grinned. “Well, I know what you want to do about it. Sneak in, save everypony? I’m for it... but don’t run off just yet. We need a plan.”

Leaning away from me, he looked out over what was left of Blank. Much of the main street had been destroyed, now that I saw it. Traffic’s store had taken a missile or something, half of it was gone. The sign was still there, completely untouched since its repair. The wall was gone, leaving only half of the gate hanging limply from its mooring on the remaining wall. The building nearest the wall was the one that had been destroyed in my fight with Sweeps, so the bomb, or whatever had caused the blast, hadn’t done too much damage.

“What happened?” I asked, staring at the wall. Ash followed my gaze.

“They were all quiet for a good while, until Massacre ordered the attack. I guess they snuck in along the ditch, must have had a hell of a sapper or I would have seen it. Bomb went off, took out the wall and most of the ponies on it. The rest... well, the plan went to shit, as you can guess.” He made a gesture with his hands, imitating an explosion. “Ponies came rushing from the other walls, met the raider army head on. I didn’t see you until things were pretty fucked, but by then I hear you’d already had quite the day.”

Quite the day. Easy way of summing up that I’d been used as a flail, to destroy the interior of a home.

I nodded, not willing to take my mind back to that. The less I thought about the mask, or the beating leading up to it, the better.

Raw Deal finished speaking with Willow, and turned to walk over to us. Willow walked off, her shoulders drooped and looking at the ground. As Deal reached me, he gave Xiera a small kiss on the cheek, and whispered. “He’s fine, you can stop fussing.”

She blushed, and nodded at him. Ceasing her prodding, she stepped away and hurried off. I wasn’t sure where to, but I noticed that she had more bags with her than she had previously. Several of them had the Ministry of Peace logo, and I guessed that they were loaded down with medicine. She probably had other patients.

“Sorry about the mask, but I didn’t see any other choice.” Deal was looking at my neck, as was Ash, and I really was starting to hope that I’d be able to find a mirror. Something about it was drawing a lot of attention, and that could never be a good thing.

“What... what was it? The mask?” I figured that if anypony knew that wasn’t going to try to kill me, it was Deal. Massacre might know, and whoever made it would know, but I doubted I could ask either of them.

“One of Epiphany’s little projects.” He must have read the confused look on my face, because he immediately cut to an explanation. “A Paragon. Hate’s inventor.”

“I thought Holepunch was the inventor.”

Shaking his head, he reached into his own pack and pulled out the mask, which I instinctively recoiled from. He flipped it over and pointed to a small mark on the inside, a sideways eight. “The infinity mark. He always puts that on his stuff.”

Looking at me, then to the mask, he shrugged. “What it is, I’m not really sure. It sure fixed you up though. How do you feel?”

I paused, doing another quick check of my body. “I feel... I feel like I haven’t spent a day on the wasteland. Aside from my throat, that still hurts a little.” Honestly, aside from the crushing despair of having lost my best reason to keep living, I felt great.

Yeah. Feels great, doesn't it.

Not now. Go away Two Kick.

Don't worry, I'm not gonna try anything. I'm still just a little worn out... I'll let you run things for a while.

That was... a very odd answer for him, normally he was fighting me or taunting me. To actually give in and just let me be? My face must have mirrored my confusion, because just then I noticed that Deal was looking strangely at me, and stopped with the inner dialogue. It always seemed to weird ponies out whenever they noticed it.

"I feel fine."

He nodded, turning away from me. I wasn't done with him though. "What happened with Massacre?"

Deal shrugged, not looking at me. "He got away." I wanted to protest, to question him more... but him being nice to me was a new thing. If I pressed him, it might go back the old way. I really didn't need more enemies right now, and getting Deal had been a moral victory for me.

With that, he left, walking over to where Rhapsody and the other surviving Whitecoats were. Several of them looked defeated, while Rhapsody just looked furious. I didn't blame them, they'd lost their family, at least how I looked at it. The Whitecoats had been raider survivors, each of them lost until they'd found their way to those like them. To lose almost everypony they knew a second time...

Must have been hard.

When I got Shade back, I was never going to let her go again. She was fine. She had to be fine.

If she wasn't fine, if she was injured in any way, I was going to start killing and not stop until they were all dead. Every Paragon. Every raider. Every slaver on this entire fucking world.

I would kill them all.

Finally. A fun idea.

Wait. First... I had a plan.

No. Come on, your first one was great.

I stood, making sure that my legs were really listening to what they were telling me. When I was confident that I wouldn't faceplant when I tried moving, I started off in the direction that Willow had gone. Knowing her, or at least thinking I knew her, she would be with her wounded.

As I walked, I took in just how badly Blank was damaged. Most of the buildings along the main road had burnt out, making me wonder again how long I'd been down. It could only have been a couple hours at most, and as I stepped through a puddle, I figured it out. It had rained, but just enough for the fires to go out.

So the wasteland wasn't all about fucking us over, occasionally it gave a little help.

I heard a commotion in one of the buildings, what sounded like shouting, and reached for Broken. Not finding it, I glanced down and realized that I wasn't wearing my barding. It was still back where I'd woken up. Of course I'd left it in my haste, because that was just the sort of thing that I would do in a situation like this. Fuck.

I still had my hoofguns though, and I'd reloaded them right before the beating. I rushed up the stairs, slipping a little bit in a pool of blood on one of them, and burst into the scene. A couple guns pointed my way, but lowered as they saw who it was.

All of these Whitecoats were injured, with either visible wounds or dressings. Against one wall, chained to a metal pipe that must have once belonged to a heating system of some kind, were about a dozen raiders. One of them was screaming at Willow, who had her blade out and pressed against his neck.

“Fucking do it, you sloppy cunt! Cut me! Cut me!” He was bleeding heavily from where an eye had once been, and he was spitting through a mouth missing a lot of teeth. I couldn’t tell if it had been done in a fight, or if it had all been done recently.

“You know, you’re a pretty thing, I’ll be sure to hunt you down when we get out of here and…” He was cut off as she slammed the pommel of her blade into the side of his head, knocking him out cold.

Willow spit on the raider, and kicked him casually as she sheathed the blade inside her coat. She was a mess, covered in blood and squinting from one eye. Turning to me, I saw that she was limping heavily as she made her way across the room.

“Get out of here Ripple. This is Whitecoat business.” At those words, two of the Whitecoats moved in front of me, rifles aimed at me. I stepped back, just slightly, but didn’t leave.

“No. One of them might know where they took Shade. Where they took everypony! I’m sure you’d like to know that!” I pressed forward, both of the injured Whitecoats threatening to shoot me. I wasn’t going to back down. They weren’t going to shoot me.

“I will find that out! There are ways to get a pony to talk. Even hardened scum. They all talk.” She was now standing almost nose to nose with me, flanked by her two guards. Her good eye was glaring into my scarred eye, as the two of us just dared each other to break first.

From behind her, I heard a small voice. “Badeye?”

Willow turned, sucking in a breath to scream at the raider, but as she moved I saw who it was. The raider looked much more tired than the last time I’d seen her, but she was still the same green mare that had introduced me to the other Red Dogs.

Jackleg. One of the few survivors of Stadium.

“Jackleg! Willow, get her out of those chains.” Willow looked at me like I was insane, but had stopped screaming at the beaten mare.

“Why? She’s a raider. She’s gonna die, just like the rest of them.”

I pushed my way past the soldiers, trotting towards Jackleg who suddenly had a gleam of hope in her eye. “I don’t think she is.”

I got close to her and leaned down. She looked terrified, and was bleeding from a bullet hole in her flank. She’d been beaten before she was chained, and I could tell that she hadn’t been one of the professional raiders. She’d been a part of the first wave, the lightly armed and completely unarmored mob. I hadn’t seen that tactic used here, but I’d seen it done at Orchard and knew the signs. Those that weren’t here voluntarily were forced into that job from what I understood.

“She’s no more raider than Ivory. She just lived in Stadium when the raiders took it, she was a prisoner before you put her in chains. Get her up.” I shouted at Willow, glaring at the Whitecoat leader for treating everypony she thought was a raider the same. If things had gone differently, would I be chained to a wall somewhere right now?

Willow stared at me, a grimace on her face. After a few seconds, she looked to one of her soldiers and jerked her head towards us. A unicorn missing an ear and with much of his face in bandages, he was probably the most heavily injured Whitecoat in the room. Despite that, he followed her orders and drew

a keyring from a pocket, limping towards us. Unlocking the padlock securing Jackleg, he glared at me and backed away.

Jackleg, despite not knowing me very well, pressed against me as she stood. As far as she was concerned, I was her only friend in this room. The only one that wasn't intent on putting a bullet in her head after torturing her for information.

I turned, supporting the beaten mare, and left the room without a word to Willow. Once out in the street, I shouted as loud as my voice would let me. It hurt, just a little. "Xiera! Little help here!"

Within seconds, I saw the zebra mare stick her head out of a nearby building. That must have been where the other wounded were. She trotted over to me, a grim look on her face. "Ripple... what is this? A raider? Why would you ask me here?"

I shook my head at my aunt, sighing. "She's not a raider. Trust me. She's been shot." She looked at me, clearly trying to figure out why I was insisting on this, but shrugged and nodded.

"Bring her, we shall treat her off of the street."

Where they had gathered the wounded was a long, low building that I'd never been in before. Judging from the boxes pushed hastily to the sides or turned into cots for the wounded, it was some sort of storage area. Xiera weaved her way through ponies that I'd seen, but never gotten to know. I practically dragged Jackleg along, her wound tripping her up.

Once we made it to an empty spot, I gingerly helped the wounded mare up onto a blanket thrown across a pair of crates. Then, I let Xiera go to work, backing away from her. Jackleg, to her credit, was taking this all rather well. She had seemed resigned to her fate when we'd met in Stadium, and she was resigned to her fate even now.

"So... Badeye."

"It's... uh, it's Ripple, actually."

"Oh... since when were you white? I thought you were dark... green or something..." Her head rolled to the side as she took it in. She had also taken a hit of med-x, which combined with the blood loss seemed to be making her a little loopy.

"Hey. Jackleg, hey, stay with me." I tapped on the table next to her head, causing her to open her eyes a little bit wider.

"Where are they taking captives?"

"Ripple, could you not bother the patient?" Xiera glared at me as she started working in the area of the bullet hole. Jackleg let out a little whimper as the zebra began digging into the hole with a pair of metal tweezers.

"Please, Jack." I said it softly, but with urgency. I had to know.

Her eyes locked onto mine, and she frowned. Opening her mouth, she said the one place I feared she would say. I knew I'd be going there eventually, but I'd hoped that I'd be doing it under different circumstances. Namely, with an army at my back.

"Neighwhere."

Thanks to Kkat for writing Fallout Equestria, and inspiring myself and many others to write with her amazing story.

Thanks to Wirepony for doing a really good job of editing this one, it was broken before he came around.

Comment, fave, all that jazz.

Oh right, Ripple has an ask blog, mostly just for fun. It's over at [Ask Ripple](#)

Chapter 14: Failures

“Kick. We can’t just rush off on this one.” The griffin was busy cleaning his revolver, which had grown filthy with all the shit in the air. Burnt pony, smoke, dust, fumes. It was not pleasant, and had coated nearly everything in the town with a thin layer of grime.

We sat in the entrance to the infirmary, watching as any survivors were found and wheeled in. The ponies of Blank had suffered terribly. The Whitecoats had been slashed down from an army to a well trained gang. The town itself was likely going to be abandoned, the survivors scattered to the wastes now that their wall was gone.

The architect brothers hadn’t been seen since the raid, which meant that they were either captured, or they were dead and buried under the slowly burning wreckage. If they’d been near the wall, there wasn’t likely much left of them. Harsh experiences looking for survivors had taught us that. One distraught mare, her entire family on the wall when it had went up, had taken to gathering the pieces. No pony could talk to her, and she’d cut the first pony who’d tried stopping her with the wickedly sharp shovel she was carrying.

Ironically, I found that she was named Specter. It described her perfectly now, as she crossed the street in front of us yet again, a dripping bag of gore gripped in her teeth. She’d been throwing the pieces in a hole she’d dug where her house was. By my count, she must have had ten ponies worth of pieces by now.

I was purposely keeping near the infirmary, as it was now being called, just in case. In case any of the girls were brought in. Or found. I didn’t want to give up on the chance that they had survived and were free, but were injured.

Even though I knew deep down that they’d been taken, I had to keep up the hope that they weren’t. Even death, as much as I hated to think of it, was preferable to going to Neighwhere in chains. Shipped off to some distant slave monger, put to work in some fucking city. Checking absentmindedly, I couldn’t even find Fillydelphia on my map. It wasn’t anywhere nearby.

A talon rested on my PipBuck, pulling my eyes away from it. The griffin had stopped cleaning his weapon, and behind him I could see that Xiera had come over to him, wrapping one of his wings in medical bandage. I hadn’t even known his wing was hurt.

“Don’t dwell on it Ripple. Thinking about a loved one in Neighwhere... it’s not healthy.” His eyes had a sadness I’d never seen before, and I just stared at him. He’d called me Ripple. He had never, not once since I’d met him, called me Ripple. Always Kick, maybe Two Kick if he wasn’t thinking. Never Ripple.

“Ash?” The question was there, hidden beneath his name, and as he looked at me, I could see that he knew it. He knew what I was asking him.

“I said I came down to Hornsmith because there wasn’t competition. That was true. What I left out...” A long pause as he went back to his revolver, staring down into the open chamber for any dirt or debris. “What I left out, was that my little brother came with me.”

I arched a brow at that. He’d never mentioned family before. Every impression I’d gotten from him was that he was alone out here, a griffin apart. He’d even mentioned being in Neighwhere as recently as the last year, where he’d seen Two Kick compete in the arena.

“For a few years, me and him made bank. Only two griffin mercenaries in the region, demand was

high. Talons, the both of us, or we were before we came here. Took jobs out of Neighwhere, mostly guarding caravans or attacking threatening gangs.” Slowly, he was rotating the chamber on the weapon, still staring down at it. The weapon had been positively sparkling for a while now, but he continued with his cleaning.

“Caps, entertainment, security. Life was sweet. Had a place outside town. Even commissioned a weapon from a Paragon. From Sweeps.” Behind him lay his rifle, which he had already cleaned. He’d gotten right on that, pretty much as soon as he allowed himself downtime from rescue operations and making sure there were no raiders left in town. Sweeps had reacted to the rifle’s shot, now that I remembered it. She’d known Ash by the sound the weapon had made.

“I never told you her name, did I? My girl there, I don’t talk much about her, but she has a name. Like your Broken, but she’s a bit more shy.” He chuckled, and I tilted my head. Sure, I’d thought of Broken as more than a weapon several times, even considering it a friend, but to give an instrument of death personality traits? Ash was acting a bit strange.

A long pause as he looked down the barrel of the gleaming revolver. Eventually, the griffin continued. “There’s an old medical practice. Pony mages had it, Zebra alchemists had it, even some of my own people had it. Griffin feathers help with vision. This rifle, she helped me see things I never would have before. Like a whole new world opened up. I named her Sight to the Blind.”

I nodded, fascinated with this. Ash had never talked much about his past, other than stories of successful jobs or fun times he’d had. Here he was, though, pouring out his past.

“Cutter. My younger brother, he was always talking about our history. Griffins have been warriors for as long as I can think of, and he was immensely proud of that I guess. The world burning really gave us a time to shine, you know. War, constant war, gave my people a purpose in Equestria. Before that... well, before that we did what we could. Grudgingly living in a pony's world, we made due.” He snapped the chamber on the weapon shut with a loud report, the noise drawing warning glances from ponies helping the injured.

“Right, off topic. Sorry. Talking about the past does that to me, Kick.” There was the familiar name. Even if it was a part of my past I’d rather leave behind, coming from Ash it felt right.

“We did a job for Hate. We were scavenging an old outpost up near Maremack. Ponies can’t get up there too easily, and the ‘Clavers stay far enough away from this area that going above the clouds wasn’t an issue for us. He had us looking for something, anything that seemed out of the ordinary.” Gesturing at the saddle bags I had reacquired, now that I was fully armed while my barding was being repaired by Torque, he shrugged. “Now I know I was probably looking for one of those Cubes, but I had no idea back then. Anyways, we didn’t find it, just returned to Neighwhere with what we thought was a pretty decent haul. Electronics and weapons and the like.”

He dropped his shoulders a bit, staring down at the dust at his paws. “Hate didn’t think so. Kept going on about us failing him, threatening to shoot both of us. No job was worth that, so we left. Tried to leave. We were airborne when he shot Cutter through the wing.”

The griffin’s face was completely impassive, like he’d run the scenario over in his mind thousands of times, looking for any way he could have changed the outcome.

“We weren’t too high; Cutter dropped right back into Neighwhere. When everypony else started shooting at me... I flew, fast and hard. Didn’t go back for my brother, would have been gunned down long before I coulda got to him.”

He holstered the revolver in its strap on his chest. “Last time I saw him. Don’t know if he survived, don’t know a fucking thing. Could be in shackles, or he could be dead and in the ground for a year!”

Turning to me, I saw the rage burning in his eyes. I'd seen him mad. I'd seen him disappointed, defeated, and distraught. I'd never seen him furious before.

"That! That is what I want to talk to Hate about. Wring it from his neck if I have to." He was gripping the corner of the box he sat on, and it began splintering as his talons dug in deep. The wood gave a sharp crack, and it seemed to snap him out of it. His face lightened, he sat back, shaking splinters and wood fiber from his claws. Xiera was finished, and he nodded politely in thanks to the zebra who had been bandaging and tending to the wounded predator even as he'd told his tale.

I didn't know what to say. We'd both lost so much to Neighwhere, and I'd never known Ash's reasons. It made sense how he seemed to know more about the Paragons than almost anyone I'd met in the Wasteland.

Pointing at me with one wicked claw extended, he growled. "That's why I gave you my contract. You can get me in. Let me deal with him, find what I need, then you can kill him. All square." Drawing a small box in the air with two claws as he finished the sentence, he turned away from me and picked up Sight to the Blind, slinging it over his back. Standing on his hind legs, he glanced at the rows of injured ponies. "I'll be outside if you need me."

The griffin left, his injured wing tucked tightly against his body as he moved. He always was in a bad mood whenever the option of flight was gone, but I doubted that was why he was angry now. He'd just dredged up what I suspected was every bad memory in his stock, and no one would be fine after doing something like that. I'd just let him walk it off, or do whatever it was he did. The tavern had burned, so the town was critically low on alcohol, and I hoped that he had realized that before heading there.

Sitting there in the entrance, I waited.

None of the girls came through as injured. No pony any sign of them amongst the dead.

I was going to Neighwhere.

Evening came, the darkness bringing an even more somber tone to the shattered town. Most of the town's power was out, but Torque had scavenged a generator and gotten it to work for the infirmary. Traffic's shop had indeed been hit with a missile, as I'd suspected, and Torque had been inside when the projectile had torn into the building, demolishing much of the interior.

Only ten minutes into the search and rescue efforts mounted by those capable of moving around, he had been found under a collapsed pile of scrap in his workshop. He was distraught at the loss of Traffic, who was missing, but had pulled himself together. Together enough to help repair what he could, making life just a little easier for the survivors.

The lights flickered inside the infirmary, where I still sat vigil. Really, I was still having a hard time moving. After my confrontation with Willow and rescue of Jackleg, I'd collapsed. My legs were still weak, and most of my body felt like it hadn't been used before. I helped where I could, but Xiera had kept me off my hooves for the most part. Doc Care had agreed with her diagnosis from the cot he currently lay in, where he was missing most of a leg.

Honestly, since it was a rear leg, I doubted that it would inconvenience him too greatly. I'd rarely seen the pegasus touch the ground, preferring to stay airborne most of the day. Almost like he'd been practicing for losing a leg.

So I was playing at guard, making sure that nothing happened to the injured inside. Whitecoat scouts had confirmed that the raiders had left, and weren't just waiting in the hills to descend upon the crippled town in the night. Ironsight had stopped by for a while, checking on the injured and chatting

with those capable, before he had trotted back into the street to continue doing his job. He was sheriff... or a guardpony, or something. I'd never really asked, but his dedication to the task he spent his life performing wasn't going to be hampered by his town being destroyed.

As frequently as I could, whenever Xiera was too occupied to pay attention, I'd get up and trot around the building, or walk up and down the aisles. It felt like if I didn't do something, my legs would never work again. They needed exercise, and each time I gave them what they wanted I felt a little better. By nightfall, I was trotting with the best of them. I didn't know what exactly had been in the mask, but it had increased my stamina, and I was pretty sure I was healing faster as well.

So there were some good news to go with the crippling, mind numbing pain. I could still barely feel anything, even when I gave a test jab with a piece of metal I'd found. I applied different pressures, and found that it took quite a lot to actually cut me now. Xiera had yelled at me when she'd seen me trying to cut my leg.

After that little experiment, and after I'd cleaned and checked all of my weapons, I ran out of activities to entertain myself whenever I was forced to sit. Each little walk ended with Xiera, or one of the increasing number of helpers she was getting, yelling at me to stop walking around. As I sat there, staring at the dirt and dust shifting in the evening breeze, I did anything I could to not think.

The girls were either captured, dead, or missing. Traffic was was in the same boat as the girls. Blank was functionally dead. The Whitecoats, which I had been hanging a lot of my future plans on, were all but gone.

Why... why did I have to feel amazing? I wanted so much for my body to feel how my mind did. Like I'd failed. Like I'd failed three mares I'd sworn to protect.

Failed at everything.

“No. Fuck off. Not now.”

A passing mare who was filling in as a nurse gave me a quick, scared look and hurried off. I raised a hoof towards her, wanting to tell her I wasn't talking to her, but she was gone too fast.

You're just bad with mares. You didn't even rut any of them. The pale one with the nice flanks, your little marefriend, they all but threw themselves at you at least once each. I woulda plowed until the clouds went away, but you just shrugged it off and kept suffering. Even the little scarred one... you just know she can take some pain.

I clenched my eyes tightly and put a hoof to my head, trying to force him out of my mind. His voice was weaker than usual, but the volume was like he was talking into my ear. I needed him gone. The only reliable way I'd found to drown him out was with Shade... and she wasn't around.

Too bad. Nice curves. Nice mouth. Hope she's still alive, she looks like fun.

“I will shoot you first. It killed you once already.”

Trapped me. I didn't die. I'll get out, it's just a matter of time. When I do... oh boy, the wasteland is gonna be sore for fucking years.

Growling lowly, I gripped the shotgun in my holster. Two Kick's weapon might be enough to kill the voice in my head.

A hoof rested itself on the weapon, holding it in the leather. “Ripple, you're making my patients nervous.” Looking up, I saw the eyes of a zebra staring into mine with concern. Concern for me, and concern for those in the room.

“I'm... I'm sorry. Think I took a harder blow to the head than I thought. I... I think I need some fresh

air?”

She'd been telling me to stay down all day, and I watched her run it through her head. Her eyes kept shifting from me to the room of patients, some of whom had shifted away from me. Slowly, my aunt turned back to me and nodded softly. "That sounds good, but move slowly. I don't know if you have internal injuries, I don't want you tearing something."

I wobbled to my hooves, nodding to her through the building headache, and stumbled to the door.

Ya know... Uncle Square landed himself a nice piece of stripe there. When I get back, I'm gonna give her a try. After I finish Square. Again. He's doing good for a dead pony. Runs in the family I guess.

Once I was out of the sight of Xiera, I found a dark alley. It wasn't hard, the entire husk of the town was dark. Once under the cover of wood, metal, and darkness, I slammed my head into the wall as hard as I could. I barely felt it, even as blood streamed from above my eye. The wall was dented and splattered with specks of blood, but I didn't care. This wasn't meant for me.

What, you going to beat me to death? You know if you lose me... there won't be any of you left. If I die, you die. Who's gonna run the show then? The monster in your pocket? That would be great. I'd miss the show... but if he scares even me, he's gotta be worth something.

"Shut the fuck up!"

Ripple, why so angry? We're headed home. We can kill everypony that needs it, grab a drink, grab some tail.

"Do you ever think about anything else?" I ran my head into the wall again, trying to get him to shut up. I was getting sick of his voice in my head every time I looked at a mare. It was always there, but I'd been able to ignore it. Now though...

Shade... I need help.

I need a lot more than that.

I applebucked the wall behind me, sending twin shotgun blasts ripping into the structure. I felt splinters and a few hits of shrapnel pepper me, but it wasn't me it hit.

"If you touch her, I swear that I will end both of us. All three of us. Anypony that has EVER FUCKING BEEN IN THIS HEAD!"

I got hit from the side by a white blur. I'd seen that blur, and I fought back until my face was pressed into the dirt and debris of the alley. A fetlock was hooked around my neck and the rest of the body pressed me into the dirt. I couldn't move, I couldn't fight, I couldn't stand it.

"Ripple, you need to calm down." Uncle Raw Deal.

Square Deal. My beloved uncle.

"He just won't shut up!" I shouted into the dirt, taking in a mouthful of the stuff as I breathed in. "He just won't leave me alone..." Maybe I belonged down here, in the dirt and filth. Not like I was doing any good elsewhere, at least down here I couldn't hurt anypony. Couldn't fuck up anypony's life.

"Please... make him go away."

I heard my uncle's voice, up out of the world of dust and filth. "Okay."

A slight shift in where he had his hoof, and darkness hit me. The only place that I was alone. Darkness.

Darkness and silence.

The first thing I felt when I came too was the straps. I was tied to a bed, but I wasn't sure why. The night before...

It was morning. Light streamed through cracks in the boarded windows, and I was alone. I couldn't remember the night before, but for some reason I felt like I belonged strapped to a bed. Had I done something?

"Morning Ripple." A voice that for some reason I connected to a strangling sensation.

"Hey there Deal." I wasn't sure what I should call him. Couple of names, a title or two, Deal was the only name they all had in common.

I wasn't thinking right. Everything was... jumbled. More than usual. Fucked in the head.

Yep. You're going crazy Ripple.

"Oh shut up!"

"Who do you keep yelling at?" I saw him now, sitting at my side. Sitting rather oddly, on a table. A rifle very much like the one he had pointed at me during our first... my first meeting with him. He'd met Two Kick. He knew Two Kick quite well, which is why he had pointed that gun. I could only guess it was why he had it now. With me, alone in this room.

"I don't think you'll like my answer." My eye was crusted shut, and I was fighting to open it. Did I cut my head? I could see specks of blood on my snout, I had to have cut my head sometime.

Deal leaned forward. "I suppose not."

"I said I'm not Two Kick. I'm not. He's in here though... he's always talking to me." I'd never told anypony that. Nopony but Shade. My Shade knew... but she was gone.

A rifle barrel pressed into my temple, cold steel flaking off dried blood. "So that's it then. That's why you were attacking a building and screaming at air." It should have been a question, but I realized that he was stating it. He was telling me what I'd been doing, like he wanted me to understand just how crazy it was.

"Was I? That's.... that's no good." I'd attacked a building? Had I hurt anypony?

The older stallion sighed, lowering the weapon from my head. "No. No it's not. You were scaring ponies, I had to take you down."

I nodded at him, trying for a smile on my face. "Thanks Deal. Did I... was anypony hurt?"

Deal removed the weapon from my head and laid it on the table next to him, then stretched forward and rested a hoof on my shoulder. "I don't trust you, Ripple. I probably never will, not after what you've done."

I looked at his face, looking for a hint at what he was getting at. I had the feeling that if he wanted he could just reach over and snap my neck, remove this monster from the wasteland with a single motion.

"Even if you aren't Two Kick, you're still the same pony. Same voice, same movement, same face... aside from the scar. Every time I look at you, I see the murderer I failed so completely."

Biting his lip, he growled past me. At the table, at the wall, at the wasteland, it didn't really matter as long as the growl wasn't at me. "I promised your father. Promised him I'd look after you, that day before he went out on that trading run."

I stayed quiet. This was my chance. Deal knew my past. He knew more than anypony I could ask.

“Only pony that came back from that was Accolade.... Hate’s mother. Raped, beaten, burnt... she died almost as soon as she made it back to Anchor. That was the turning point. Hate took the name, took the most talented of us... all of you, and turned you all into monsters. His monsters.”

The burnt stallion leaned back, looking at the ceiling with a grimace on his face. I was taking in every word. I could hear Two Kick pacing the walls, chuckling as my uncle told me how the killer in me had been made. “You all latched onto his every word... wiping the Wasteland clean of those that had killed your loved ones. The raiders, the slavers... you made them all look like amateurs.”

Rubbing at the burnt half of his face with the hoof not hovering near my neck, he continued. “I tried to get Crackerjack to stop... tried to talk sense to him...” Shaking his head, he presented himself with a wave of a hoof. “Well, you can see how that went. You took part in it, too.”

Leaning forward, looming over me and placing the other hoof on me, he looked me straight in the eyes. “You know only one of the Paragons had an issue with how he dealt with me? As you dragged me from my home... you and Messy...” He shook his head with disdain. “Sorry. Massacre. I still try to think of you all as the nice kids I knew in the Stable. Messy Acres is long gone, I knew that when I saw what he did to you.”

I nodded, hoping he’d continue. This was much more than I’d hoped for. Two Kick was still laughing, like he’d known all this the entire time. He probably had, and had let me stumble along in confusion all this time. Playing with me. The fucker.

“That one voice was your sister’s. Gentle Wave. She was pleading with Hate not to do it.... only her.”

The door across from us opened and Xiera walked in, flanked by Ash. The zebra’s eyes widened as she saw Deal looming over me with his hooves at my neck, while I just lay there strapped to the bed. Ash reached for his revolver only briefly, still under contract to aid me. Deal stepped back, dropping his hooves and turning away from me.

“I don’t want to kill my family... but if you hurt anypony that doesn’t deserve it, even by accident, I will put you down. Put you down like the animal that you were.” He brushed past the approaching pair, Xiera trying to comfort him but being snubbed as he walked past. Quickly, he was out of the room, leaving me strapped to the bed.

“Are you okay Ripple?” The zebra was looking at my neck, near where the hooves had been, but I had only one question. I wanted to ask Deal, but he was gone and I didn’t think chasing after him with inquiries was a good idea. The stallion was worked up, and I knew less about what he was capable of now than when I’d first met him. He’d fought off Massacre, and somehow taken me off while I was in the midst of a breakdown.

I turned my head from where I was still staring at the door, and looked the zebra in her kind eyes.

“I have a sister?”

“Deal doesn’t talk about you or your family too much. Painful memories, ones he won’t share with me. I’ve heard him mention Gentle Wave in passing, but more than the name I do not know.” Her inspection of my neck had ceased, though she still gave it a few strange looks as she moved onto checking the rest of my body.

“That’s okay. The name’s more than I expected.”

Gentle Wave was a familiar name... she’d been the mare talking to Sweeps in the recordings that I’d listened to. She’d been gossiping with my sister, talking about her plans for me and our future. It made me hurt just a little more, that Sweeps had been that close to my sister. That I’d killed my sister’s best

friend.

“So... how did you and my uncle meet?” I wanted to change the topic, get my mind on something other than the sister I might or might not still have. “I haven’t seen many zebra around.”

“Not many of us in Equestria as it is. I had been separated from my tribe long ago, wandering the wastes, when I came across a shot and burnt pony in the desert. Your uncle made it quite a ways in his condition. He was near death, and I did all that I could to help him.” As she spoke, she prodded my ribs. They were solid now, but she had seen them smashed and broken before the mask, and she was just checking for remaining damage.

She smiled wistfully as she talked about the past, a sense of nostalgia creeping into her kind voice. “When he was well enough to move, he decided to serve as my bodyguard in thanks. He was homeless, an outcast like me.”

Giggling just slightly, she pressed in on my gut, looking for internal damage. “One thing led to another... and before long we were inseparable. Love is hard to find out here, but we got lucky. Fate was kind to us.”

Nodding to herself as she found nothing out of place, she moved to my legs. The muscles still felt weak, like I’d let them atrophy, and it was a strange sensation. Normally my legs were my strongest part, and having them strapped down and helpless was not reassuring.

“We travelled south, helping where we could. Your uncle was... decent in a fight, and I healed when I was allowed by circumstance. I began training him in the warrior ways of my people. I may have taken a vow of nonviolence... but nonviolent is not the same as untrained.” She added, with a smirk. “It made us safer, in these uneasy times.”

Strapped down and useless, I moved the one thing that I freely could. My mouth. “So you met the Whitecoats and fell in with them?”

She shook her head. “Not in that way. We met Willow first. A broken pony, I won’t tell her tale. Her ambitions spoke to us, and we began to follow her. Others joined, and soon, the Whitecoats had formed around us. So many survivors, marked by the Wasteland and gathered together under a banner of justice... it was good for the soul.”

Her eyes looked sad as she went silent. She had pretty much finished her checkup, looking into my eyes and covering them to check on pupil dilations. The Whitecoats had been her family, and now most of them were dead. The matriarchal zebra, I realized now, was dealing with this a lot better than most. Almost everyone she had known in the last year, healed and cared for, was dead.

As she stared into my eyes, I had a warming thought. It must be nice to have loving family. This zebra made me want to be better, just like Shade had. Like that poster urging us all to do better, like the beautiful mare with the pink mane. Inspirational mares could make all the difference in the world.

At Xiera’s order, Ash undid the straps, but slowly. Almost like they were waiting for me to lunge for one of them, and I noticed Ash’s talons twitching towards his revolver every time I moved my head or twitched a leg.

As the last strap went, I lay there for a few moments. Ash and Xiera reached for me, but I brushed them off and got to my hooves myself. The griffin steadied me as I stumbled, my legs feeling better but still a little wobbly. “You okay, Kick?”

I nodded to him, but he handed me a mirror. “You should see this before you answer.”

I took it from him in my magic as I wobbled to my hooves. Looking into the mirror, I recoiled and nearly dropped the mirror. On the whole, I looked maybe a little younger than I had before I’d put on

the mask, but that wasn't the surprising part.

At each of the six puncture points the mask had made around my jaw and neck, every vein in the area had turned black, showing through my white coat quite easily. It did not portray the image of health very well... I looked diseased.

"What?" I prodded a hoof at it, rubbing slightly to see if it was just dirt. It didn't come off, moving with my skin like it was just underneath. "I thought I was better, that doesn't look better."

Xiera shrugged her shoulders at me as she approached. "I looked at the... track marks, I guess one could call them. I don't know why they're showing up... it looks like a blood infection but I couldn't find any trace. My poultices did nothing as well."

Pushing aside the mirror, she reached out a hoof and prodded at my neck again. It didn't hurt, but I realized that it didn't feel. The whole area was just... not there. I couldn't feel a thing.

"So I guess saying that it's completely numb doesn't help." I tried smiling at her, but the look of concern I'd been seeing more and more on her face was back.

"In my opinion... both as a doctor and as your aunt... I suggest you stay in Blank for a few days, just long enough to see if there are any side effects."

Shaking my head, I put the mirror down carefully. Items of its like were rare in the wasteland. I glanced at the griffin, who agreed with a look. I acknowledged him with a raised eyebrow, and turned to Xiera. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I need to get after the girls... get after everypony that was taken. Leaving them as Neighwhere's slaves just isn't going to happen."

The zebra mare smiled, but it was a sad smile. "You're just like your uncle." With those words, she turned and left. Once she was out of the room, it was just me and the griffin.

"You gonna be okay Kick? I heard you before Deal took you out... you were freaking out. Yelling at ponies that weren't there, attacking a building. You gonna be able to hold it together, at least until we get to Hate?"

Will you Ripple? Huh? You gonna keep it together? Heh.

I sighed at the inner mocking, nodding my head. "Yeah... yeah, I'll hold it together."

He indicated a pile that I hadn't noticed in the corner. I spotted Broken's holster and knew that the pile was mine. "Well then, you might want to get your stuff. We're heading out."

I was already lifting my barding before he finished. Nodding in approval, he turned and followed, leaving me alone with my thoughts. My thoughts were still teasing me.

"Shut up, Two Kick."

The only change to the town since the previous day was that there were less ponies on the street. Blank looked practically abandoned, and if it weren't for the sound of pain drifting from the infirmary building, I would have thought that to be the case.

Ash appeared at my side just as I started looking for him, giving me a bit of a start. He had his weapons with him, but seemed to have been quite busy. He had several extra bags with him, no doubt loaded down with all the supplies and ammunition that he could scavenge. What was odd though was that he was wearing armor.

I'd never seen armor for a griffin before, or at least from what I could remember, I hadn't. The armor he was wearing protected his chest and had a wide collar around the neck, but that he'd gotten it to look

like armor was surprising. It was clearly combined from the leftover armor of dead raiders, a patchwork mishmash of leather, metal, and various hides. One shoulder pad was quite clearly pony hide, a cutie mark of a razor cutting through a flower displayed prominently and stretched over metal.

My jaw must have been open, because he glanced at me and then at his shoulder. "Sorry, I couldn't be picky. Had to build armor, used what I had."

Gesturing offhandedly with a talon at me, he indicated my saddle bags. "I got you all loaded up. Meds, ammo, whatever I could find. We gotta go."

I nodded. "Yeah." The bags had felt heavier, but I had thought maybe it had just been my legs still feeling a bit off. I would have taken this chance to dig through and see exactly what I had, but Ash really seemed ready to go. Delaying would only waste time.

Delaying would only hurt the girls.

"Let's go."

I wouldn't let the girls get hurt.

It began raining, as though the Wasteland was bidding us good luck.

Or cursing us.

We were only a few minutes outside Blank when the sound of hooves running and splashing after us caught up. Neither of us stopped, our course set. As the hooves came to us, I glanced to the side.

Willow came up between us, slowing from a full gallop to a trot to keep pace with us. Her jacket was mostly white again, though there were blood and dirt stains mixing in with rips and bullet holes. She was loaded down with saddlebags, carrying more gear than I'd ever seen a Whitecoat carry.

"I'm coming with. Those fuckers killed my family. I need to be there."

I glared at her, only briefly. What she'd done to Jackleg was still fairly fresh in my mind, and the Whitecoat's treatment of prisoners was still rubbing me wrong. The look in her eyes was a mixture of sadness and rage. I wasn't going to deny her... and it would be useful having another hoof to lend a hand in a fight, especially without the crowd control Ivory had provided.

Over her head, past her eyes, Ash looked at me and gave a little nod. He was in one of his moods... the kind of mood that had set us at each others throats in Orchard. Despite that, we were in agreement that Willow should come with us. Shifting my gaze to the vengeful mare between us, I nodded through the pouring rain. She gave a vicious smile, and looked ahead at where we were headed. In the distance, through the rain and mist, Hornsmith. The mountain at the end would be a visible landmark, with Neighwhere at its base. It would be a long walk, but when we got there the very Wasteland would tremble at our wrath.

"Welcome to our little suicide mission." Ash was just so helpful when it came to greetings.

As we travelled, we kept seeing signs of the passing raiders. Graffiti, destruction, the usual calling cards of that specific blight on the wasteland. A few bodies along the way, beaten and stripped of everything.

A disturbing majority were residents of Blank that had suffered wounds in the fight, and had fallen in their forced march to Neighwhere. From the bruises covering their backs and limbs, it looked like their captors had taken to beating them whenever they fell, killing them or leaving them to die when they

couldn't keep going. I could tell whenever it was a Whitecoat, from a little sound that Willow made when she recognized one.

A few were clearly raiders abandoned by their comrades. Stripped of weapons and armor, they were just leaking corpses now.

I was keeping an eye out for the girls. For Traffic. For anypony I knew.

I prayed to Celestia that I wouldn't find them like that. No pony deserved that. Celestia had come through for me before... I just hoped that she deemed to listen this time.

With the rain, it was pretty much impossible to determine how long it had been since the raiders had passed through. We couldn't find any camps, just the dead left where they'd fallen.

Willow's face got darker and darker with every Whitecoat we came across. She'd begun taking her anger out on any dead raiders we passed, kicking them as hard as she could. Neither Ash or I did anything to stop her, everypony had their own ways of dealing with anger.

Ash had been walking upright for some time now, Sight to the Blind swinging from its strap thrown over his shoulder. He was tapping out a simple rhythm on the handle of his revolver. I had the feeling that he was going to vent his anger through his weapons.

Me, I was going to rip Hate's head off with my bare hooves.

That's my boy.

I wasn't even yelling at the voice anymore. He'd go away as soon as I got Shade back. Until then, he served as motivation. He symbolized everything that I had to destroy in this world, and his droning, mocking voice just drove me forward.

We walked like that until we reached the limit of Hornsmith. Angry little sounds, the tapping of claws on metal, the constant pounding of rain.

We'd been seeing less and less bodies as the day had gone on, which could only mean that all of their weak and injured had been weeded out. We were all surprised when one of the corpses coughed and groaned as Willow drove her hoof into his side.

I moved just as quickly as she did, slamming the barrel of Broken into the ground at an angle, just barely deflecting the whistling blade aimed at the raider's neck. "Dead ponies don't talk, Willow." I glanced up at her as I spoke, to which she snorted derisively and sheathed the blade in one quick motion.

Shoot him in the fucking head. He stole your girl. No mercy... come on!

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to ignore it. Two Kick was right... a disturbing trend he was getting into. Glancing over at the griffin who was scanning the rooftops for a trap, I holstered Broken. "Ash. Can you ask him some questions?"

Looking from me to the near dead raider, he shrugged. He slung the rifle over his shoulder before reaching down and grabbing the earth pony by his mane. Wrenching him up face to face, the pony opened his eyes with a low groan. He should have been screaming from that, but I guessed he was too near death to really feel the full pain.

The pony's eyes were unfocused, but Ash stared right into them. The scared little pony deep inside the raider came out then, under the piercing gaze of a predator. He coughed, blood dribbling down his chin, and Ash responded by grabbing the raider under the chin.

"Hey there. You tell me anything you know, and I won't rip your throat out."

The raider's eyes widened, and he stammered a little. "I...I...uh....well," another cough interrupted him, spattering the griffin's beak with blood. When he licked it off, the pony took his threat just a bit more seriously. I grimaced at that just a little... his bloodthirst had just turned literal.

"Okay! Okay... fucking stop!" His voice was low, but he sounded scared. Ash grinned, placed the wounded raider back on the ground, and stepped back. Crossing his arms expectantly, he nodded.

"We... we're headin' back to Neighwhere... left me when I fell. Fuckers took my gear..." Coughing again, he clutched at his gut, where I now saw what was killing him. A bullet had gone in one side and out the other. Bits were dangling out, remnants of organs he likely needed to live. It was amazing that he hadn't bled out, and even more amazing that he was scared of death threats. He was dead before we got here, he'd been dead since that bullet had hit him.

"Gear was holding my insides in... they took it. Fuckers took the slaves that could still walk... took 'em with. Left any of us that couldn't walk..." He was just rambling. He didn't know anything that could help us. Ash's eyes met mine and I looked at the pony briefly. Ash aimed the revolver and his talon tightened.

"Fucking pale bitch... she killed me."

My eyes widened at that. "Ash, wait!" He eased off of the trigger just slightly.

Stepping forward, I kneeled next to him. "Pale? She have a big gun? She still alive?"

Coughing, his eyes started losing focus again. "Yeah... that's the one. Hit us in the back... came after that twitchy fuck... shot us up good, ran after him when he bolted. Massacre had us hold back, he wasn't worth it."

I nodded and stood, stepping away from him. A gunshot buried a chunk of lead in the raider's brain, ending his miserable life. Ash was holstering the pistol as he stepped over the body and started walking.

That was one of the girls off of the list... I just hoped we found her before she chased Crossed Wires into Neighwhere. She was tough, but she stood no chance.

We picked up the pace, moving much more quickly into Hornsmith.

Standing at the door, I breathed a sigh of relief. That unassuming door held the entry to what I was at this point was convinced was the last free town in Hornsmith. Underhoof had been skipped, very likely due to the fact that very few surface ponies knew about it. Those that did would never tell a raider or slaver where it was.

Ash was standing next to me, gazing at the door as well. "Should we?"

I shrugged. We needed supplies, we needed help, and most importantly we needed a way into Neighwhere. The ponies of Underhoof knew the Hornsmith tunnels better than any other. Some of them had lived in Hornsmith before the bombs, had worked the tunnels. They'd been down there for two hundred years... if there was a way into Neighwhere that wasn't the front door, they would know.

Willow was still in the street, pacing in the pouring rain. She didn't know about Underhoof... I could only assume that she thought we were just staring at a door. Bringing her down there would be letting another pony in on the secret...

"We need to." All I could say. Pulling the door open with my magic, I let Ash go through first. Looking back at Willow, I gestured with a hoof towards the door. "You coming?"

Looking down the road, she pointed a hoof. “Neighwhere’s that way. No time for sightseeing.” She said it with a certain menace that I’d not heard in her voice before. It was a warning, not a speculation.

“Look, Willow. We’ve got friends down here, they can help.” I know that calling Rail Spikes, Crimson Knife, Gristle, and the others friends was a bit from the truth. Viola, she was alright, but the rest had only worked with us because it was in their best interests. I’d be leaving Ash to deal with the little merchant, while I found Viola. I wasn’t going to let Willow out of my sight.

With an angry sigh, she consented and trotted past me into the open door. I followed her through, pulling the worn door shut behind me. She made her way down the stairs following Ashred, who was walking quickly down the path, his unbandaged wing tucked in tight.

When I finally caught up, he was banging on the secure door. “Rail Spikes! Viola! Open the door!”

There was a long pause as we stood there. Willow let out another little noise, angered that this was taking so long. She was getting impatient.

With a click and a whir, the reinforced hatch slid open. Standing there were two ghoulish ponies, rifles at the ready. One of them tilted her head to the side, her eyes smiling. Viola.

“Ripple! How’s my favorite surface pony?”

I’d explained the situation to Viola and Rail Spikes, who had joined us within minutes of our arrival. Ash was off gathering supplies from Gristle, leaving myself and the Whitecoat to talk to the ghoulish guards of Underhoof. Just as I’d planned. Small victory.

The smile was gone from Viola’s face. Rail Spikes... well, his face never really changed much. We were in the Guard station inside Underhoof, sitting around a table. Willow had been really twitchy around the ghouls, but I’d shot her a glance when she’d first seen them and reached for her swords. I probably should have warned her, but there was a famous saying about the visual quality of hindsight.

“So I need anything that can get us into Neighwhere. Anchor. Stable 87. Anything in that area.”

Rail Spikes sat back, crossing his front legs defiantly. “I don’t see how this is our problem. Raiders never found us, don’t even know we’re here. If we don’t open that door, I doubt they can get in. We can choke the tunnel with their dead before they get close enough to try.”

Viola was looking at Rail Spikes and nodding along with him. Her eyes looked sad in her mask, and as she looked over at me I was getting ready to stand and leave to find somepony that would help us. There had to be a ghoulish pony that knew the way in. I began turning away from them, standing.

“I can help.”

What?

My head snapped back to Viola, who was looking right at me still. “What?”

She looked over at Rail Spikes, who was glaring at her. “I can help. I may have been young during the war, but my uncle was chief of maintenance for the Hornsmith Underground Authority. I spent a lot of time in the subway systems near the mountain. I can get you in.”

Rail Spikes stood rapidly, slamming a hoof down on the table. “No! I won’t have the security of this town compromised to assist a fucking suicide mission!” His rifle floated at his side, aiming into my face. I wasn’t sure if he was yelling at me or at Viola, but that rifle was aimed at me.

By reflex, I drew Broken, aiming the shotgun at the yelling ghoulish pony. He was trying to stop the pony that could help us. Viola was possibly the perfect chance for us to get into Neighwhere undetected. If I had

to shoot him, I would.

Perfect.

Willow and Viola moved in tandem. A soft pink glow emanated from Viola's horn, pulling the barrels of both weapon towards the slowly swinging bulb illuminating our situation. A slight jab let me know that Willow had her swords out, pointed at both mine and Rail Spikes' throats.

They spoke at the same time, the Whitecoat's slightly singsong voice overlapping with the muffled, raspy voice of the ghoul. "Calm down."

Viola snatched the weapons from our grips, floating the firearms to her side and away from us. "There, that should help the talk. Now I'm going, for the protection of Underhoof. How long do you think it will be before they find us down here? You know as well as I do that we're practically up against a wall down here, and if we make one mistake they will turn us into another ghost town."

There was a pair of small snaps as Willow slid the blades back into their sheaths. I hadn't even felt her take the weapon from my throat. Viola took this time to rearm us. Levitating the guns back up, she threw them at us casually. I caught mine in time, but the older ghoul only caught his when it had very nearly impacted with his face. Turning to him, she spoke evenly to the ghoul. "Going is better than doing nothing. I'm going."

Turning back to me, her eyes crinkled as the corners to show she was smiling. "I'll get my things." Backing away from the table, the mare left the three of us. Rail Spikes was glaring at me, and as I returned the look I couldn't help but wonder how this would affect future attempts to enter Underhoof. Holstering Broken, I looked at Willow and jerked my head towards the door. She sighed, and left with me following close behind. I could feel Rail Spikes' eyes burning a hole into the back of my head as I left.

Fuck him, he can rot.

I hate when you're right.

Back on the street, I sort of expected Ash to be waiting for us. The griffin was nowhere in sight, and I only had a few seconds before a popping sound went off to my left. Willow, ever the jumpy mare, spun while drawing a blade. I knew what was coming from the sound, and the red pony that had appeared next to me lowered her horn just a second and then the world snapped.

I was in Crimson Knife's clinic, where Ash was sitting hunched forward on a table with his injured wing outstretched. Crimson was standing right in front of me, a disapproving look on her face as she took in the black veins tracing down my neck. Just as she started speaking, I looked around quickly expecting Willow to attack Crimson, but the tan mare wasn't in the room with us.

I turned and trotted to the door, sticking my head out and ignoring a sputtering Crimson Knife, who wasn't used to ponies just walking away from her when she was beginning her examination. Willow was frantically searching the street, both blades out, and jumped when I shouted her name. "Willow! In here, put the swords away."

Returning to Crimson, I gave her a shrug and a small apology. She jumped right into her diagnosis without even a hello. "Discoloration in circulatory system leading from mandibular area down neck. Possible reaction to unknown element or toxin found on the surface. Skin beneath coat looks recently healed across entire body..." She trailed off, looking up at me with a mix of concern and foal like curiosity.

"Ripple... what happened to you?"

I told Crimson. I gave the abridged version, cut down because I was getting impatient looks from Willow. She was really being nothing but trouble, but I knew that when it came to fighting, it would be better to have her around.

Crimson was handling me in rather uncomfortable ways as I talked, but at least she wasn't scrubbing me with a coarse brush. For a second, I was glad that Shade wasn't there. Then I caught myself, hating that I had done that.

After Crimson had done a thorough examination, she popped away, then popped back carrying a scalpel. Reaching towards me with it, she stopped when I shyed away a bit. I may have a high tolerance, but getting cut was something I still tried to avoid. "Ripple, do you mind if I try something? It might hurt."

I was curious what she would try. It wasn't like she was going to maim me or anything, so I nodded my consent and stepped forward. She pressed the blade against the hide of my shoulder, away from anything that could do serious harm, and cut me carefully.

It stung a little bit, but the noise she made got my attention more. A medical backing to my own little experiment earlier would be good to have. I felt a little let down when all I got from the mare was a curious little noise. A short, questioning exhalation.

"What?"

She looked up at me, smiling. "Oh, sorry. It's just very interesting. Your skin has toughened up a bit, not sure why. The wound has already healed."

I looked down at it, and sure enough where once there had been a short incision was now just a pink line with a trickle of blood. Ash laughed a little, rather impressed. "If anypony needs that out here Kick... it's you."

I smiled a little. Whatever had been in the mask must have some remnant running through my system still... I wasn't getting the crippling pain, but I was getting the good part. What had kept Massacre going. If it lasted, it might just give me an edge in whatever was to come. "Yeah... I can always use a little boost."

Even if it's rotting the veins in our neck?

Yes.

Once Crimson Knife had let me leave, we met Viola in the center of town. The masked ghoul had donned saddlebags and a travelling cloak. Ash had gotten what supplies we needed before he'd been hijacked by the teleporting doctor mare, and Willow had sullenly been waiting since we'd come into Underhoof.

Viola opened the door, closing it behind us. Rail Spikes was nowhere to be seen, still mad at us. As the four of us walked down the tunnel, I noticed that Viola was shaking, just a little bit. "How long have you been underground?" She was ahead of me, but she jumped when I spoke, startled. She must have been more nervous than I'd thought.

"Uh.... when did the balefire hit? Right before then." She had taken a few seconds to think of it, gazing at the ceiling as she walked.

She hadn't been above ground in 200 years. I had to wonder how she hadn't turned into a gnasher in that time... the ghouls of Underhoof must have had some trick to staying themselves. If I ever came down with that particular affliction, I'd have to ask how they stayed sane.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, Ash was already at the top, opening the door and walking outside. I started up the stairs, followed by Willow. Viola delayed at the bottom for several seconds, staring up at us as we ascended to the brightly lit portal. It must have been quite the sight for the subterranean ghoul.

Waiting on the surface as she climbed the stairs, I noticed that it was now raining harder than it had previously. Visibility had dropped, but that might be beneficial for us. Didn't want to be spotted by any raider parties as we crossed through the city. If we were spotted, and any of them got away or notified Neighwhere, the element of surprise was ruined. We'd be fucked.

"Oh wow... it's bigger than I remember." Viola's raspy voice drifted through the rain. Turning, I saw that she was staring straight up at the sky, the rain soaking her cloak and running off of her gas mask. I wondered if she'd be able to see anything, but as I did she flipped a hood up from the cloak, covering her lens protected eyes from being blinded by rain.

She turned, looking both ways down the road a bit. Sighing sadly, she looked at the ground.

"Everything's different... it's gotten grayer." Looking up at me, she shook her head and trotted towards me. Jerking her head to the side, towards the now unseen mountain with our destination at its base, she spoke loud enough to make sure that everyone heard her. "So it's this way...."

Under her breath, I heard her mutter, "Or at least I think it is..."

Through the rain we walked.

Viola's memory served her well. In front of us was a large building composed almost entirely of heavily rusted iron and weather faded glass. It stuck out, to say the least, a jagged chunk of dark red amidst the city of gray.

"This is the station. The rest of Hornsmith had a trolley system, but this was the way back to the rest of Equestria. It's how we sent back freight and supplies for the war..." Viola seemed rather pleased with herself. She had led us right to the station without a hitch. No pony had seen us, we hadn't run into any wildlife... everything had gone perfect. Which meant that it was about to all go wrong. It just had to.

The front doors were propped slightly open, a pile of bones keeping them from closing. There were the remains of clothing and baggage scattered around..

"Those that didn't make it to the Stable or try to brave it out underground tried taking the train anywhere else." We'd passed a sizable crater making our way here, and had to take the long way around. It was now getting on in the day, but the time we'd spent going around was certainly worth it. The ticking of my PipBuck's radiation detector had told us that much.

"So... we go in, walk down the tunnel, and it will get us to Neighwhere?" I was just a little skeptical. This was all working out far too well.

She nodded and trotted towards the front door, sweeping aside some of the skeletons almost without care. Pushing with her magic, she strained a little before stepping back. "It's stuck... help a lady out?"

Ash and I stepped up to the large door, while Willow snickered a little behind us. Putting his shoulder into it as I pressed against it with my side, we began pushing. The door didn't give, at first, but then with a crunch and a shower of rust, it began moving. It screeched so loudly that it hurt my ears, and I stopped. Ash looked at me, then at the door, and nodded.

I slipped through the opening, which was wide enough for me and my equipment. Everyone behind me would be able to easily get in. I stepped in, over several barricades that must once have been rather formidable. Hundreds of years of weather and erosion had reduced the once reinforcing protection to

scraps of metal and wood, crudely attached to the inside of the door.

Inside was mounds of discarded luggage and assorted waste. Stepping over the skeleton of a pony that was missing half of its skull, I looked at the massive train before me. Once, it must have been grand, a testament to the craftsmanship of ponykind. Now, it was a burnt out shell of what it had once been.

“Wow...” Willow was the first in behind me, and she let the little exclamation slip past the surly front she’d been putting up all day. Viola was behind her, and Ash brought up the rear, relishing what little time he had left outside. Once we were all inside, I reached down and activated the light on my PipBuck. It had been so long since I’d used it, I’d forgotten how little illumination it actually provided us. There was still light outside, but once past the doors it grew much darker.

The tunnel we were looking at was pitch black.

“So... in we go?” Viola questioned, eager to get back underground. She looked back at me, and at the griffin rubbing an arm with his talons. I nodded, and the four of us started walking down the train platform, weaving around debris and skeletons. There were quite a lot less dead ponies in here, and I had to wonder if just a few had locked the rest out.

Hopping down onto the tracks, I gazed into the darkness, hoping that my eyes would adjust. Without the PipBuck, I wouldn’t have been able to see anything. With it, I could see just a few paces ahead of me.

I could see the hoofprints in the dirt right at the entrance to the tunnel. There had been movement... a lot of it. Recently.

Further down the tunnel, something screamed.

Numerous thanks to Kkat for writing Fallout Equestria.

Thanks to Wirepony for editing and Mittens for prereading. They make it easier to read.

Mirandasaurus-rex drew a [great picture of Ripple](#) at my request. Much thanks to her, she does great work.

Then we get to the part where I request fave/track/star/comments. Always like hearing how I'm doing, so drop me a line.

Chapter 15: The End

The noise echoed the length of the tunnel, sending shivers up my spine. Nothing I'd met in the wasteland could produce a scream quite like that, and whatever it was was most likely between us and Neighwere. If we were lucky, we could avoid it or sneak past it.

But that relied on luck, so I fully expected whatever it was to find us. Claws, fangs, stingers, whatever it had. It would bring them all to bear on us.

"Well that's not a good sound." Viola said it with a tinge of boredom, but she'd probably heard it before. She was a good ten times older than the rest of us at least. The experience of age, and all that. Floating her rifle before her, she absently slid the bolt back to double check the weapon was loaded.

"What is it? Raiders? Ghouls?" Willow had a sword out, her pistol floating on the other side. Her eyes were searching the darkness quickly, ready for a fight. Maybe a fight would make her a little calmer, less twitchy and ready to cut down anypony that came near her. It would work for foes, but I had been getting the feeling she was seconds away from attacking any of us.

Oh yeah, I know that feeling.

"Might be ghouls. Gnashers don't make much sound, unless they're going for your throat. Last time I was here was... centuries ago. Plenty of time for something to move in." The gas masked mare flicked on a flashlight built into the mask, the ancient bulb flickering to life. The illumination it granted was better than my own, but it flickered and dimmed at random, throwing strange shadows down the foreboding tunnel.

Ash and I exchanged a glance. He was not looking forward to walking into an unknown enemy underground, if I knew him at all. I was not looking forward to whatever new damage I would receive. The mask, while cripplingly painful, had restored me. Debilitating wounds were gone, and I was working at 100% again. My legs were still a bit wobbly, but after the walk from Blank I was feeling much more confident. I wanted to be in top shape once we got to Neighwhere, I had to be at my peak to get the girls back.

I had to.

Viola was already trotting off down the tunnel, her rifle at the ready. I moved to catch up, hearing the stumbling of the others behind me, trying to keep up with the only light sources. The tunnel ahead was pitch dark, and the going was almost immediately difficult. We made it about ten minutes into that blackness before we hit our first snag.

"Fuck! Ow!" Ash's voice brought a beam of light from Viola to highlight the griffin. He had smacked his leg into a cargo box, spilled from an overturned train car. Quickly, we found that it wasn't just an overturned car. It was an entire train, flipped and scattered through the tunnel for some distance. Time and the seeping dampness had not been kind to the vehicle, the metal warped and corroded, making it impossible to tell what the train had once carried.

Ash and Viola had the easiest time making it through the debris. His talons allowed him to grip and pull, steadying himself as he went over or through any obstacle. Viola trotted along like it was any other situation, drawing on two hundred years of tunnel dwelling.

Willow stuck near me and my illumination, and the two of us kept an eye out for each other. A slip of a hoof, one ill timed step, and we could have easily fallen into piles of jagged metal or precariously balanced debris. The going was slow, to say the least.

A twinkle caught my eye as I crested a pile of what had once been metal crates. Approaching it, I looked at it closely. A thin metal wire, taut and completely out of place. "What is this?" I reached a hoof for it, and as I pressed on it I was hit from the side. There was a deafening boom in the enclosed space, and I was certain I'd just been shot or blown up. I could only feel a weight on my side, and I looked up into the eyes of Willow. She'd tackled me.

"That was a trap. Don't touch those." Standing and getting off of me, she walked towards where the blast had gone off.

Ash's head poked up from past a crumpled train car, his eyes catching the light from my PipBuck. "What was that?"

Willow had found the other end of the trap. Floating in front of her was a crudely constructed shotgun, similar to those I'd seen used by the citizenry of Blank in its defense. The barrel was much larger, and as she popped the breach open I saw that instead of a shell it contained a tin can.

Only then did I observe where the shot had gone. A ragged hole had been punched in a car next to me, big enough that I could have put my head in it. If Willow hadn't stopped me, I likely would have been decapitated. A tough hide and resistance to pain would have done nothing to help me in that case, I would have died.

"Somepony in here doesn't want visitors. Don't think ferals did this." Willow dropped the crude shotgun, the clatter echoing down the tunnel. I drew Broken, the glow from my telekinesis adding slightly to the light in the tunnel.

"Definitely not. Can't ever really call a gnasher smart, so I'm betting whoever put this here is either long dead, or not looking forward to visitors." Viola had joined us around the disabled trap. "I'm betting the latter."

Ash glanced at her, a smirk on his face. "Dead ponies everywhere back there, what makes you think this is recent? Two hundred years is a lot of time for ponies to build traps."

Averting her face to the wall, the beam of light lit up a coating of fresh blood on one wall. It still ran in places, and it couldn't be more than ten minutes old.

THE END BECKONS

"Gnashers don't write." She lead the beam down, highlighting the source of the blood. It was a raider. She'd been gutted, chin to tail, her insides smeared along the wall to write the message. The rest of her had been dumped under the words in a pool of blood.

Nice. Very artistic. I approve.

That was not good. So much for the hope of an easy trip under Neighwhere's walls. I honestly would have rather faced gnashers. They were predictable, brutal, and dare I say it, easy. I could handle gnashers. An unseen and... literate foe in a dark and mysterious tunnel, on the other hoof... that was an entirely different matter.

"What's that last word read?" Willow asked, staring at the wall. It struck me that she was likely a former slave, or a farmer, or something. I could read because I'd been brought up in a Stable. Literacy would be of benefit to a mercenary, which covered Ash. Viola had the benefit of prewar Equestrian schooling, if she remembered that far back.

"Beckon. It's an invitation." Her eyes shone past the protective glass of her mask, surprisingly clear in the darkness as she looked across at the Whitecoat. I could see the hints of a smile around her eyes. "I say we keep walking. Take them up on it."

I turned from her as she let out a raspy giggle, clearly having too much fun with our current situation. She hadn't been through Blank... she'd probably seen more in her time than we could imagine, and her mood was a little offsetting. She was right though. "Yeah, lets keep moving. Willow, you're better at this than me, could you take point?"

The mare nodded to me, looking down the tunnel. Glancing at the still chuckling ghoul, I cut in to her fun. "Viola, you stick close to Willow. Your light is better." She looked at me, shining the light right in my eyes for a second. I shielded with a hoof, and looked back at Ash.

"We just follow the girls then. Keep an eye out."

He gave me an exasperated look. Pointing at his eyes with both talons, he flicked them to point at me. "I'm always watching, Kick."

Of course he was. That's what he did.

Stupid bird. That's why it's hard to kill his kind.

Shut up Two Kick. I don't need it. Not now. If I die from a mistake, so do you.

Fine. Bah, you need to lighten up... at least we get to follow the mares, so I'll have something to watch. Thanks for that.

Fuck you.

We'd come across three more similar traps, as well as several landmines. Those had posed a unique threat, at least until Viola had approached one and deactivated it with a quick burst of magic. Turning back to us, she floated the explosive next to her. "We used to use these against gnashers, but we ran out." Tucking it in her bag, she all but skipped to the next explosive before giving it a similar treatment.

The going was slow, to say the least. With the girls checking for traps. Ash and I focussed on the surroundings. Every sweep of Viola's light made shadows dance across the tunnel. Ash kept cocking his head to the side, a move I'd seen him make when he was listening for something.

It got routine, almost. That of course meant that something had to change drastically.

"You follow the path of The End?"

The four of us froze at the voice, which almost immediately had four firearms trained on it. Viola's light caught the figure, and for just a second I thought that it was Fluster.

No, it wasn't Fluster. Black, shredded robes. A horn in the center of her forehead. A crazed glint in the mare's eyes. Rotted flesh and sharpened teeth. A ghoul, but not a gnasher. Her crazed glare locked onto Viola, who was aiming her rifle between the ghoul's eyes.

"Sister. Join us. Leave the unenlightened. I shall escort you to the End." The ghoul held out a gnarled hoof, which I couldn't help but notice was completely coated in gore. She'd either been the welcome sign's artist, or had been involved with something equally gruesome.

Viola tilted her head to the side, looking curiously at the ghoul. "Nah, I've got a home to return to."

The black robed mare nodded. "You've made your choice then. You are not a pilgrim. You are an interloper. A heathen."

From the shadows, a dozen voices began chanting. "Heathens... heathens..." Our weapons trained out into the unseen, looking for the source of the voices. Slowly, Viola's headlamp unveiled the rest of them as they stepped closer, circling us at the edge of the shadows.

A rainbow of color lit up in the dark, each ghoul a unicorn using their telekinesis. From within their robes they pulled weapons, each of them hoof crafted and wickedly edged. The leader, or at least the first ghoul we'd seen, pulled a rusty set of daggers dripping with blood from within her robes.

They rushed us on an unspoken cue.

The first one that moved took a shot right under the left eye from Ash's revolver, blowing him backwards in a spray of ichor. Even though I had much more pressing matters as the mob rushed us, I couldn't help but think that the pony was blown out of existence as his horn's magic flickered out and he left the small lit area.

Yeah. Pretty. Pay attention to the knife.

Reflexively, I jerked Broken up in front of my face, a rusted blade bouncing off course inches from my eye. I was faster on the recovery, spinning the sturdy stock into the cheek of the ghoul. His head twisted to the side at the impact, and I took quick aim as the weapon finished its revolution. The shot tore into the side of the ghoul's head. Ghoul goop sprayed into my face as I readied another shot.

Willow was taking it upon herself to fight five of the ghouls at once, kicking and spinning as her blades flashed through the air. A pony tornado made of razor sharp metal. The tip of a blade slashed through a windpipe while her hoof staved in a skull.

Viola was backing away from the melee, trying to fend off the savage swings of a robed ghoul. Her rifle was taking the hits, but she was losing ground. She tripped and fell backwards, her assailant whooping for joy and leaping for a killing blow. He was snatched out of the air, however, by a taloned fist that gripped him by the throat. Ash spun with the momentum of catching the ghoul, but kept steady. Even before the ghoul could die from the claws piercing his neck, Ash put a shot through his face and hurled the corpse at another ghoul. He reached down to help the masked ghoul to her hooves, putting a second shot through the knocked down ghoul without even a sparing glance.

Seeing opponents in this lighting was really difficult...

EFS, dipshit.

Right. The little red bars that I was constantly not paying attention to. I'd picked up a nasty habit, ignoring the functioning radar I had slapped onto my eyes at every waking moment. There was red mixed in with blue, but a steady red at the very edges and an instinct I couldn't describe as mine told me to kick.

I kicked out with a hind leg. The motion was rewarded with the detonation of a shell being set off as I hit a body that was rushing in from behind. I glanced back just in time to see the shredded remains of a ghoul returning to the shadows in a pinwheel spray of blood and bone. I'd hit the ghoul right in the tip of the nose, if what little was left of the head was any indication.

I'd probably have gotten a knife in the flank if Two Kick hadn't spoken up. That was twice he'd helped me in this fight.

Thanks.

Wait. No. Fuck.

Yeah. You love me.

I tried shutting his voice out, but I couldn't deny that he'd been getting a lot more friendly towards me. He was also at max volume every time he spoke. I needed Shade, I really did. The Med-X wasn't cutting it anymore.

The little bloodthirsty laugh that came as I shot another hooded ghoul in the face drew up the corners of

my mouth in a smirk. I forced a frown immediately. Reacting physically to him was not helping.

I clenched my teeth in a snarl and threw myself at one of the last remaining foes. In my distracted state, Willow and Ash had cut down a majority of our shadowy lurking opponents, leaving only a couple of stragglers. A gunshot cutting a cry of anger short told me that it was down to one, and the little red bar confirmed it. The last ghoul, faltering as he found himself outnumbered, had me in his face before he could react.

Batting the hovering blade aside before he decided to ram it into my neck, I swept his legs out from under him with Broken. I swung just a little too hard, and his left leg shattered at the impact. Slamming into the debris littered ground, hissing in pain, he soon found three pairs of eyes staring down at him, accompanied by the barrels of two guns and a twin pair of swords pressed against his neck.

I glanced back at Viola, who was rummaging carefully through the remains of the cleanest kills. "Viola. You have a knack for this, could you ask him what's up ahead?"

She beamed, quite literally, at me. As the spots left my eyes, the ghoul had already trotted over and taken her place in our midst. Looking down at the ghoul, there was still a laugh in her eyes. Two hundred year old ghoul mares were just as strange as any other, it seemed.

"So "brother", tell me more about this End. You have me intrigued."

The grounded, groaning ghoul grimaced gingerly as she pushed a hoof down on his broken leg lightly. Her rifle was holstered, leaving her unarmed, but the ghoul would still be dead before he could try anything.

The ghoul glared up at her. "You rejected The End. We offered you a great gift. The Chorus of The End will kill you and use your remains for decoration. Your entrails will serve as our supper. The End will play with your mares before he crushes them beneath his hooves, as -"

His zealous tirade was cut off as a sword jammed through his throat, severing his spine and embedding slightly in the debris he was laying on. A brief jet of thick black fluid from his neck, and he was dead. Viola turned, glaring at Willow as the dead ghoul's last revenge dribbled off of her eyepiece.

Willow shrugged. "What? That was getting old fast."

Ash and I nodded a little in agreement. I'd been a few seconds from shooting the ghoul myself. You just can't talk to a fanatic.

Viola wiped her cloak across her mask, clearing as much of the viscous liquid as she could. Leveling a joyless stare at Willow, she spoke softly. "Yes, but the spray was unpleasant."

Shrugging, Willow pulled out the blade and whipped it to the side, a move I'd seen her do several times before. Blood, if you could call it that, splattered the ground and she wiped the blade on the robe of the dead ghoul before sheathing her blades. "Right, sorry. Let's keep moving."

Ash was already moving, calling over his shoulder. "Yeah, it sucks down here. Lets go kill everything else and get topside."

The rest of us started following, Viola moving faster to get to the front. Ash was practically blind down here, and his need to get back topside would likely get him killed if he started walking down a trapped tunnel without any light. Luckily, Viola caught up to him before he could trip another shotgun or stumble across a horde of murderous tunnel ghouls.

I brought up the rear, hopping on one of my back legs as I reloaded the weapon attached to my hoof. The promise of more cultists was not good, but at least we knew now that there were more ahead. Full readiness would be useful.

As we went farther into the tunnel, into the realm of the hooded ghouls, things started getting weird. Before long, every surface was covered with writing. What made it weird was that it wasn't all threats against us and declarations of the End's various tremendous qualities.

Scratched into some of the walls were notes to loved ones, epitaphs, assorted messages. I came across a date hastily scrawled onto an ancient sign and stopped. Staring at it, I had a flashback to when I was young, sitting in a sterile room with a motherly mare teaching a room full of other colts and fillies. History. A date on a board, the date the ponies went into the vault.

"Hey. This one is from the day after the balefire hit."

From behind me, I heard a grumpy groan. Willow's voice echoed across to me as I read looked at the message from the past. "Rip, we don't have time for sightseeing."

I waved off her complaints and read it aloud to them. "Daddy, set up camp further in. We're fine, just tingly. Diadem... it's just a message from one pony to another. The walls covered with them."

Viola's light lit up the passage and the wall surrounding it, throwing everything into much sharper focus. "Wonder if that would be Pearl Diadem. I went to school with her, before the war. Bit of a bitch." Gazing closer, the mare sighed. "Yeah. It's her writing. Always sort of hoped she'd burned." She chuckled lightly, and turned, trotting back towards the middle of the tunnel.

"Felt tingly, eh? I felt that way, before I got all pruney and this mask welded to my face. If that's the case, she could be down here. There could be hundreds down here. Maybe more."

My face dropped a bit. Hundreds? We didn't have the ammunition for that. We didn't have the energy for that. I took mental count of how many shotgun shells I had with me. Around fifty. If it came to it, and we really had to fight our way through a mob of ghouls... I'd have to use my hooves.

We'd be overrun and ripped apart.

I could take them all. Little stampede, I'll come down on them like a fucking force of nature.

Shaking off Two Kick's suggestion, I turned to Viola. "Let's hope not... Willow's right, we don't have time for sightseeing. Let's go."

Down the tunnel we went, towards a promise of nothing good.

"You see any way through Ash?"

We crouched in the dark before a passenger train that was turned sideways. The side we were on had metal plates welded to it, and served as a very effective wall. There was light streaming over the top of it, indicating that something was on the other side. It could have been an ancient bulb that had held up through the years, or it could have been an army of ghouls.

The army would be more fun... but lets go for the bulb. I'm getting kinda homesick here, with all that talk of Neighwhere. Will be good to get to the old killing grounds.

Not now.

Viola had been whispering up to the griffin, who was clinging to the side of the wall just under the ledge. Though we had all of our lights off, there was enough ambient illumination to see him turn to us and hold up one talon. Returning his grip to the wall, he slowly edged an eye over to take a look. He jerked his head back quickly and threw himself over to a towering pile of scrap, giving his one good wing a flap for stability, where his dark coloring helped him blend into the assorted junk.

Taking it as a sign to hide, the three of us on the ground ducked below the frayed bench we'd been

taking cover behind. I kept an eye on the wall and saw why Ash had jumped. A robed head appeared over the wall, quick enough that it meant the ghoul had been patrolling the top. A long and wicked spear floated alongside the ghoul, aimed down towards us as though ready to be thrown.

A snap from the wall to our left and the ghoul looked quickly, lowering the spear and turning his head away from where Ash was hiding. Leaning forward, he narrowed his eyes, completely missing the dark blur launching at him from the hiding place in the rubble.

A flap of his wing and Ash had the ghoul's head in his talons, dropping his whole weight on the pony and pulling it over the ledge with a muffled yelp of alarm. Its neck bent double over the lip of the wall with an audible crack, and Ash's weight pulled the rest of it after him. He landed as softly as he could, stabilizing with his good wing, clutching the dead ghoul in both hands.

Ooh, nice. Little clean for my taste though.

He walked over to us. "Sorry, had to move fast. Anyways, there's a camp further on, but only this guard at the wall. I think he was waiting for the group we killed back there, they might have been foraging or something." The ghoul was still in his grip, its lolling head beginning to drain a string of nasty black fluid on the ground at his paws.

Viola was looking up at the wall, admiration in her eyes. It was rather impressive, how well the wall was constructed, and a pony who had spent a long time working as a guard would probably appreciate such things. Her voice came from the mask, muffled as ever. "How do we get in?"

Ash was busy stuffing the corpse into a broken pipe, and waited until he was closer to us before he answered. He was the only one with the hearing of an airborne predator, and luckily he knew enough to not shout his answer to us. "I'll find a way. Be right back."

He scaled the wall quickly, finding holds where the metal was welded to the train. I felt a brief bout of jealousy at what could be accomplished with fingers, but it was fleeting. Magic did what I needed of it.

After about a minute, he came back over the wall with a disappointed look on his face. As we gathered around him, he pointed at the biggest piece of metal on the car. "That's the gate, but the gears are so rusted opening it would announce our presence to every thing in this tunnel." He sighed and dropped his shoulders. "I'm gonna have to carry you over one at a time... which is going to suck."

He gave his weapons to me, and then Viola and I got to watch the humorous scene of a griffon giving a pony a piggyback ride. Willow wasn't the smallest of us, but could hold her own the most silently if something went wrong while the rest of us were going over, so she had been nominated to take the first ride over the wall.

Once her front legs were wrapped around Ash's neck in a way that didn't strangle the griffin, he started making his way up the wall, much more slowly this time with the added weight of the armed pony on his back. Willow was visibly tightening her grip as they went up, and as they reached the top I heard the griffin give a little choke. Willow loosened her grip so much that she almost fell backwards off of Ash's back, but he caught her with one hand and steadied her. Then they were out of view, leaving Viola and I to wait patiently.

Ash returned, and then it was the masked ghoul's turn. She was much more relaxed about the entire process, and after watching Willow's fiasco knew exactly what to do. Ash's ascent was much quicker, and went over the wall without incident.

Then it was my turn. Ash had carried me before, but he'd had access to both wings then. I was substantially heavier than the girls, and Ash and I stood there looking at each other. He glanced at the wall, then at me, then back at the wall.

I had Sight to the Blind slung over my back, and I'd been a little surprised at how heavy the weapon was. He always carried it without complaint, and I'd seen him fire it one handed on more than one occasion. Right now though, he had to carry both the weapon, me, and everything I was carrying.

"We shoulda let one of the girls carry the rifle." He nodded in agreement with me, before turning his back and spreading his wing to allow room. He was bigger than me, but not by much. He towered over me when he stood, but in reality we were similarly sized.

Sighing, the griffin crouched a bit. "Let's just get this over with."

I did exactly what I'd watched Viola do, and as I propped my fetlocks over his shoulders my perch seemed rather stable. Ash grunted as he stood, straining under the weight. "Fuck, Kick. You been putting on weight?"

Then up the wall we went, slower than any of the previous times. He tested his grip each time his talons found purchase in a crevice or seam, making sure that it would hold. Then we were up top, and he dropped me before the hop down. Looking at me, he was breathing hard. "There's a ramp... you can take that."

Pulling the heavy rifle from my back, he hopped over the side to join the girls where they were hiding, down behind a large crate. From here, I could see down the tunnel to where the light was. It wasn't a bright light, but the smallest amount would travel far in this darkness for some reason. The light was given off by the combined glow of what looked to be hundreds of dim bulbs, stretching off until the horizon point of the tunnel, where it was too distant to see.

I mouthed a curse to myself, and made my way to the ramp, where I rejoined the others as quietly as I could. Hooves on metal. Always a problem when it came to stealth.

When I clicked up to the girls, weapons strewn about me, Viola judged me with a glassy stare. "Why did *you* carry the weapons up? That must have been heavy." I sighed, knowing that she was right, and just hunched my shoulders in defeat.

Once we were together, we tried coming up with a plan.

We all looked at Viola, the mare who had been down here before. She knew the underground of this city better than anyone, and would know any tricks to getting us down the tunnel. A secret tunnel, steam tunnels, maintenance tunnels. She would know, and she shared her wisdom on the matter with us.

"There's really nothing. There's an emergency exit a ways down, but the station that can get us into Neighwhere is past that." She was staring out at the ghoul city as she told us just how poorly prepared we actually were.

"We really should have grabbed some of those cloaks." The two of us just stared at Willow as it dawned on us that we really should have. Viola just nodded her head thoughtfully. Cloaks would have allowed us to just walk through the town, without having to sneak from shadow to shadow.

Oh come on. Nopony is gonna realize it? Fine.

What? Realize what?

Ask nicely.

Fuck. Fine. What is it... please?

Your little ghoul is already wearing a cloak. Cover her up right, she'd blend right in with these freaks. She could bring you cloaks.

It scared me a little, but Two Kick was right. Again. Viola was a ghoul with a cloak. She could just walk into the ghou town, bring us what we needed, and we could be on our way. I facehoofed.

Wow... we really had just thrown ourselves into this. If only Ash and I had learned from our mistakes, but nope. We never really had a plan before we threw ourselves into these things, and if we did it was always blown to shit when something went wrong.

When I opened my eyes and removed my hoof from my face, I found three pairs of eyes staring at me with a range of emotion. Playful apathy, barely contained contempt, and the predatory gaze of a griffin that wanted nothing more than to be topside again.

I sighed, ashamed that I was about to present a plan given to me by the murderous psycho talking in my head. "Viola, with the hood up and your armor stripped, you'd look just like any other ghoul down here. Aside from the mask."

She tilted her head to the side, looking at herself, before looking back at me and nodding. "You want me to bring you cloaks? Play the fox in the chicken coop?"

I didn't quite get the reference, but agreed. "Yeah. Just find us some cloaks, and we can get through town."

She began undoing the guard armor she was still wearing beneath her cloak, removing her saddlebags and dropping her rifle carefully on top of it. I averted my eyes, as it seemed almost indecent to watch a mare strip down, even if ponies don't normally wear clothes.

Oh come on. She might be two hundred something, but I'm sure she's still got some good curves. Look, you fucking pansy.

Nope. I looked at the ground, intent not to give him anything.

No reward, even when I save your useless flanks? You owe me.

I don't owe you shit.

Once Viola cleared her throat a bit, I looked up. She'd pulled her hood over her head, and I had to admit that she blended in quite well. Her cloak was a few shades lighter than the others we'd seen, and if you really looked you could see that she had a face made of metal, plastic, and rubber, but it really looked like she could pull this off.

Ash nodded with a small grin on his face, approving. "Looks good. Be quick, be quiet, don't get killed."

A nod of a hooded head and she hopped over our cover, heading into the ghou camp. It didn't feel right, letting her go, but there wasn't any other option. The ghoul was the natural choice to sneak into a ghoul camp.

Sitting there, we had little to do but think about our situation. Ash was rubbing his shoulder a bit, and I looked at him with a raised brow. Noticing, he shrugged and kept rubbing. "Oh... I pulled my shoulder in that fight. All that climbing didn't help, now I'm just working out a few kinks. No worries Kick."

Willow had her swords out and was cleaning them with a rag, keeping herself occupied though she was tapping a hoof impatiently. She'd been a real pain to travel with this whole way, and if I hadn't known how much coming with us had meant to her I would have told her to go back to Blank. As it was, her blades were coming in handy, so putting up with her was the price that had to be paid.

With the griffin rubbing his shoulder and working his arm in a range of motion, and Willow busy with her swords, I tried to find something to do. My vision showed a sea of red anytime I looked in the direction of the camp, almost indicating of the sea of blood that would have to be spilled to fight our

way through.

See, that I want to see.

Turning away from the others, I floated out a dose of Med-X. Ash probably knew how much I'd been taking; I was sure that Xiera had told him to keep an eye on me. I needed it though... even if I wasn't feeling any real pain, the medication helped lower the volume of the monster in my head.

Oh, sure, just drown me out. Listen, if you take stampede and let me out to play for a little bit, I'll be a good little colt afterwards. Honest. I'll sit in your head, nice and quiet.

Let you out to do what? Fight a tunnel full of intelligent ghouls? Kill until you couldn't kill anymore?

I'd take a run at your goody goody there too. Mare that fine needs some attention every once in a while. Maybe she'd lighten up a bit.

No. You're gonna stay in there and you're going to fucking like it. I'm not letting you out, not ever again.

I jabbed the needle into my side, and waited for the cooling fog to settle into my head. Since the mask, I'd lost a lot of the feeling in my neck, chest, shoulders, and withers. Now I couldn't feel the rest of my body either. The voice in my head grew muffled and faded a bit, to the point that I could ignore him. It wouldn't last long, but it was worth it.

Much better.

Without the voice in my head, it turned into the longest wait I think I've ever experienced. The need for stealth ruled out any lengthy conversation, and I couldn't exactly walk around and take in the sights.

When Viola returned, she was greeted with the barrels of three guns. They were quickly replaced with grins, as we saw that draped across the triumphant ghoul's back were several black cloaks. Viola had brought back five cloaks. I wasn't sure where she'd gotten them from, but they weren't covered in blood and didn't smell too terrible.

Then, it came down to us disguising ourselves and our armor. Willow removed her jacket, the first time I'd seen her do so. Her cutie mark, which I only got a glimpse before she adorned herself in a black cloak, was what looked to be pruning shears. Maybe I wasn't too far off on the farmer guess.

Viola slipped back into her armor, the larger black cloak being able to cover more of her than her faded travelling cloak had.

The hardest disguise to pull off was Ash's. The rest of us could act like ghoul ponies, because we were shaped like ponies and moved like ponies. Ash, on the other hoof, moved nothing like a pony and had his wings to cover. For once, his being a griffin was not helping.

It took two cloaks to cover him. At his very reluctant suggestion, we tied down his wings with Sight to the Blind tucked underneath them. We would keep between him and anypony we encountered, and just hope that he was taken for a big ghoul. At least he was dark colors.

Willow was tan, I was white. Not common ghoul skin colors. They ranged more in the brown to green spectrum.

If only Fluster and her jar of horrible black goo was around... it had worked once, and I was sure it would work here. I missed the quiet little pegasus. I just missed the girls. I missed Shade.

I ignored the little voice making suggestive comments about the girls.

"So... we ready to do this? Kick, you good?" I snapped out of it, looking at the hooded griffin. Viola had done her best making him look like a ghoul, and he did to the extent that a griffin could.

“Uh... yeah. Let’s go.”

“Was it this abandoned when you got the cloaks?” I whispered ahead to Viola as the four of us weaved our way through assorted scrap metal huts. We hadn’t seen a single ghoul, and I was beginning to question where the hundreds of potential threats were. According to my PipBuck, they were still ahead of us, just as they’d always been.

Her hooded head turned to the side and she gave a little nod. “Only pony I saw was this guy.” Following where her hoof pointed, I saw another raider, a companion to the paint donor we had seen earlier.

The raider had once been rather large, as raiders went. Nailed to a table, he’d had most of the meat stripped off of his legs. There was a decent sized bite mark in his neck, and I honestly hoped that he’d been dead before they started eating him.

Not even raiders deserved that.

“Let’s not get caught.” Viola spoke so casually, it was a little creepy.

Everyone nodded, and we hurried past the grisly scene. The raider was far beyond help. None of us wished to join him, if I had to guess.

I sure don’t.

And the Med-X had worn off.

We were moving at a faster pace, since we still had yet to see any of the residents. Just short of running, actually. At this point, if Ash had started tunneling his way to the surface I probably would have pitched in and helped.

We came across the remains of several other raiders... or they might have been ponies just caught in a bad place. It was impossible to tell from the flayed corpses on tables or piled into corners of the tunnel. The name was scrawled everywhere, mixed in with notes and ancient letters. On signs, on the walls, on the floor, on tables, and one on the hide of a pony, stretched across a frame made of bones.

The End.

I had assumed it was a name, at first. The first ghoul had made me think that they just meant death, but they treated it like a deity. No more notes, epitaphs, or doodles. Just The End.

Then we were in an open area. There were no more shacks here, and for one glorious second I thought we’d gotten past the ghoul camp. As I turned to look back at the camp, the complete circle of red marks told me just how sorely mistaken I was.

We were surrounded. Behind us loomed dozens of hooded ghouls, and in front of us I spotted the glow of horns and brandished weapons. We had our weapons out and aimed, but the odds were just too against us. Viola was right. Hundreds. We were so fucked.

I muttered under my breath, “Shade... I’m sorry.” Ash shot me a glare as he held his revolver out, searching for whichever target he’d take out first before they rushed us.

A booming voice cut through the cave, and at first I had a flashback to Massacre slamming me against a cabinet. “So... you are the heathens that have stumbled into my little dominion, killed my followers, and stole some of their garments.”

The earth pony that stepped forward was certainly similar to Massacre in size, but I’d only ever seen one ghoul like him before. I had a disturbing suspicion that we were in a lot more trouble than we

thought. He strode out of the throng of armed unicorn ghouls, approaching us with an easy canter.

Ash aimed the revolver more carefully, pulling back the hammer and pointing it straight into the massive ghouls eye. He chuckled and pushed the revolver out of his face with a hoof. "Please. That won't work, bigger weapons have failed to kill me."

He began circling us, admiring the work we'd put into our disguises. "Well done... if we hadn't been watching you, it might have worked." Laughing, he threw back Ash's hood. "Very well done."

As he got to me, he stopped, cocking his head to the side. "That's... that is a sensation I haven't felt in some time." Reaching for my saddle bag, he flipped it open and reached in. Out came the black case, and my eyes opened wide. Balancing it on one hoof, he looked closely at it. When he nosed close to the latch to open it, my eyes opened wide.

He saw my look and smiled, nudging open the latch. As the box opened slightly, white began creeping into the edges of my vision. No. Not now. Stop.

"Hello again, my messy pony..." I was sure that only I heard the voice, but it was enough. I couldn't afford a meeting with Pandemonium, not now.

"No!" Reaching out with my telekinesis, I slapped the box shut and pulled it to me, tucking it against my chest. I slammed the barrel of Broken into the bottom of his jaw and fired, more on instinct than intentionally. I had a feeling that Two Kick had a hoof in it, because the instinct wasn't mine.

Blood shot into the air, thick and stinking, showering down on us. With a roar, the mob of ghouls started rushing in, ready to tear us to shreds with their bladed weapons. They'd probably eat us too.

"Wait!" The End bellowed, and his minions slid to a stop, several weapons already chopping down towards us. The ghouls looked down at me, parts of his face missing and oozing gore. Any pony would have died from that shot. Any ghouls... except...

Fuck. The End was Endless, and he wasn't a mindless berserker like the one we'd turned into a quivering yet angry pile of goo and bone.

I mouthed the word, "Endless."

The ghouls with half a face nodded. "You know what I am then? That's a first, but with that box I'm not surprised that you've encountered my ilk before."

"I killed the last one I met." The horde surrounding us was straining at their leash. I could see a mixture of bloodlust and confusion in their eyes.

The End laughed in my face, his wound throwing viscous fluid onto me. "Did you now? You killed the unkillable?" His grin was widened enough that it reached the back of his head on one side, scraps of flesh flapping as he spoke.

Tear this fuckers head off. I know you want to.

It was tempting, but I doubted that the mass of cannibals surrounding us would appreciate me attacking their leader a second time. Willow had her swords out, Ash had the barrel of his gun actually in the empty eye socket of a ghouls head, and Viola was clutching a grenade with her magic. We'd make a showing of ourselves, but we'd be ripped apart.

"Wasn't a pony left when I was done." I really shouldn't be doing the talking here. Really, really shouldn't.

"I respect that. Shows determination." The End stepped back from my face, rubbing a hoof at the hole in his face. "Stand down, my Chorus. Return to your homes."

As one, the ghouls turned and walked away, leaving the four of us rather confused. Had that really just gone our way?

“What, you think we won’t kill you? Sending your lackeys off won’t score you points.” Willow. Shut up. You’re not helping.

I wasn’t sure if that was me thinking, or Two Kick. I wasn’t sure it mattered.

“Oh, you can try. I’ll be up and about in a week or two, and you’ll be warming the bellies of my congregation. I don’t really see a point, do you? They’ve had plenty to eat, you surface dwellers have been coming down here more and more lately.” He turned away from us, and I noticed that the lights were coming on in the darkened tunnel. His ghouls, the Chorus had turned them off to set the trap, which we’d walked right into. I wasn’t really sure if we were out of it yet.

He was walking away, and paused only briefly to turn his head and speak to us over his shoulder. “You coming? If you’re not going to make your attempt on my life, I’d like to chat.”

Three of us exchanged confused glances, while Viola trotted after the subterranean deity. She’d holstered her rifle, and the rest of us followed her cautiously. I kept my weapon out. Ash and Willow chose to do the same.

We followed him to an intact, if rusted, rail car. It was bigger than the rest, and looked like it was built to carry a tank. Or an Endless experiment. Unlike everything else down here, the car was completely unmarked by graffiti and religious declarations. Viola followed him in, and we pursued more out of concern for the ghoul. With her years of experience, there was no way she was this naive. I was beginning to think she really didn’t care for her own well being.

Inside, we found that The End had turned what was once a sterile and heavily reinforced shipping container into a fairly comfortable living situation. A pile of fairly clean mattresses in one corner, a jukebox in another... it was pretty decent. For a hole in the ground filled with cannibals and bones, it was pretty decent.

“You have two cubes? That’s rather impressive, I thought them all lost.” He was looking at my saddle bag, where the demon in the box lurked.

“Uh.. uh, yeah.” I stammered a little, still thrown off by how this had all gone down. He was being rather cordial, considering I’d blown off half of his face. Though if what he’d said about being up and about in a week or two was true... Underhoof might be having problems if the other Endless managed to get past the door we’d closed.

“Who the fuck are you?” Ash still had his revolver out, and jabbed it at the ghoul with each word. He was rubbing his shoulder with his free hand still. He was not enjoying his time underground.

“Now, I am The End. I brought endless life to the Chorus that exalts me.” He said it grandiosely, with a sweep of a leg. Then he looked up, as though recalling a memory. “I used to be Nickel.”

I looked at Ash, my jaw hanging open slightly. Somehow, we’d gone from seconds away from death to hitting the jackpot. Celestia had shown mercy once again, as far as I could tell, because I was NOT that lucky.

Viola was flipping through a small stack of magazines on an end table. Glancing up, she posed a question. “How’d you end up down here?”

“I woke up in this container. Before that, I’d volunteered for a project that was supposed to create unkillable soldiers to fight against the stripes.”

I held up a hoof cautiously. “Wait, why are you telling us this? I need to know why you didn’t have

them cut us apart back there.”

The large ghoul chuckled. “I like to talk to outsiders every once in awhile. I found that conversation helps stave off the madness I’ve seen grip so many of my flock over the years, and just talking to sycophants just isn’t enough. Immortality gets tiresome.”

“Those murderous freaks out there? Explain them.” Willow was lingering near the entrance, glancing over her shoulder into the dark tunnel frequently. A sword was resting across her withers, ready to be used at a moments notice.

Viola glared a little, and The End gave a low growl. “Careful child, those are my worshippers you’re talking about.” He sat down, causing the entire car to rock slightly. Ash braced himself against the wall, looking around quickly. We’d need to be moving on before too long, before he started freaking out.

“They were down here when I found my way out of my confinement. Scared and lost, they saw me as the giant who emerged from the tunnel to save them from the death and fire of the outside world. I brought them the gift of immortality, and they brought me companionship.” As he spoke, it dawned on me that he really believed he’d given those ghouls their ‘immortality’. That didn’t explain the ghouls I’d encountered elsewhere in the wasteland, and I realized that he was crazy.

“Every so often, interesting interlopers such as yourselves find your way into my realm. I always enjoy hearing of how the topside is faring in these dark days. Most of my visitors decide to stay in the end, as I hope you will.” An image of the raiders nailed to tables and eaten passed through my head, and I wondered if they’d decided to stay, or just been cut down in the dark.

I spoke up, now very interested on getting us out of here. “Well, thank you for your hospitality, but we are on a bit of a tight schedule.”

Ash looked hopefully at me, and I jerked my head towards the exit of the container. My eyes were wide, and he tilted his head to the side just a bit. I nodded very slightly. The griffin stood, turning towards The End as he backed towards the tunnel.

The End glanced turned to me, now between Viola and myself. That could become an issue. “In a hurry to go somewhere? I’ve never seen one with my gift from outside before that didn’t have the madness.” The large ghoul was now looking at Viola, who had put down the magazines. The mare in the mask was looking past him to me with questioning eyes. I jerked my head towards the door, not sure if she’d get my meaning.

He was approaching her slowly, cornered in the container. So our luck hadn’t changed, it was just bad in a different way.

Ash was out, his revolver still aimed at the ghoul. Willow had her sword ready as it had been, but Ash had pulled her out with him. I drew Broken, aiming the weapon at the back of the Endless’ head. It wouldn’t kill him, but it might buy us enough time to start running.

Viola saw what we were doing and nodded almost imperceptibly. Her horn began glowing just slightly, and her saddle bag popped open. Out floated the grenade, and I heard the large unkillable obstacle let out a low growl similar to when Willow had called ghouls freaks.

I didn’t expect Viola to do what came next, as she slammed the grenade into his mouth as soon as he started to talk again, rushing him. With more agility than I’d ever seen from her, she sprung past him, bouncing off the pile of mattresses and clean over the massive ghoul. As she sprinted past me, I turned and followed.

We were only a short distance from the container when there came the thump of a grenade detonating, followed by a strangled roar that bounced down the tunnel. The roar didn’t die down, but was instead

joined by others as the ghouls realized something had gone wrong.

I didn't look back, I just kept running. I holstered Broken, wanting my full concentration on the task at hand. Dodging debris, broken tracks, and collapsed parts of the tunnel as quickly as we could, we tried to keep our head start. Viola had turned on her headlamp, so we had illumination, but if the ghouls had trapped this direction we were screwed.

"Viola! How far to the station?!" As I ran, I shouted as loudly as I could. The roar behind us was staying at a constant level, which I hoped meant they weren't gaining on us, but it was enough that shouting was necessary.

She was leading, with Ash and Willow behind her. I was bringing up the rear. Her voice, muffled as ever but harder to hear with the roaring, drifted back to me. "Not far. Maybe a few more minutes."

"Let's hope we live that long!" Willow was running while looking over her shoulder, something I wasn't too keen to do myself. I'd rather see what was going to trip me than what was going to stab me to death and eat my flesh.

Viola, at the head of the group, opened her bag as she ran. I couldn't see what was enveloped in the glow of magic, but she threw it to her side as we passed a detached railcar. It didn't look like a passenger car, it looked like a big tank of something. Passing by, I saw the mine she had casually tossed next to it.

Oh fuck.

I began running just a little faster.

The ghouls were just a little bit behind us, and to their credit they'd been catching up. When one of them strayed too near the blinking explosive, the proximity fuse was tripped. Whatever was in that tank had spent two hundred years waiting for a spark, and it had just been given its moment to shine.

Its moment to burn.

Its moment to over pressurize the tank and detonate outwards in a fireball, washing a horde of ghouls in flame and obliterating everything near it with a crushing shockwave. The ceiling of the tunnel, after two hundred years of regular neglect and weathering, took that shockwave as its cue to give up in the constant fight against the weight above it, collapsing into the tunnel in a shower of concrete, metal, and earth.

The shockwave was a lot kinder to those of us up the tunnel from the blast. As I heard the blast, I felt an invisible force pick off my hooves and throw me down the tunnel. In the light of the fireball, I saw the train car I was flying at in stark detail, every window, bolt, and decoration picked out in the bright yellow light. Then I hit, and everything went black.

Yay...

"Kick. Kick, wake up."

Turn on the lights. I'm getting bored.

A snapping sound made me snap my eyes open. Gripping for Broken with my magic, I tried rolling over to get upright, but a clawed hand was pushing down on my shoulder.

"Whoa there Kick. Everything's cool, just take it slow." Ash was over me, backlit by a fire. Looking past him, I saw a shattered window. Looking at my surroundings, I found that I was inside the train car, laying on an ancient cushion that was still surprisingly comfortable. If it wasn't for the glass in my

flank and the splitting headache, I'd be downright comfortable.

"Is he dead?" A shout from outside told me that Willow really cared.

"Nah, he's just a little beat up." He pulled me up and ran some talons down my back, dislodging shards of glass from my cloak and the armor underneath. "You good, Kick?"

Getting to my hooves, I found that I really was. That was the least damaging explosion I'd ever been in.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Everyone okay?"

"Willow ran into a train car, but other than that we're all good. We gotta get going though." I nodded at him, following as he made his way through the car and hopped out the back and into the tunnel. As I landed, my front right hoof slipped and I hit the ground hard.

"Ow..." As I picked myself up, looking for an injury I'd missed because I couldn't feel, I saw that my right leg was covered with thick black goo. Looking down, I saw that I'd landed in what had once been a ghoul. He'd been ripped in half, and I'd landed squarely in the insides spilling from his chest. "Ew..."

Willow, whose right eye was swollen shut, laughed out loud at my misfortune. "Watch your step, Rip." It couldn't have been too long since the blast, but she was already wearing her long white coat, the black tree design reminding me of the black veins running down my neck.

"Willow, we're gonna be walking into a city filled with murderers, rapists, slavers, and sick fucks. Is wearing the symbol of opposition to all those things really a good idea?" She stopped laughing as I pointed out that wearing her coat was a really bad idea, and frowned at me for a few seconds before grudgingly stripping the jacket off and placing it back in her bags.

Viola trotted up to us from further down the tunnel, her eyes twinkling in the fire behind us. Glancing at it, I saw the collapsed tunnel and the burning debris. I'd gotten really lucky, landing on a cushion. Extremely lucky.

"Station's right up ahead. Looks closed, but that's not really an issue." With a tilt of her head, she indicated behind her. Turning into the tilt, almost playfully, she practically skipped away from us.

Shrugging, I followed the ghoul mare. Ash fell in next to me, walking upright. Willow trailed behind, her pride damaged, but the rest of her intact apart from the bruised eye.

Catching up to the playfully trotting mare, I began walking alongside her. "Viola... could you warn us next time you use high explosives?"

Glancing over at me, she nodded. "Sure. Can do." She gave a little giggle. "That was pretty cool though, wasn't it?"

I gave a conciliatory nod, chuckling slightly. "Yeah, it was pretty cool."

I needed a laugh. Ahead, I could see the open space of the Anchor station. Somewhere above it, Neighwhere festered like a boil on the world. A whole new hell awaited us there.

Neighwhere didn't know we were coming.

Hate didn't know we were coming.

He'd know, soon enough.

As always, praise to Kkat for creating the fantastic Fallout Equestria.

Thanks to my editor Wirepony, he has great ideas.

Also the most recent picture is a feature on [Broken](#), done by BurnOut42. Love it, the look on Ripple's face is great.

Then, as always, fave/comment/rate/track. Thanks much, hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Chapter 16: Gentle

Entering the station, I had to wonder why the ghouls hadn't camped out here. It was spacious, and surprisingly still had functional lighting. Viola was leading the way, hopping from the tracks up to the platform. As I climbed up, I took a look around the abandoned space.

Much like where we'd first come into the tunnel, this station was littered with abandoned belongings from hundreds of years before. There were skeletons here too, but as I passed by one I couldn't help but notice that there was a hole in the skull. These ponies had all been shot, but by what I couldn't tell.

I felt sorry for the dead pony on the ground. Getting shot in the head was never fun.

As I noticed that every other pony skeleton here was similarly killed, I heard a ratcheting sound from my right. Broken snapped out to point at the sound even as I whirled, finding myself staring down the twin barrels of an automated turret nestled in the ceiling. A small red light shone, aiming right at my chest, but as the ratcheting sound continued I realized that the turret was out of ammo.

"Phew... that's lucky." As I muttered my little statement under my breath, Ash stepped up alongside me, looking up at the turret. The griffin inspected the rest of the platform, concentrating on the ceiling.

Crossing his arms, he let out a little laugh. "Huh, tenacious isn't it, Kick?" Drawing his revolver, he pointed up. "Keep an eye out though, if there's one there might be more."

As if on cue, a metal pony lurched its way around a corner, one rusted leg giving it a creaking limp. I recognized the model immediately, throwing myself behind a crumbling bench as beams of burning energy slashed through the air at us. Ash was forced to dive off of the platform under the barrage of energy.

As I popped up over my cover, I prepared to unload lead into the rusted sentinel, but the robotic pony had suddenly suffered a bad case of sword through the brain. It lurched drunkenly to the side, sparks sputtering from around Willow's sword. It took a few more steps, fell over, gave a little shudder, and then lay still.

As Ash and I got out of our cover, Willow was already prying the sword loose from the robot's head with her magic, a hoof firmly pressed against the prone form to apply leverage. That didn't really make sense, but Willow's sly grin as she turned back to me gave me pause. Approaching me, she pushed Broken's barrel down with the tip of a sword. "Can't be making much noise. A little tact this close to Neighwhere."

No. It probably wasn't. Thinking about it now, if Neighwhere wasn't up in arms over the detonation only a short walk down the tunnel, it could only mean that we were the luckiest ponies in the wasteland. Though with how smoothly events had been going recently, I was sure that we'd be walking into a wall of armed and very alert slavers. Luck never lasted.

We were fucked.

Shaking my head to get that thought cleared, ignoring the voice telling me that I was right, I walked past her to where Viola was already peeking around the corner that the robot had come from. I joined her in scoping out the path ahead, but from what I could see it was clear. No robots, no turrets, just lots of skeletons.

Taking a few tentative steps out, I waited for another turret to spring to life and spray me with bullets. With a click and a grinding whir, my expectation was answered, but once again the turret made a rapid

clicking sound. Fresh out of ammo. Bad for the skeletons littering the floor, good for me.

“Wow. It must have really sucked to be here after the bombs. Death or ghoulication.” Trotting past me, carefully avoiding stepping on any exposed bones, Viola led the way. Making our way through the boneyard, the four of us eventually came to the locked gate that had doomed everypony here to a violent death.

The gate was a big steel shutter that had slid down from the ceiling, probably when the bombs had gone off and the security had been tripped.

“We could blow it up.” Viola giggled a little as she suggested the use of one of her reclaimed mines, but we shot down the idea before she could even open her bag. We didn’t need to make any more noise while trying to stealthily enter Neighwhere. Collapsing a tunnel had done enough.

“You could try forcing it open. Worked at the headquarters.” Ash shrugged as he spoke, bringing to mind the door I’d forced open all that time ago. That had taken most of my strength to do, and the door leading to Grace’s labs had been much, much smaller than the one before me.

I shook my head, not even willing to attempt. I’d probably kill myself trying. “Don’t think that’s an option either..”

As we stared at the door, Willow taking a chance at prying at a seam with her sword, I noticed that Viola was drifting off to one side. As I watched her, I saw her inspecting a rust covered wall closely, scratching at it with a hoof. With a little glow of her horn, a panel popped open in a shower of rust.

“Oh, that works too.” Reaching into the opening, she moved something and the gate gave a cringe inducing screech. Slowly and haltingly, but surely, the gate began retracting into the ceiling. From underneath, a flow of debris and stinking liquid began entering the room.

The three of us in front of the gate took a few steps back, Willow even going so far as to hop up onto a skeleton draped bench. The foul flow oozed around my hooves, and Ash shuddered as he tried picking his paws out of it. As the gate unveiled the room past it, I saw that it led into a long abandoned building. The ponies of Neighwhere, and probably of Anchor before it, had used the building to dump trash, and water had pooled there to form the horrific sludge we now stood in.

I slogged my way through the muck, pushing the larger pieces of filth out of the way with my magic, before reaching the stairs and climbing up them as quickly as I could. Standing on the stairs, I started shaking the grime from my legs as I looked down at the three making their way towards me. Viola was strolling through it casually, Ash was rushing it, and Willow was hopping from debris to debris.

Eventually, all of us were out of the trash. At the top of the stairs, I found a boarded up, dilapidated interior. No pony had been here in a long time, which was perfect for us. A thought had occurred to me, and I chose now to express it.

“Ash, Viola, you two can’t go into Neighwhere.”

“What?!” They shouted in unison, and Willow and I hissed them silent. It was dark out, and shouting coming from a closed up building in the middle of the most hostile place I could think of couldn’t be good.

“Ash, you know you can’t just go walking around in Neighwhere. They know you here, and they know you were fighting at Blank. Griffins don’t exactly blend in.” As I spoke, he narrowed his eyes menacingly at me. He knew that I was speaking sense, but I knew the griffin. This would not go over well with him.

“That’s not part of our contract. You’re not denying me my chat with Hate.” He was towering over me, rage emanating from his very being, though he was speaking low and even. Talons hovered near my

face as he grasped at the air like he was ready to wrench my skull from my neck.

“I know it’s not, but we’re here for rescue. If we go in killing, how many ponies do you think will get out? We’ll be cut down before we could even try.” I stared into his eyes, not backing down. I was hoping this wouldn’t turn into another fight like it had at Orchard.

I was sure that this time one of us would die if we got into it.

“Besides, we need a way out. We could keep going down the tunnel, and I need the way clear for when the rescue happens.” I could see the griffin narrowing his eyes and glancing to the side furtively. I knew that he knew I was speaking the truth. The angry griffin just had to work it through his head and convince himself that he knew it. Very slowly, he lowered his talons.

“Fine.”

The griffin turned from me and walked off. “I’ll check this building out then.” Disappearing into a doorway, he let me release the breath I’d been holding.

“Why can’t I go in?” Viola was standing next to me, watching the doorway the griffin had departed through.

“You’re a ghoul. Don’t raiders shoot ghouls?”

She nodded her head a little, scuffing a hoof at the filthy ground. “Yeah... they do.”

“You also know tunnels. There are emergency exits farther along, right?” The nod she gave was much stronger. “Well, I want you to check the tunnel. Those ghouls aren’t past here, but I want to know that the way is clear. Can you do that?”

Willow was up against a window boarded up with ancient and rotting woods. Her voice came across the room softly at us. “So just you and me then Rip? We’re gonna have to cover up, you did live with these ponies for most of your life. If they recognize you, it’s over.”

Hood to the rescue, yet again. Pulling the dirty white cloth around my neck over my face covered the telling scar. “Better?”

She nodded and used her magic to grip a slim sheet of metal in place over one of the windows. With a short jerk, she pulled it from its rusted moorings, surprisingly with almost no sound. Placing it against the wall next to the window, she hopped through the window before I could say anything.

I nodded to Viola and to Ash who was just coming back, and followed her through.

I got my first real taste of Neighwhere in those first moments.

Though it was early night, there was light everywhere. Flood lights, strings of colored light, salvaged streetlamps. The air was also filled with a deep bass rumble... it sounded like music, but not like any that I’d heard.

Ah, so that’s tonight.

There were ponies everywhere, raiders and slavers walking the streets. It was actually a lucky break for us. There were other ponies with covered faces and hoods, which meant that Willow and I would be able to blend in and wouldn’t be limited to hiding in the shadows. It would make the rescue that much harder though.

Now we just had to find where they kept the slaves. Come on... let me remember.

I know where it is. You just have to follow my lead. Take that left up there, with the red light.

“I think I remember. It’s up there.” I tried keeping the volume low, but with the music in the air I

couldn't whisper. No response from Willow and I turned my head to make sure that she'd heard me.

The mare was gone.

Fuck.

I looked around frantically, but I couldn't tell Willow apart from any of the other ponies on the street. I locked my teeth to hold back a scream as all the ways that this could go wrong flooded into my mind. The absent Whitecoat could quite literally be the death of me and everypony I cared about.

With how flaky she'd been acting, I guess I should have seen her abandoning me immediately coming. She'd either be off to do something incredibly stupid, or she was looking on her own for her captured comrades.

I glanced briefly back at the building I'd left Viola and Ash in, but decided against returning. The reasons I had left them as the rearguard still existed, it was only my situation that was different. The ponies of Blank needed rescue, and I was going to provide.

I was just surrounded by enemies, any of which could be family or friend from before.

Fuck.

All I had was the murderous voice in my head. He knew the way around, he knew these ponies.

Damn right I do. Up there, red light. Take a left.

Sighing, I followed his directions. I didn't know if this was a trap, or if he was being honestly helpful. I could only follow along and find out.

As we went down the side path, I noticed that even for a place run by monsters, it was unpleasant. Drugged out raiders lying in pools of filth, the occasional corpse, mares selling themselves to anypony that walked past.

"Hey there stallion, looking for a good time?" A scrawny unicorn mare stepped in front of me, shaking her rear to emphasize the offer.

Masking my voice, I growled out. "No. Outta my way."

"Okay, geez. Colts are two streets over, you gelding." Making room for me, the mare spit curses at my retreating form as I kept walking.

She's right. You might as well be a gelding. You're never any fun.

Shut up. How much further?

Just a bit more, gotta go through that building on the right.

The building on the right must have been an apartment building before the bombs. Several stories tall and covered with cruel graffiti, it was now to a building as a ghoul was to a pony. Not very pleasant to look at.

The doors were long gone, a filthy curtain in their place. Pushing it aside, I entered a dimly lit hallway. There were a few lamps here and there, giving off enough light to make the whole place look even worse than it should have.

And here we are.

I stared at the door he'd led me to, a sense of dread sweeping over me. Solid metal, a massive keyhole with scorch marks right above a blood spattered door handle. Right in the middle of the door were the indents of two pairs of hooves caked with long dried blood.

My hooves.

This was Two Kicks room.

“No. We can’t be here.”

You wanna blend in? I gotta grab some things. Remember, two deadbolts up and down, turn with magic. Don’t want you killing yourself trying to pick the lock.

I knew this part, and even though I wanted to get away from this door as quickly as I could, I reached out with my magic and slid open the locks unseen on the opposite side. With a creak, I pushed the door open, opening up a nightmare I wished to never see.

Luckily, the image I’d had long ago about a blood-smeared room filled with the rotting corpses of ponies was mostly inaccurate. Aside from a skeleton tactfully nailed to one wall, there weren’t any dead ponies at all. The room, however, was a mess. Shotgun shells and Stampede injectors lay in piles scattered around the room, along with mounds of healing bandages, and heaps of shattered armor.

Dominating the room was a massive bed, one that could fit five or six ponies comfortably.

What? I like to have fun. Now close the door, mighty suspicious looking if it’s open. I’m supposed to be dead, you know.

Closing the door behind me, I was presented with the most complicated lock I’d ever seen. Where a lock should have been, and where any enterprising ponies would choose to pick a lock, there was a crudely rigged shotgun rigged with a long feed of shells. On the ground I counted three spent shells, which explained the dried blood splattered on the door.

“Wow... is that really necessary?”

I don’t want anypony stealing my stuff. Do you know how many thieves there are in this town?

“Three less?”

Hah. Yeah. Hey, you made a joke.

I began sorting through the supplies scattered in piles around the room. Dozens of shells for Broken, healing items, anything that could come in handy went into my bags. He kept trying to get my attention, but the way I saw it what was his was mine. Just take what I need and leave.

If I had my way, I’d burn this place before I left, but running incognito ruled out arson. Two Kick sounded relieved when I reached that conclusion.

Phew. Okay, open the closet, stop looting my room.

I dropped several more shells into my bag very deliberately before approaching the heavily reinforced closet door. As I opened the door, I was assaulted by a stench that I couldn’t believe had been contained by a simple metal door. It should have broken free and rampaged across Equestria long ago.

I stumbled backwards, gagging.

Like it? I find that the smell helps when I’m fighting. Psychological shit, there.

Hanging in the closet was battered leather barding, scraps of sharpened metal fastened to it almost at random. The entirety had once been soaked in blood, which had likely come from the gutted stallion lying at the foot of the closet. At least three weeks he’d been there, and was now a festering pile of pony scraps, putrid and rotting.

Looking at the scene from across the room, I held back the urge to gag.

It’s perfect. Protects in the right places, flexible where it needs to be. Go ahead, it’s a gift. It’s custom

fitted to us anyways.

No.

I slammed the door shut with such an expenditure of my magic that I felt the strain almost immediately. Distance wasn't a strength of mine, and that door was heavy.

No? I give you a gift, and you say no?! I'm trying to be helpful here.

It hit me. I'd been too lenient with Two Kick, listening to him and taking his advice. The filthy leather abomination on the other side of that metal door was everything that set us apart. The armor I wore now was given to me by friends, had held the warmth of what I was pretty sure was the love of my life, and had saved me several times.

I would never put on something like that abomination in the closet. Never again.

Put it the fuck on! These ponies respect power. Fear. Pain. Strength. You need these. You need me! You'll fucking die without me! I'm trying to keep us alive you stupid fuck!

I jabbed the needle into my side, feeling the coolness of the Med-X spread through me. His voice slowly mellowed from a screaming rage to a menacing tingle.

A sound at the door made me drop into an alert crouch, drawing Broken by instinct. Approaching cautiously, I could hear muffled words, from a mare and a stallion.

"I'm telling you, somepony went in. They got Two Kick's door open. Last pony that tried that was..." A soft mare's voice was cut off by a gruff stallion's voice.

"Sledge. Dragged his corpse off and everypony wised up that the door just kills you. No pony goes in but Two Kick, and he's dead."

"Then why's the door ajar?"

I noticed then that I hadn't bolted the door back up, and I could see through the slight crack into the hallway. With a creak, the door started opening very slowly, and the glow of magic accompanied the barrel of a pistol into the room.

Thinking quickly, I grabbed at the door lock with my magic, pulling the hair trigger attached to the shotgun. Blood sprayed the inside of the door as the weapon fired, wrenching the door open with the recoil. The pony that had been opening had had his ear up against the lock as he nudged it open, which had ended with half of his head being liquefied against the wall.

As the door slammed open, the other pony was scrambling for the long blade sheathed against one leg. Broken was already aimed, and the shot tore out her throat and lower jaw, cutting off any cry for help.

She still grasped for the knife, even as her blood poured from her ruined face and neck. I watched as her eyes went dull and she slumped into the hallway. I sighed, "I'm sorry," and dragged her body into Two Kick's room. Her companion followed shortly, twin streaks of blood leading into the room.

I knew that somepony would have heard the shots. Even if they'd thought that it was just another pony trying to get in with the first shot, Broken had a noticeably different report. Somepony was sure to come check, if for no reason other than to loot the bodies.

Stepping into the hallway, I closed Two Kick's door behind me, hoping to never return. I locked both deadbolts with my magic, and turned. Two Kick knew the way to where the slaves were, but with his leading me astray once already, I decided to try and find it myself. Maybe I'd run into Willow. I wanted to head her off before she did something irreversibly stupid.

"Hey! Who are you?!"

There were two filthy unicorns at the entrance to the building, brandishing shotguns at me. The shots had attracted scavengers faster than I'd expected, and the ponies that had come to check had the upper hoof. They'd caught me standing in a pool of blood and closing a door that nopony was supposed to be able to open. They were far enough away that if I rushed them I'd likely be dead before I could reach them. It would take some fast wordsmithing to get out of this.

"Uuuh...." I couldn't think of anything to say, so I fired Broken blindly at them as I started running further into the apartment building. Shouts and a blast of buckshot ricocheting off of a wall followed me down the dark corridor. With Two Kick muffled, I tried using any inkling of instinct that I could find as I ran.

Hitting a corner, I started running up a flight of stairs. I could still hear the two behind me as I ran, and I wondered if I could ambush them. Wait around a corner, take them out as they passed.

"He's upstairs, let's go! Pony looted Two Kick's room!" The cheers of around a dozen reverberated through the building, and my ambush plan was immediately scrapped. The two had gotten help.

Door on the right.

Two Kick was barely understandable, muffled by the Med-X and amplified by my search for memories. I could barely hear him over the thunder of hooves coming up the stairs after me

RIGHT! NOW!

I opened the door to my right and scrambled through, slamming it shut behind me. Pressing up against the door, Broken aimed and ready, I listened as the mob ran past in blind pursuit of liberating anything I'd taken from my old room.

A sound behind me was followed by the audible click of a revolver's hammer. "Only pony that busts into a Paragon's room is a dead pony, didn't you know that?"

The voice sounded familiar, and as I turned slowly I gently lowered Broken to the ground. It wasn't the bad familiar I'd gotten more frequently, but a pleasant familiar. As I turned, I slid back my hood and pulled down my face cloth. It just seemed right.

Standing there was a mare floating a large revolver, the business end pointed squarely between my eyes. Her blue eyes were very familiar, and they slowly opened wide as she stared at me. Her coat was a more off white than mine, a cream color. A greyish blue mane, not striped like mine.

"Ripple?" The mare lowered the gun just slightly.

"Gentle." I knew the name, and now I could attach it to a face.

The revolver clattered to the ground and she fell to her knees, staring up at me with regret etched into her face. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I shot you."

Shot me? Taking in the room, I found things that I didn't immediately connect to the sister I knew from Sweeps' recordings. Worn leather barding, assorted munitions. A battle saddle with a massive sniper rifle connected to it, longer than Ash's prized weapon.

"You're Skyline?" My sister had shot me in the side. I had wondered why the sniper had gone out of her way to hit me with a shot I could survive. When I had wondered why she hadn't gone for my heart or my head, I hadn't conceived it was because she really didn't want me dead.

"You know that. We were in together..." She sobbed, clearly broken up by my entrance back into her life. "When Crackerjack shot you... When Hate shot you... I lost the last of my family. When I started hearing rumors that you were still alive... when Cindy started talking about running into you... and then I saw you hovering over her, that look in your eye. I had to shoot. I'm so sorry."

I approached the mare slowly. She was my sister, true, but she was still a Paragon. A certain menace came with that title, and I had no idea how it would show itself in her. I'd seen insanity, brutality, arson, callousness, and a host of other negative qualities in Paragons. The voice in my head was a monster, and he got along fine with these ponies.

How did my sister fit in with these monsters?

I didn't put Broken away, unsure if I'd have to shoot my sister.

"It's okay. I'm fine, really."

The mare pulled me into an embrace, crying. I just sat down and let her go at it. Seriously... one of these days I'd have to figure out mares. Right now was not that moment, as a crying mare buried her face in my shoulder while I floated my shotgun, ready to blow her head off.

It took a while, but eventually Gentle's sobs tapered off, and she drew back, apologizing and wiping at the dampness on my shoulder. As she regained her composure, she looked at the worn and battered gear I was wearing. Her eyes lingered on the cloak and white cloth. "What are you doing here? You were with the monsters."

"Monsters?" The word had been said with an amount of fear.

"There are monsters everywhere." She was looking at me oddly, like I should have known that. I did know that, I'd been fighting monsters for three weeks.

"Gnashers, bloatsprites, timberwolves. Yeah, there are monsters." Not to mention all the monsters I'd encountered.

"No, not just them. Ponies. Like the ones that killed Dad."

When she said that, I could only stare at her. Deal had told me our dad had gone out on a trading run and never come back. It would make sense that he had been killed, but how was a mystery as far as I knew.

Her suspicious look deepened as I worked that through my head. "You told me that, Ripple. Every pony that didn't come from the Stable was a monster. You told me right after it happened... don't you remember?"

Looking at her was sending a stream of memories through my head. Fractured memories, but memories all the same. An adoring younger sister, looking up to me to protect her. A loving filly that supported me in my every endeavor. The optimistic mare staring out at the bright world for the first time.

The teary eyed, distraught young mare that had just lost her father.

The mare that followed her brother into a life of thinly veiled evil.

The killer that believed the lies fed to her by her older brother.

The Paragon that saw the outside world as evil.

I had done that.

Yep. Sure did. Had to protect her somehow. What better way than to turn her into a killer like you? A killer amongst killers, feared and respected by all. No safer position.

Two Kick was back. The med-x had worn off faster than ever. I growled under my breath. "You monster..."

"What was that?" As she looked at me, I couldn't stop seeing the innocent filly that had just slammed

into my head in the form of lost memories. I stammered, trying to find words. I wasn't worthy to talk to her. Two Kick was voicing confusion over why I was so mad... he thought that he had done the right thing, making her a Paragon. What had been wrong with my head that I had thought that was a good idea?

"Look, Gentle..." I paused, sorting through the next few words. "Things have been complicated these last few weeks... and I..." I needed to get to the slaves and keep on with my rescue mission. I needed to find Willow. I needed to find the girls. I needed to find Shade.

"I need your help."

She tilted her head to the side with a smile. She didn't care that I'd been killed by Hate, she didn't care that I wasn't a Paragon anymore, she didn't care about anything other than her big brother had just walked back into her life. "With what, Ripple?"

"I'm looking for somepony. Massacre just came back with a crop of... slaves, right? You and Cinder were with him." It hurt to refer to Shade as a slave. I winced as I said it.

Gentle nodded. "Yeah, from that raider outpost down south. We lost a lot of good ponies, but the crop is sure to bring in good trade from Red Eye."

I twitched a little, holding back the urge to correct what she had just said. I didn't know much about Red Eye, I'd only heard the name a couple times, but it didn't sound like he was somepony I'd be thrilled to meet.

"I need to find those ponies." I need to find that pony. "Hate's mad at me though... I have to get there quietly."

Gentle smiled at me, nodding. "I can do that. I was headed there in a short bit anyways, it's fight night you know."

Oh good. I was right, this will be fun.

I put back on my flimsy disguise as my sister strapped on her armor and broke her massive rifle down into pieces. She packed each with care into a case which she slung along her back. "Lets go, it's going to start soon."

I can't say that I was looking forward to whatever 'it' was.

I sure as fuck am.

The streets were much easier to walk through with Gentle leading the way. Other ponies avoided the 'Paragon Skyline' like she had a magical shield around her. I fully understood the looks she was getting. I'd gotten them a few times since I'd woken up in that ditch, and Two Kick had revelled in them for years..

They were afraid of her.

Armored up, the heavy revolver in a holster on her left leg and the heavy case on her back, she did indeed cut an imposing figure. I hoped that it would draw attention away from my hooded and masked form slinking along next to her. I was doing my very best to blend in.

As we walked, the music in the air was getting louder. Looking down the road we were trotting through, I could see that the area ahead was very well lit. I could hear the voices of many ponies as well, cheering and screaming obscene things.

The building she led me to was massive, easily filling an entire city block. It had reached for the sky

once, but was now crumpled, almost chewed off at around two floors of height. It probably had a roof, too, but that was long gone. Now it was a jagged stump of a building, filled with rows and rows of seats overlooking a clearing in the center. At one end was a raised platform rimmed with jagged metal and sporting a rather comfortable looking couch.

The seats were packed with raiders, slavers, and assorted scum. In the higher seats, I even spotted four griffins in dark combat armor cheering and shouting along with the ponies. At the center were two earth ponies dead set on kicking each other to death.

“It’s game night. Wanna catch a few matches before we see the slaves?” Gentle was at my side, smiling at the carnage as one pony landed a lucky kick that sent teeth and blood flying.

This was the place. Caps flying. Mares throwing themselves at me. Paragons cheering. I’d fought in this arena more times than I could guess at. This is where my fame had come from. I was the monster of this arena. I took a step forward unconsciously.

Yesss.....

I froze mid step and turned my head to the sister at my side. “No, lets go see the slaves.” I had to get to Shade. I was playing it cool with Gentle, or I’d be tearing through walls to get to my blue mare. The voice needed to go away.

Oh come on. I haven’t killed anyone in so fucking long...

Gentle turned from the arena and began heading down a side passage, missing the little twitch that I gave while trying to ignore the voice. I trotted after her, and quickly found myself in a low, dark tunnel. It was a service corridor, or had been long ago. Pipes and ductwork crisscrossed the ceiling, rusted and in poor condition but from the dripping of water and occasional hisses of steam, still serving a purpose.

Down a broad flight of stairs, the strangely calm mare led the way. Her dead brother had just walked back into her life, and she was acting like it was just any other day. I’d messed her up pretty good when I was still Two Kick... I could tell just from the little smile on her face.

We came to a doorway where two burly unicorns stood guard, cruel looking whips coiled at their sides. They straightened up when they saw Gentle coming, and one of them stammered a little as he greeted her. “Skyline... pleasant evening we’re having, isn’t it?”

She smiled softly at the pony, who I could tell wasn’t from a Stable due to his lack of PipBuck. The kind of pony she’d expressed notable dislike for. He wasn’t even a pony in her eyes. “It sure is. I’d like to see the stock.”

The guard pony nodded rapidly, then shot a glance at me. He was the first pony that had looked me in the eyes here, and I really hoped that he wasn’t familiar with my face, even though I’d only been gone for a little under a month.

“Don’t worry about him, he just needs to take a look at the stock.” Gentle set a look on him that looked foreign on her serene features. A warning look, like she was seconds away from putting a bullet through the guard’s head.

“Oh... of course, Skyline. Anything you say.” He stepped aside, his silent companion following suit and making room for the two of us to pass by them. As we entered the low, dark room beyond, I heard one of the guards let out the breath he’d been holding.

My sister was that unpredictable?

Glancing at her, she gestured around the room. “Here’s the stock, including the slaves that Messy brought in.” She pulled a key from the wall and tossed it to me. “Take a look around. They’re not

scheduled to be traded for another few days anyways, no harm in letting you look.”

I took the key and hurried to the nearest cage. There were several very large cages, capable of holding dozens of ponies each, and I had every intention of letting them all free... but I had to find Shade.

At the first cage, I didn't recognize any of the terrified ponies that drew away from the bars as I approached. Filthy, beaten, dull eyes. These ponies had been here for a while. A red light around each pony's throat drew my attention, and when I looked closer at the nearest slave, I saw the crude collar around her throat.

Slave collars. I was familiar with the concept, from listening to Whitecoat stories. Enough explosives to decapitate the wearer, the easiest way to keep slaves in check. If everypony had one, my plans for their freedom were instantly much more complicated.

The second cage was similarly filled with beaten and broken ponies. As was the third. I was beginning to panic. The alternative to not finding the girls was not something I wanted to think about.

At the fourth cage, I spotted several ponies in torn and filthy white jackets. Opening the cage, I walked in slowly. Several of these ponies were trained in close combat by my aunt and uncle, and could probably do some serious damage. I looked like a raider after all.

Gentle stood outside, her horn glowing and the magic enveloping the handle of her revolver. The ponies inside the cage saw this as well, and cleared away from me as I approached. Glancing rapidly from face to face, I started to panic.

Then, in one corner, I saw a pair of mismatched eyes. Blue and violet. My soul calmed instantly, and tears sprung to my eyes. Pulling back my hood, I whispered her name hopefully. “Shade?”

The blue mare stood slowly, staring at me. Taking a few tentative steps towards me, she smiled. Then without warning she leapt forward, hitting me and driving me to the ground in a deep kiss. I couldn't get a word in as she clung to me.

A click and the glow of magic made Shade freeze, and I opened my eyes to see a revolver pressed against the head of the loving mare. “Get off of my brother.”

“Gentle... put down the gun.” I shot her a warning glance, and luckily she reacted quickly, backing up and dropping the pistol to a less pointed ready position. The other ponies in the cage were edging towards her now that she had stupidly followed me in. When she'd been outside, the bars had protected her. Now the two of us were surrounded by ponies, several of which I could immediately identify as trained killers.

I scooted away from Shade and stood, pulling the bandana from around my neck. Holding it aloft, I spoke directly to the Whitecoats in the cage. “I came here with Willow. We're here to free you.”

A voice from the back raised a very good question. “Well where is she?”

I didn't want to sugarcoat it, so I gave it to them straight. “I don't know. We got separated, and I'd hoped to find her here...” The Whitecoats groaned at the news.

One of the Whitecoats, one I recognized from Relay but didn't know the name of, stepped forward, eyeing Gentle warily. “We can't leave. These collars are rigged to blow if we leave this room. You got a way to get these off, great. If not, then fuck off with the false hope.”

Wow. Very straightforward. I wasn't expecting that. Maybe a little gratitude?

I glanced at Gentle, who was giving me the strangest look. “Do you know how to get those collars off?”

The mare shook her head, backing away from me and the captives. Raising her revolver, she pointed it in our direction, but not specifically at any of us. "Why? They're monsters... they're not like us. You're siding with them?"

Fuck. I was hoping that this wouldn't happen.

I took a step towards her, hoping she wouldn't shoot me. I'd been shot plenty, but I had the feeling that getting shot by my sister would just hurt more. The last time she'd shot me had been painful enough, but I didn't know that it was her at the time. "Gentle... you trust me, right? You trusted me enough to not shoot me when I walked into your room."

The revolver aimed at me, and I knew that if she shot the guards would be all over us. Everything would be over. My sister gave a little half nod, unsure of herself.

"Listen, Gentle. I was wrong... I was so wrong. The ponies outside aren't monsters... they're just trying to get by." I wasn't the best at convincing speeches. I knew that almost every one I attempted ended with me getting shot or blown up, but I had to try. I had to try to save my sister.

"The ponies that killed our dad... yeah, they were monsters. Raiders." They could have been bloatsprites for all I knew. "But not all ponies are raiders. These ponies, these are good ponies. Torn from their homes by raiders and slavers. They have families."

I pointed a hoof out the door, hoping to drive my point home. "There are ponies out there who just want to make something better, who work every day to try and improve the Wasteland, even just a little bit. And yes, there are ponies who are monsters, who bring death and destruction wherever they go. Ponies feared and hated, whose names aren't spoken lightly in case they hear." I took a deep breath and rolled the dice, hoping that luck would be with me. "That's the Paragons, 'Skyline'. That's us. Hate... Crackerjack, all he's doing is making more ponies like that, like us. He's a monster. The Paragons are monsters. I'm a monster... and so are you."

She dropped the revolver with a clatter and sat down hard. She was just staring at me. I really didn't know how she hadn't figured out that the Paragons were evil. There was a rotting corpse in my closet, and a fight to the death going on somewhere above us for the amusement of others.

"I found this out when he shot me. I've spent the last three weeks trying to make the wasteland a better place, even if that wasn't my original goal." I felt a welcome warmth at my side, and knew that Shade was leaning against me. We'd been separated for only a short while, but it had felt a lifetime to me. It must have been even longer for her.

"Shade is one of the ponies whose life was destroyed by Hate. We..." I glanced at the soft mare, seeing that she had her eyes closed. She wasn't even listening to me, she was just enjoying my presence. "We're close."

Gentle's face changed right then, a small grin playing across her lips. "You have a very special somepony?" Her voice was quiet, but didn't sound malicious. It was almost playful.

I nodded.

She grinned wide. I almost smiled as well until she spoke again. "Sweepy will be jealous, you know."

My mouth dropped open. I was at a loss of words. She hadn't heard that Sweeps was dead? Cinder had figured it out, and Massacre knew for sure. Had no one told her? Told her that I'd killed her best friend.

Shade took the initiative and stepped forward cautiously, approaching the Paragon as though she were approaching a bomb. When she got close enough, she gave a low bow to my sister. Gentle looked at her with her head tilted, a look she apparently favored.

“Hello Gentle. I’m Shade, your brother's very special somepony.” Gentle looked her in the eyes, possibly waiting for her to attack or turn into a dragon or something. I took a step forward, tensed to lunge between the two if needed.

Gentle gave a small smile, and bowed her head just slightly. “Nice to meet you Shade.” Looking the blue mare up and down, Gentle widened her smile just a bit, nodding in approval. “Sweepy is going to be quite jealous.”

I sighed. This was going to get complicated.

“So, yeah. Make with the fucking rescue already. Get these collars off.” That same Whitecoat, standing next to me, was growing rather impatient. I understood why. Gentle turned and glared at the Whitecoat, but softened when she saw the look that I was giving her.

Years of xenophobia would be hard, if not impossible, to break. I had to undo the damage I’d done to my little sister though. First, though, I had to do what I came here to do. I had to get these ponies out somehow.

“Gentle, do you know how to get the collars off?” The Paragon nodded and turned to trot out the cage door. I turned my head to Shade, nuzzling close to her.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t worry, I’ll be safe. Just... stay safe. I’ll be right back.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek, then gave me a hug.

In my ear, she whispered. “Be safe. I love you.” I nodded, mouthing back that I loved her. Then, I had to pull myself away from her, one of the hardest things I’d ever done. I slowly walked away from her, back to the door. I closed it as I passed through, but didn’t lock it.

Turning back to them briefly, I addressed the crowd of Blank residents and Whitecoats. “I’ll be right back. Act like nothing happened.”

There was a muttered chorus of agreements, and I realized that the other three cages had been listening in quite intently, pressed up against the bars of their doors. Hopefully none of them would try an escape before I came back with the ability to remove those collars, or the plan would be as dead as whichever pony attempted to flee. “Please don’t try to leave yet.”

Catching up to my sister, who was already out in the hall and past the guards., I drew up alongside her. “Gentle... how do we get those collars off?”

“We get the key from Messy.” My face dropped as she said it. She made it sound like the easiest thing in the world. I remembered what happened the last time I’d come up against Massacre. My whole body remembered... the black veins snaking through my neck were a constant reminder of the pain that had let me survive that encounter.

“I... can’t go near Massacre. He knows my face, my scar... you’ll have to do it for me.” As much as I hated saying it, I knew that I couldn’t go near Massacre. Gentle could. I was sending my sister to get a key from the worst pony I’d ever met.

She smiled and nodded. “No problem. Messy has always liked me, he’ll do anything I ask.” I didn’t want to think about that, Massacre liking my sister.

We’d reached the top of the stairs by now, and were standing near the entrance to the arena. Inside, I could hear the clamour of countless ponies screaming for blood. Gentle tilted her head into the air, smiling as she listened. “Sounds like it's getting good. You stay here and watch for a while, I’ll go get the key.”

Yes. Do it.

Two Kick had been tickling at the back of my mind since I'd left Shade, and his voice was now at full volume again. I didn't want the stimuli of the arena affecting him... but the crowd there would be my best chance to blend in while Gentle retrieved whatever means Massacre had of releasing the captives. I sighed, glancing at her. "Okay... just... be quick about it." The mare nodded, turning away. "And Gentle... be careful, okay?"

"Don't worry. I'm a Paragon, this is my home. I'll be fine." With that, she trotted away from me to whatever dank hole that Massacre dwelled in. As she rounded a corner and disappeared from sight, I hoped deeply that trusting her wasn't a huge mistake. She seemed a little... broken.

The crowd in the arena went silent, which drew my attention more than the screaming had. Curious, but wary, I walked through the entrance. Pushing past a few ponies, I found myself in the arena proper for the first time that I could actively remember.

Two Kick, needless to say, was deeply pleased that I had set hoof on his old killing ground. He was reminiscing about his favorite kills, going into deep detail about how he had killed each, savoring each as he did so.

I subtly slipped a needle of med-x into my leg, hidden beneath my cloak, in a hope of getting him to shut up. Only a little more and I'd be back with Shade, then we could get out of here. As the medicine kicked in, granting me at least a few minutes of relief from the voice, I looked out onto the arena floor.

I almost screamed in frustration as I saw the long billowing white coat worn by the pony standing there. Swords out, Willow was standing in the center of the arena, ignoring the two ponies dragging the bleeding and broken remains of a combatant away on a streak of blood.

"Hate! Hate, come out and face me! I know the rules! If a challenge is given, a Paragon must accept!"

She screamed at the top of her lungs, filling the arena with her voice even without an augmenting spell. Gasps and murmurs roiled through the crowd, and even the muffled voice in my head got through.

Oh shit.

Willow stood there, and I would have yelled at her if it wouldn't have blown my cover and doomed the ponies I was here to save. I didn't know what she thought she could accomplish with her current actions, but I really hoped that she had a plan.

A voice, one that I'd heard once before on a recording I'd taken from the PipBuck of a mare that had loved me, came over the arena, amplified magically to shake the very walls.

"So, who is it that calls me?" A figure on the other side of the arena, up on the raised platform with the couch, came into view. "Ah, one of the so called Whitecoats."

The pony that I instantly knew to be Hate came into view, and it was the absolute measure of my self control that I didn't join Willow right then and there. The sight of him made my blood boil, and it almost seemed worth it to rush him and tear him apart with my bare hooves. Kill him before he could do anything.

No, I'd have to cross the wide open arena floor and somehow jump up onto a platform five times my height. Maybe if I was running on rage and stampede I could make that... but then it would be Two Kick in control, and not me. I needed to kill him, I couldn't leave it to my darker side.

"As you say, I cannot turn down a challenge. I ask you though, is it worth it? Whatever you came here to do, it ends once I step into that arena." Hate had a deep red cloak on, which obscured most of his body and head. His eyes shone brightly though, even this far away. Silver and piercing.

"I came here to kill you. Everything will fall in line after that."

I swore under my breath. She hadn't come along to rescue her captured comrades. The Whitecoat had come with us to get a shot at killing Hate. I should have figured it out, she had barely spoken of rescuing the ponies that she had fought alongside. She had just wanted to get to Neighwhere.

"Very well." Hate removed his cloak, tossing it over the couch. I saw now that the leader of the Paragons wasn't what I had expected. He was slender, almost scrawny compared to Massacre or I. He was almost unhealthily thin. His body was a dull red, but his mane was the same brilliant silver as his eyes. He wore light combat armor, with several sharpened metal rods strapped to his sides.

He hopped to the floor of the arena with ease, a small burst of magic softening his landing so that he barely had to brace for the impact. Striding forward, he threw his head back and gestured broadly with one of his hooves.

The crowd exploded into screams and cheers. Their leader had taken the floor, a rare sight indeed. I could hear bets being made, the clear favorite being the thin red stallion. He was milking the crowd for all they could give him, grinning broadly at the applause. Willow had her swords out, low, in a fighting stance I'd seen her take before. She was ready to start, but Hate was taking his time.

He always was one for theatrics. The fucker.

The drugs had worn off faster than I'd expected, Two Kick was back already. I might as well just stop at this point, it wasn't doing me any real good.

Up on the platform he had jumped from, I saw a familiar white maned mare. She was limping, her shoulder still hurting from when I'd injured her earlier outside of Blank. Right before Gentle had put a hole in my side. With healing medicine, she should have been better by now, and I grinned as I saw that she was still in pain.

No, that wasn't me. Causing pain wasn't good. Damn it, I needed Two Kick out of my head.

"Well then, I believe that we should begin." One of the metal bars at his side floated out in front of him, held like a sword in defense.

Willow sprang forward, whirling with both swords slashing out. At the last moment, almost lazily, Hate's weapon slashed forward to block the spinning mare's attack. Both swords hit the metal rod with a loud clang, and Willow jumped backwards as Hate slashed at her with the dull metal.

Springing forward, he went in for a broad overhead attack which Willow blocked easily. This left her wide open for the metal rod that he flashed forward off of his side to smack her squarely in the chest. She gave a yelp, and jumped to the side, slashing at him as she did. The tip of the blade sang as it nicked the armor at his neck.

He gave a little laugh, and strode confidently towards the mare. She hopped up onto her rear hooves, holding her front legs in a strange way as the swords floated at her sides. I'd seen enough of how Raw Deal fought to know that she was mixing zebra martial arts in with her sword fighting technique.

"Oh ho. That's new. Let's see how it works, shall we." Hate's voice was playful, as though this fight to the death was nothing more than a training match.

When she jumped at him, slashing with both swords and punching towards his throat with one of her front hooves, he moved quickly. Using both rods to parry the incoming blades, he deflected her hoof with one of his own. Leaping into the air, he kicked forward, planting two hooves squarely into her chest. He used the impact to flip backwards, landing ready for the next attack.

Willow, on the other hoof, was thrown off balance and hit the ground hard. Scrambling back up, she readied herself much as she had before. She snarled at the grinning pony, and rushed in for the attack.

Slashing with one blade, she thrust with the other. As his weapons blocked each skillfully, a series of rapid gunshots went off between them. Her pistol had been tucked in against her belly as she'd attacked, and she'd hoped to take the Paragon off guard with twin distractions.

It didn't work, however, as Hate had somehow dodged the point blank shot. Willow's fire had gone into the stands, nearly decapitating a raider pony with three tightly grouped shots. The raider clutched at her throat as blood spurted from the wreckage of her neck. The ponies around her did little more than move out of the way of the spray, intent on the unfolding battle.

Hate took several steps backwards, his twin rods held defensively. "Tricky. I like a mare that can think on her hooves. It's a shame that this is to the death, or I think I'd like to get to know you a little better."

"Go fuck yourself. I'm gonna rip you apart." Willow had her three weapons out and ready, breathing heavily from both the physical workout and magical expenditure.

Hate barely twitched, and there was a flash of magic. Willow screamed in pain as one of the rods that was still at his side was now punched cleanly through her front right leg. He'd thrown it faster than my eyes had been able to follow.

Willow crumpled to the ground, her swords clattering to her side as she screamed at the metal bar impaled through her leg. Grasping at the simple steel rod with her faltering magic, she screamed in rage through her tears. Hate lazily stalked towards her, more rods floating at his side.

"This was fun."

Another rod appeared in Willow's right flank, almost tearing her leg off in a spray of blood. He was throwing them from his sides, barely even a flash of magic to indicate that he was firing. He'd been playing with Willow... he could have killed her without even hopping down off of the platform.

"Because you were such a good fight, I'll let you hang around for a while. Heh, I hope you found that funny, because I did. You'll see." He fired another rod, burying it deep into her chest. She coughed, spraying him with blood.

"...Fuck you." The crowd was dead silent, or I'd have missed the mare's gurgled words. Blood was pouring from her open mouth, but she still clung to one of her swords. She swung it, very slowly, at Hate. The blade hit him in the chest, and if she had any power to put behind it she could have scored a killing wound. As it was, the blade barely scratched the armor.

"Sorry, but I've got a schedule to keep." The next rod buried itself deep in her eye, killing her instantly as it pierced through the back of her skull. Blood sprayed across the stylized tree worked into her jacket, and she slumped to the ground dead.

I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth. I hadn't wanted to see that... but now I knew how Hate fought. I had no idea how I would counter something like that, but Willow's death had granted me a small tactical advantage for our eventual fight.

Still, it hurt to watch the mare die. She was a good pony. She'd spared me when she had had every right to kill me. Her orders had helped protect Blank, and her skill in combat had helped to get us to Neighwhere intact.

I would do everything in my power to see that she didn't die in vain.

"Sorry Willow..." I spoke under my voice, so that none of the ponies around me could hear. They were too busy cheering.

Looking back at the arena, I saw that Hate had lifted her corpse and was approaching the platform where Cinder was now lounging on the couch. Blood poured from Willow's body, less and less each

second as she simply ran out. When she was floated up near the platform, Hate lifted her against it with her two front legs outstretched.

He drove two rods through her fetlocks, nailing her securely to the front of the platform. He pulled the other rods from her body, placing them back in their places at his sides, and turned to the cheering crowd.

“Who don’t you mess with?” His voice echoed out, drowning out the crowd.

As one, they screamed back at him. “Hate!”

“That’s right. Now have fun, and let the games continue!” He rose into a victory pose, both front legs over his head as he shouted at the crowd. Dropping to all fours, he turned and walked out of the arena.

I stood there, staring at Willow’s bleeding and broken form.

Heh, hang around. I got it. Nice touch.

Shut the fuck up.

Now I could do little but wait for Gentle to return, there amongst the crowd of murderous scum. I did my best to not look at Willow, and as the next combatants were pushed into the arena, I swore to myself that I would do everything I could to level this place.

To wipe it from the face of Equestria any way that I could.

I owed it to Willow.

A nudge at my side made me tense up, gripping for Broken as I turned. Soft blue eyes looked at me over a sly grin. I’d been waiting there for half an hour after Willow’s death, watching her corpse preside over several lesser battles. Each time another pony’s lifeblood spilled to the arena floor, I felt my hatred grow and fester.

I couldn’t smile as she stood there, looking at me. “I got the key, lets go help your marefriend.”

I nodded, turning and walking out of the arena. Following after me, she got a concerned look on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Let’s get the slaves and get out of here. Do you know a quick way from here to the abandoned rail station at the edge of town?” I wanted to get out of here. I wanted to get out of here more than anything. Get Shade and leave, never to return. I knew that I would have to though, to kill Hate. I just had to get everypony to safety first.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I can even get the guards to help.”

As we walked down the stairs to where the cages were, she floated a small device up in front of her. “This is the transmitter. If I turn this switch, it takes control of the collars and changes their radius. It’s how they’re moved outside the room.”

“What about getting the collars off? I asked for a key.” There was much more anger in my voice than I had planned for, but I was still filled with rage from my time watching the arena. Willow’s death was still playing over in my head.

“It’s not that hard, the transmitter can also put a delay on the collars. They can be taken off then, but it takes time.” She kept the transmitter as walked, looking it over. “At least, that’s what Messy said.”

The guards at the door looked up as we approached, straightening up again as they saw that Skyline was one of the pair approaching them.

Gentle spoke softly to them, that hint of menace slipping into her voice. “Hey, we need help moving the stock.” They looked at each other questioningly, then at her. “Massacre wants them moved, and you’re going to help us.” Gentle added, with a hint of menace gaining strength.

“Yes... uh, Yes m’am.” The pony that had spoken last time took the initiative, stepping aside and letting us pass. When we got into the room, the two followed us. There was a murmur from the ponies within the room as the four of us entered, and I caught Shade's gaze and gave her a little smile with a reassuring nod.

“Okay scum, you’re being moved!” The guardpony who had done all the talking yelled at those in the cages.

“You, open the cages.” Gentle, in a bit of thinking that would have escaped me, tossed me the key again. I’d left all the cages unlocked, and if either of the two she’d conscripted into assisting us found that out, they’d know that something was up.

I made my way to each of the cages, starting with the one holding the ponies I’d come here specifically for. Shade made to press against me, but I shook my head at her. The blue mare nodded slightly, frowning and shrinking back into the group of ponies she’d been with.

Once all four cages were open, the crowd of ponies milled around uncertainly. The guard looked timidly at Gentle, still terrified of the unstable Paragon with a history of shooting ponies she didn’t like. “Do you have a transmitter, Skyline? Cause I can get one if you don’t.”

I wanted to facepalm that it had actually been that easy, but kept a straight face and played along with my sister taking charge. She held out the blinking box in front of her, nodding. The guard looked past her at the slaves. “Okay you fucks, keep up. If you get out of range of this box here, your collar goes off. So stay close, stay quiet, and if you try anything you’re getting shot. Ammo’s cheap, and you’re easy to replace, so don’t try anything.”

The slaves nodded and murmured assent. Gentle took the lead, waving the box over her head. “Follow me if you don’t want to die.” Walking through the door, she set off through the tunnels at a leisurely pace. The two guard ponies took the rear, pulling out their whips and keeping everypony in line. I walked near the front, right behind my sister.

Each snap of a whip made me start a little, every part of me wanting to turn and kill the two slavers. They were helping our cover though, making it look like a legitimate slave transfer. We needed them, at least until we made it to the tunnel.

Gentle led us through a series of dank passage, back alleys, and the occasional room filled with ponies too stoned out of their minds to attend the games. Before long, the boarded up old building I’d entered Neighwhere through.

I hurried ahead of the group, hoping to get there first. Reaching the window that Willow and I had previously gone through, I stuck my head in to check if Ash or Viola were within shouting distance.

Instantly, I found that I couldn’t move my head and it was hard to breath. Glancing down, I saw that a taloned hand was firmly clamped around my throat, my deadened nerves had just denied me all sensation other than the denial of air.

I choked and coughed out, “Ash, its me. Let go.”

My air returned, and the griffin backed off, holstering the revolver he’d been ready to shoot me with. “Took you long enough. Where’s Willow?”

I looked at him and shook my head. He nodded, an understanding look in his eyes. “Hey, open the front door, we’ve got company. Get ready though, we’ve got two slavers I need dead following the line.

Keep it quiet.”

The dark griffin nodded with a quick malicious grin. He disappeared into the shadows, and I turned back to Gentle and the approaching line of around forty ponies. Behind me I could hear the crack and crunch of moldy boards being ripped loose, and the front door of the station opened for the first time in a long while.

Gentle led the line up to me, stopping short. She floated the transmitter to me, a sad smile on her face. “It was real nice seeing you again Ripple. Come back and visit soon.”

I looked at her, dumbfounded. “No...” I stammered a little. “No, you’re coming with us. I can’t leave you here... I just can’t. You’re coming with.”

She shifted her weight from one hoof to the other, uncertain. “My whole life is here...”

“I don’t care. You’re coming with us. Trust me, you need to get out of here... I don’t like what this place has done to you.” I placed a hoof on her shoulder. I looked into her eyes with what I hoped was my most convincing “I’m your brother, this is best for you” look.

One of the guards cleared his throat, looking over the crowd of collared ponies. “Uh... Skyline, what’s going on here?”

She gave a start, looking over at the slaver. “They’re going in there... we’re uh... transporting them by train.”

He got a strange look on his face, glancing at me. “Uh... I haven’t heard anything about that. You sure this is what Massacre said?”

Looming behind him, I could see the dark winged shape of Ashred. The pony slavers gave each other strange looks. I whispered to Gentle, “Distract them.”

“Uh... yeah. He wants to try this route for getting the stock to Red Eye. Said it would avoid most of the dangers.” She wasn’t very convincing, and the two ponies drew the short pistols they carried at their sides.

“Where’s the caravan. The guards?” They were at high alert now, aiming their weapons at me, warily avoiding pointing them at my sister.

“Stop them!” From further away, a voice shouted out. I saw a mob of ponies rushing towards us, weapons in tow. They were armed, and they were angry.

“Ash! Do it!” Even as I was halfway through his name, the griffin looped an arm around the talking raiders neck, snapping it with a sick pop as he put a shot through the companion slavers eye with the heavy revolver held in his other hand. “Gentle! Into the tunnel! Everypony run!”

I drew Broken and snapped a shot off over their heads towards the incoming raiders. The crowd of captives panicked, but luckily for me took my advice and followed Gentle as she headed through the open door into the waiting rail station.

The ponies streamed past me as I fumbled through my bag, looking for the shell I knew I still had somewhere. Grasping at the one I needed, I pulled out the last of Torque’s custom explosive slugs and fed it into Broken. Aiming carefully, knowing that my shot had to hit them, I pulled the trigger.

The slug hit one of the lead ponies, detonating him into a cloud of red mist. The ponies alongside him were killed by the shockwave, which threw them into the ponies next to them. The entire front line collapsed in a heap of shredded pony and tangled limbs, the ponies behind them getting tripped up as they ran into what remained of the front line.

Ash ducked past me, firing his revolver into the ponies that had crumpled up in the street. “Kick! What the fuck!?” He screamed as he disappeared into the tunnel. I turned and ran after him.

“Shut up and run!” He was already down the stairs, and I was at the top. All of the ponies had gotten down onto the platform, and I started rushing down after them, taking the steps several at a time.

As I hit the bottom, a wall of flames sprang up, and I set my hooves, sliding to a stop before I was immolated. Turning, I saw Cinder at the top of the stairs, an insane grin on her face. Gathering around the incendiary pony were gore smattered raiders and slavers. I saw the hulking form of Massacre moving through them towards me.

I was done for.

From beyond the flames, I heard three voices shouting at me. Shade, Gentle, Ashred. They had to keep running... I was meat, but I could at least buy some time for them and the escaping captives. As much as I could.

I slipped my saddle bag off quickly, throwing it through the fire as hard as my magic could handle. “Take this and run! I’ll hold them off!”

Inside that bag was the black case that held half of one of my demons. The very thing that Hate wanted... if I died in Neighwhere, I wasn’t going to let them keep it.

“Viola! Close the door!” I hadn’t seen the ghoulish pony, but I knew that she couldn’t be too far off. I heard protests from the other side of the flames, but somepony had heeded my order and I heard the slam of the heavy gate. I heard a banging sound, and Shade’s muffled voice screaming my name.

“Sorry Shade...” I spoke low, knowing that she wouldn’t be able to hear me. Looking up at the wall of raiders, I aimed Broken. I now counted three Paragons.

Cinder Trails, staring down at me with those crazed eyes, a look of anger slashed across her face.

Massacre, the pony that had almost killed me, with a broad grin. He had another mask hanging from his neck, showing me that the one that I had used was not unique.

The crowd had parted and let a form through, silver eyes staring down at the steps at me. Hate was standing there, a smile on his face. I snarled back up at him as he stood there, backed by what looked to be half of Neighwhere.

“Hello Ripple. Long time no see.”

As always, praise to Kkat for creating the amazing story Fallout Equestria.

Thanks to my editor Wirepony, he has great ideas, and helps me mold this into a readable form.

Chapter 17: Stairs

A mob of filthy, screaming ponies rushed down the stairs as the flames went out, leaving just me and the huge metal door. Knives, clubs, spears, guns, all aiming at ending my life. I couldn't let that happen, not without killing Hate.

Rushing the ponies, I knew that I only needed to get to Hate. I fired Broken into a pony's face at point blank, detonating his skull in a shower of bits and blood. Jumping through the spray, I used the ruined stump of his neck as a springboard to launch as far into the crowd as I could.

Landing rear hooves first on the backs of two raiders, I came down in a shower of blood as my ballistic hooves ripped through their spines and they crumpled beneath me. Broken ended a pony trying to gut me with a rusty spear, and I smashed down another with one of my front hooves, throwing him off balance and making an opening.

A hulking pony with a shotgun reared in front of me, and I ducked to the side as the weapon roared. I didn't see the carnage the weapon made behind me, but I heard a surge of pained screaming amongst the roar of rage, even as I unloaded buckshot into the obstacle's chest. As he fell over backwards, I ran up his body, hoping to duplicate the springboard maneuver. I was already more than halfway up the stairs. Hate's face had the most hideous smile I could imagine as he watched the carnage unfolding beneath him.

I felt a bullet tear into my leg, and rewarded the origin for his endeavor with a shotgun blast to his face. There was now no pony between me and Hate. Running up the stairs as fast as I could, I skidding to a halt and aimed Broken straight into his face, pulling the trigger with my magic. Not even Sweeps could have stopped it at this range.

Click.

My eyes went wide as the firing pin fell on an empty chamber. Five shots. Torque's explosive slug, and four coming up the stairs. Stupid. Stupid stupid fucking stupid.

"Out of ammo?" Hate chuckled, looking me in the eyes with a knowing gaze. He knew me, he knew Broken. He knew I was out of ammo, which is why he hadn't dodged.

Massacre's hooves came from the side, and as they connected with my face everything went dark.

Not like this...

"Ripple."

I couldn't move my legs.

"Wakey wakey."

My head hurt. Everything was dark.

"Wake up, you fuck!" A hoof smacked me across the face, and I wearily opened my eyes to the hell I was in. The reek of death wafted off of the massive pony that had just backhoofed me, his eyes glaring malice at me through the glass of a familiar memory.

"Now Massacre, don't hurt our guest. He's a brother to us after all, is he not?" Behind Massacre, Hate stood with a little smirk playing across his face. He was close enough, that even with Massacre in the

way, I could kill him. End his murderous existence before they brought me down. If I wasn't chained to a wall, anyway..

Massacre stepped aside as the gaunt pony that had been the focal point of most of my anger approached me. Hate was aptly named. As he drew nearer, even the sneering face of Massacre dropped away. All I could see was the narrow face of the pony I had once called brother. Standing there in front of me, his piercing silver eyes appraised me like I was a piece of meat.

"You made quite a showing of yourself before you were... incapacitated. I expected no less, really. Sixteen of my best dead, but here you are now. It was well worth the price." His horn glowed, and I felt the grip of magic around my jaw. He turned my head to the side, examining the scar that still lurked beneath my eye.

"Rather dashing, wouldn't you say, Massacre?" The pony giant snorted in derision. "I should have known that wouldn't have been enough to end you. Pegasus tech couldn't have been able to take down my star. Oh well, hindsight always has had a tendency towards accuracy."

As he released me, I spat at him, but he nimbly stepped out of the line of fire, not even appearing to notice. "You've been busy, haven't you Ripple? Sweeps and Holepunch dead, my attempts at both Orchard and Blank foiled, an entire stock of slaves released, two of those lovely little cubes unaccounted for. I assume that's what you threw to your compatriots before your stand against us, an attempt to keep them out of my grasp."

He shook his head with a sad smile, his eyes calm and placid. "I have to give it to you Ripple. I underestimated you, and I have surely paid the price. I apologize."

"You apologize?" I let out a sharp laugh. Chained to the wall, all I had were my words. Not my strong suit. "Go fuck yourself. Let me down from here, and I'll show you what I think of your apology."

If I could just kill him, I could let myself die. It would crush Shade, break her already wounded heart. But, without the Paragons, without Hate, she would be safe, she would heal. I had a feeling that the Paragons would fall apart without Hate at the top, and their infighting would be the end of Neighwhere. Blank would be better off. For that matter, the whole Hornsmith area would be improved. I would have atoned for the things the voice in my head had done. Good enough.

"I challenge you to the Arena!" Willow had done the same, and had mentioned rules. I couldn't remember specifics from my time as a Paragon, but the rule of the challenge had been absolute in the Arena.

What? Fuck! You fucking idiot.

Two Kick had woken up, it seemed. The voice sounded groggy and pained, just like I felt. I tried to ignore him as Hate shook his head, snickering slightly as he did so. "Normally, I would be bound to accept, but there are several loopholes you're forgetting." Stepping closer, he looked into my eyes. "Or maybe you don't know them at all. Isn't that interesting... you're Ripple but not the Ripple I know." He shrugged, tugging at one of my chains with his magic.

"But I digress. Loopholes. A challenge may only be issued in the Arena. We are not in the Arena. A challenge may only be issued by a pony without a pending fight, and you, my friend, have quite the day ahead of you."

"What?" He'd shot down what I'd hoped was my best chance at killing him. I'd seen him fight Willow, and I had seen his tricks. It was better than not knowing, even if I didn't know exactly how I would counter his attacks.

You don't counter Hate, you idiot. The only way we'd stand a chance against him is with a head full of

stampede and me driving. Always wondered if I could take the bastard out.

“Oh, we dragged you through the Arena while you were unconscious. Friends, family, lovers... you killed a lot of ponies that had all of those things. There’s quite the list of challengers for you. The prize for killing a Paragon is quite high, and with you obviously not in top shape, many of the enterprising ponies of our humble town saw their chance at a fast track to the big time.” He turned from me, gesturing to Massacre to follow him as he approached the door leading out of the bare cell I was in.

“Anyways, you have a big day ahead of you. I let you sleep in, so that you would have your rest.” A grin thrown back at me from the doorway drove home just how very deeply I wanted to remove his head from his fucking neck. “It wouldn’t be fair to the competitors if you were worn out at the start.”

The door slammed behind him, plunging me into a dank gloom. The only light in the room was from a barred opening set into the door, the dim rectangle casting an even dimmer illumination across my cell. Hanging there, I wondered how long I’d been asleep.

Now I was here. Chained to a wall in Neighwere. No hope for escape. Fated to fight until I died for sport.

“Fuck.”

Fuck.

When next the door opened, a scrawny, filthy earth pony mare sporting a heavily bruised face walked into the room dragging a bucket. When she got near enough for me to have attempted an escape, the look in her eyes stopped me. She didn’t want to be here anymore than I did. The blinking collar around her neck put an explosive punctuation to the statement made by her dead eyes.

“Mr. Two... I mean... Ripple... my name... is Pearl.” She spoke with a halting wince, like saying more than two words at a time caused her pain. The little slave pony’s side was mottled with bruises, and I suspected from personal experience that she probably had at least a cracked rib or two.

“And?” She flinched as I spoke, closing her eyes as though I was about to strike her. I wouldn’t even if I had had the capability to, she was the most wretched pony I’d ever seen. I’d seen gnashers that looked in better health.

“I’m here... to clean... you up... for... your show.” Reaching into the bucket, she pulled out a sponge soaked in clean water with her mouth.

“I won’t hurt you, you know.” She flinched as I spoke to her again. Without answering, she started sponging away at me. Between the battle at Blank, the tunnel, and my short time in Neighwhere, I guess that I’d gotten pretty filthy.

Dropping the sponge back into the bucket to let it absorb more water, she whispered up at me.

“Please... don’t talk... they’ll... beat me.” A quick jerk of her head towards the door drew my attention to the still open door, two armored ponies standing outside it, watching our every movement.

I shut my mouth, not wishing any more harm on the battered pony that had gone back to cleaning me. I watched her, glancing occasionally up at the guards. If I wasn’t chained, I’d be able to take them easily. They only had crude batons slung at their sides, not a gun in sight. If only I was loose.

A splash drew my attention back to Pearl, who had dropped the sponge into the bucket. She gave me a look with sad, swollen eyes, and began dragging the bucket back towards the door. As she passed the guards, one of them kicked her in the side. She gave a short cry as she fell over, curling up defensively. A baton raised, and she pulled herself to her hooves and limped from sight as the two guards began

laughing at her.

All I could do was grit my teeth and wait. I really hoped that they were on the list.

The sound of hooves outside drew my attention away from glaring at the guards, and six unicorn ponies in the brutal garb of raiders entered the room. Heavily armed, each carried a riot shotgun and had even more chains slung over their withers.

When they got close, they attached chains to all four of my legs, and two to my neck. Only then did they unshackle me from the wall. I dropped, catching myself on all fours, and immediately they pulled the chains taut. They weren't taking any risks with me... I was still a Paragon in their eyes. A killer.

"Move. Try anything, and we tell Hate you tried to escape." The pony I assumed was in charge of my little transport detail hissed at me from behind the floating shotgun aimed into my eye.

I started moving with them, heading through the door and into the tunnels under Neighwhere. I recognized this tunnel as one of the ones that Gentle had led us through previously... if it was a few hours ago or a day ago, I wasn't sure. I would have accessed my PipBuck to check, but the warning I'd gotten seemed to encompass pretty much any action other than walking.

Walking through the tunnels, I now saw that there were dozens of doors similar to the one I'd been led from. I could see the eyes of ponies staring at me through the bars set into each door, and I realized that they'd watched my sister and I walk the ponies in those four cages past them.

I spared a moment to think of Gentle, and Shade, and Ash. Had they been able to get the slaves free? Depending on how long I'd been out, they could have made it back to somewhere safe by now, Underhoof or even Blank.

I now actually started listening to the sound around me, which I'd blocked out while thinking on my current plight and how best to kill Hate. Jeers, insults, death threats, all thrown at me from the ponies in the cages. Calling me Two Kick. Screaming about revenge, about family I'd killed, and not just from my capture. Spanning back years, these ponies had grudges against me that could now be fulfilled since I was free of the protective umbrella of being a Paragon.

I walked in stony silence with my guards, and began coming to the realization that they weren't just there to keep me from escaping. They were there to protect me from being killed before I had a chance to provide some sport.

Please? This rabble? Just meat waiting to be tenderized.

When we came to a heavily armored door, one of the guards banged on it with the stock of his shotgun. A clank of bolts being drawn, and the door swung open revealing a room filled with weapons, and a single unicorn standing near a table covered with crudely forged blades.

Glancing up at me, he grinned wide as he spotted me in the middle of the six armed ponies surrounding me. "Ah, Two Kick. Long time no see." Trotting towards me, he floated a bulky device made of leather and metal towards me, snapping it securely around my neck. I'd seen many of its like before, and knew that I now had a bomb strapped around my neck. "And there we go. You can remove his shackles now."

As the six guards began freeing me of the metal restraints, I had a metal box waved in my face. "Know what this is? I press the button and boom. Behave, okay? Have at it." He stepped to the side, giving me a clear path into the room.

I looked at him quizzically, then I glanced at the six guards aiming shotguns at me. "What, you're gonna give me weapons?"

The pony gave a shrug and a nod. "It's only fair. No fun if you're not at your peak, you know. Blades, hammers, spikes, drugs, the works. Special rules from on high say no guns though. Don't want you taking pot shots at the spectators now, do we?"

I glared at him, as he stood there grinning, denying me a chance to kill Hate. If I'd had Broken.. as long as I had my horn I would have gone after him. Leaving me with only weapons I barely knew how to use didn't give me much of a chance for that.

That's the whole fucking point, you idiot. Make sure you get a lot of stampede and some dash. I'm gonna need it if we're gonna have a chance at all out there.

I was suddenly painfully aware of how naked my rear legs felt. I'd gotten so used to having my ballistic hooves, I only now realized that they were gone. Glancing around the room, I hoped for a suitable replacement. The armorer laughed as he saw my gaze. "Yeah, if you're looking for your little kick jobbies, no luck there. Those are guns after all. Don't worry, all your stuff is safe, I made sure of that. Fine weapons such as those deserve respect after all."

"So what, I just go out with whatever I find in here?" I asked, not waiting for an answer as I began rummaging through the assorted weapons in the room, looking for anything to put on my rear legs. My kicks were still plenty potent even without my signature weapons, but adding lethality to them could only help me survive long enough to think up a plan.

I picked up a pair of what looked like leather socks covered in metal and razor edges. Glancing back at the shotguns pointed my way, I gave a sigh and began putting them on my rear legs. The fit could have been better, but tightening the straps on the razor socks at least gave me a functional weapon.

I pulled enough bladed and blunt melee weapons from the tables to almost work as armor. My front and back legs were liberally covered with stout, well maintained weaponry, which was about as good as I was going to get with the available selection..

Then I froze as I saw the table at the end of the room.

Oh yeah. That I like.

The table was covered in piles of combat drugs. Dash, Buck, Med-X, Hydra... and Stampede. Each pile was labelled with a crude picture indicating what the drug did, as well as the name. Trotting slowly towards the table, I idly lifted samples from each pile, floating them in front of me as I thought about it.

Come on. This is my playground. Let me out for a bit, I promise I'll make it worth it.

Two Kick had the skill and killer instinct that I didn't. I could fight on muscle memory and my own fury well enough. I was sure I could hold my own, as myself, for a while. But I didn't know how many ponies I was set to fight. Hate had made it sound like I was going to fight every thinking being in Neighwhere, one after the other. Knowing Hate, that could very well be the case, and I'd be worn down to a pile of guts long before I killed everyone in town.

I can do it. Two Kick's my name for a reason. I'll cut through them like a field of flowers. Blood everywhere, it will be glorious, and then we come out the other end ready to fuck Hate's day.

No. I would do this on my own. Even if I died in the Arena, I would so so as myself, not the ravaging monster in my head. Turning from the table, I tucked away several doses of Med-X, knowing that the drug could come in handy and help me keep control. Approaching the grinning stallion, I nodded firmly.

"Okay. I'm ready, let's get this over with."

"Ah, Two Kick, I been waiting a long time to see you back in action." His smile seemed legitimate. A

fan? I glared at him as he grinned towards me. He gave a sharp whistle, and I felt the prod of a shotgun barrel in my side.

“Okay. Follow me, wave to the crowd, don’t die too quick. I got money on you.” Ah, so that was what was motivating my ‘fan’. Leading me down a hall, and through a door, I found myself gazing through the bars of a cage out onto the floor of the Arena.

The cheers of a bloodthirsty crowd thundered past the bars and filled the cage I found myself in. A slam of a door behind me drew my attention only briefly enough for me to find that I was now alone. There were two ways from the cage: back the way I had come, or out onto the Arena floor.

With a slow cranking grind, one wall of the cage lifted, and I heard a voice calling out over all the cheering and shouts. “Ponies of Neighwhere and guests from afar! Welcome to this very special event!” The voice was augmented, but I didn’t recognize it. Slowly, I made my way out onto the floor of the Arena.

“Returning after a brief stint of being dead, we have an old friend come to join him. You know him, you love him, make some noise for Two Kick Rip, the Terror of the Arena!” The cheering of the crowd spiked to a new high, one I could feel thundering in my chest. These ponies were seriously excited to see me back in action, and they couldn’t care less that I was here against my will.

Fuck. Yes.

Across the way, I spotted five ponies staring intently at me, a range of emotions across their faces. Anger, hatred, fear. The things that Two Kick craved.

“Facing him are ponies from all walks of life, stepping forward to be the challengers for this round! Each of these ponies has their own reasons for wanting Two Kick dead, so let’s hope that that gives them the drive they need to land that lucky killing blow. Let’s stamp our hooves for Ductwork, Iris Blossom, Crankshaft, Dirge, and Sprinkles!”

The roar of the crowd grew even louder, as their representatives stood before them, ready to end my life as messily as possible. To me, these ponies were just obstacles between me and Hate... if I killed every single challenger, I could make my own challenge.

I just had to wade through the ponies put before me. I had to become the scythe to their grain.

“Let’s get this over with.” I growled through clenched teeth, steeling myself for the battle ahead. I couldn’t think of them as ponies. I had to think of them as obstacles. As ambulatory meat with weapons. Not ponies with lives and plans and feelings, just stepping stones to Hate’s life, spilling away under my hooves.

Fuck yes.

“Well, that’s enough for the pleasantries, now let’s have a nice vicious fight!”

The ponies began slowly approaching me, and I took a few tentative steps before striding forward confidently. Perhaps if I dealt with this fast and quick enough, I could scare other ponies out of their challenges, and I could get on with my plan.

With a scream, one of the ponies rushed out past her companions. A unicorn in a ragged oil stained jumpsuit. I could only guess that she was one of the Anchor ponies, like my Shade had been.

What had I done to her that had her so mad at me? Had I done something as Two Kick, something horrible? Killed her family? Done things to her?

I couldn’t dwell, I had to fight. These ponies wanted me dead, and I doubted I had the time or skill to convince them otherwise. I frowned, readying myself for her attack.

I'd at least make it quick.

She was wielding a large metal wrench with her telekinesis, carrying it high for a strike down onto my skull. If she had enough force behind it, she could easily knock me out or kill me.

At the correct moment, I spun into a kick, connecting with one bladed hoof. The throat strike shredded her hide thanks to the razor edges, but it was the impact itself that killed her. I felt the sharp pop of her neck breaking through my hoof, and knew she was dead. I doubt she'd even had time to feel the blow that had ended her life. The force of my hit had been greater than the momentum that she'd built in her charge, and she bounced away from me. Her wrench sailed past my head, freed of its magical control to follow its own path.

"Ooh, and Ductwork is down! Shame, she won't be fixing any more leaking pipes, will she?" The crowd roared in laughter, cutting through the few disappointed shouts that had resulted from her death. There were still four more ponies that could kill me, after all.

The remaining four had clumped together and hung back, seeing how Ductwork would fare. As she fell, I ran at them, and their return charge matched me. We clashed at the center of the Arena.

I went airborne right before the crash, and slammed into an earth pony with both forehooves. The bladed socks demolished his face, and slammed the knife he was carrying into his own throat. He crumpled under me with a burbling scream of agony.

There wasn't enough time to dodge the pony that came at me through the spray of blood, his dark coat and mane barely showing the blood as he scored a slashing wound across my side with a rusty yet wickedly sharp knife.

A straight kick with a forehoof stunned him, knocking him away from me and off his hooves, buying me time to face the remaining pair. Another ragged jumpsuit was poorly fit on a filthy unicorn, trying to stab me with a spear. I was close enough to smell the grease and filth stench of him, and I sighed internally as I ducked my head. If he'd stayed at range, and if he'd speared at me when I'd jumped, he could have easily scored a killing blow.

I headbutted him in the chest, my horn piercing deep and cracking through his sternum. The impact hurt, but my horn was up to the task. Pulling back, I took a spray of blood to the face, closing my eyes by instinct so I wasn't blinded. A choking gurgle issued from his lips as he tried stabbing at me, despite the torrent of blood issuing from his ruined chest.

Two Kick murmured happily in my head, and I was treated to the distracting and disgusting sensation of part of my mind happily displaying its arousal. An impact to my side snapped me out of the momentary daze, and threw me to the ground. I coughed as I rolled back to my hooves, very grateful that my ribs had been healed up by the mask. The hit was powerful, and had hurt even if it hadn't sprung any of my newly healed ribs.

Glancing up, I saw that the largest of the ponies stood glaring at me, his eyes filled with rage. Floating next to him encased in magic was a crude sledgehammer, a chunk of concrete with a length of rebar serving as a grip. The pony that I had punched in the face was now standing next to the larger stallion, brandishing the knife still dripping with my blood.

"Wow, folks, that was quick! It's down to Dirge and Sprinkles! Will either of these two ponies have what it takes to kill Two Kick?!" I barely heard the commenters voice over the yell of the large pony as he swung his sledge at me. As I moved to dodge, I spotted the other pony coming in low with a knife.

A rear hoof served to parry the knife out of the earth pony's face, but that left me wide open for the sledgehammer, which slammed into my side a split second later. This stroke had some force behind it,

and hurled me away from the two remaining aggressors. I landed unsteadily, coughing blood and hurting. That had been sloppy...

Never would have let that happen. Shoulda let me play.

No. I had to figure this one out. I had Two Kick's instincts... I knew the moves and where to hit for the most damage. I'd already killed three...

Nope, I'd killed two. The pony with the shattered sternum was kicking at the ground with his rear hooves, pushing himself around leaving a blood trail. He was down, but wasn't out yet.

Standing my ground, I roared at the two, ready to get this over with. A voiceless cry of challenge, much like I'd heard in the throats of many. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the wrench that had flown off when I'd broken Ductwork's neck. Grasping at it with my magic, I figured that an extra weapon couldn't hurt. Taking the initiative again, I ran at the two. I had to finish it on this run.

Reeling back, I hurled the wrench with all of my magical might. As telekinetic throws went, it may not have been anywhere near the power that Sweeps or Hate could have managed, but it was still a heavy wrench, moving at a high speed. The larger stallion with the hammer was slow in dodging, taking the full force of the metal tool in the face.

The dark pony with the knife was also slow in reacting as I drove my PipBuck into his mouth, knocking the knife back to the ground in a spray of teeth and blood. Quickly wrapping a front leg around his neck, trying my best to emulate a move I'd seen Ash make, I lept forward. Without having a ledge to snap the pony's neck, I had to improvise and bent his neck backwards. The weapons I'd strapped to my limbs as armor dug and cut into the stallion's neck, spraying me with blood as my bulk and momentum served to kill him.

It worked much better than I had hoped, the cutting working along with the attempt to shatter his spine. Skin and muscle tore, spraying blood everywhere as I partially decapitated the pony. The cheering rose in volume from the stands as I rounded on the stallion that had until now dealt the greatest damage against me.

"Oh! Dirge almost lost his head there, and now it's down to Two Kick Rip and Sprinkles!"

Sprinkles glared at me as I let Dirge's corpse drop, scraps of his flesh still clinging to the weapons and armor strapped to my forelegs. Snarling, he spoke one word before charging in, his club raised to smash my head open. "Monster."

Maybe he was right. No, he was definitely right. I was a monster, but I was a monster with a reason.

Running to meet him, I ducked underneath his swinging club, going for a move I'd done. At least, Two Kick had done it, while I'd been riding along. Throwing myself onto my back, I slid underneath him and readied for the killing blow. As I bunched and kicked into his stomach, hoping for a clean kill, he suddenly wasn't there.

Another impact in my side sent me sliding with a crack, and pain shot through me. That was a broken rib, a pain that I was all too used to, as much as I wish I wasn't. He'd hopped straight up and swatted me out from under him, sending me rolling across the Arena floor with a crushing impact.

Damnit.

Standing shakily, I knew that I had to do this here and now. I wasn't going to last through too many hits like that... I'd really only felt their like when Massacre had been pummeling me within inches of death. I couldn't try flashy tricks, I couldn't mess around. I had to end this.

Approaching more cautiously, I sprang backwards as he swung the heavy chunk of building at me. He

swung again, and I made my move. Springing forward underneath his lethal but slow attack, I punched a front hoof as hard as I could into his horn. The magical glow faltered at the impact, and his grip on the weapon weakened visibly. Just as I'd hoped it would.

Powerful as we were, we unicorns were always walking around with our biggest weakness in the center of our foreheads.

With a twin kick, I sent the weapon rocketing away from us into the stands. A souvenir for some lucky raider. Sprinkles' eyes followed the weapon with a shocked look on his face, which ended as I spun and placed my next two kicks into the side of his head.

Slamming into the ground, he stopped moving. Blood leaked from his still open eyes, and I knew he was dead even before the blood started pooling. I stood, glaring at the crowd, and turned my head up towards the platform where Willow's corpse still hung.

Hate was there, a knowing grin on his face. I pointed a hoof at him, then drew it across my throat in a gesture that couldn't possibly be misconstrued. Turning, I walked back into the cage they'd released me into this fight from, even as the crowd exploded into shouts of both support and antagonism.

"Two Kick Rip holds his record! Never beaten in the Arena, folks! Oh, I thought Sprinkles had him on the ropes there, but it just goes to show you that a pony that spends all day hitting rocks is no match for an experienced killer! Will Two Kick Rip continue his domination on the floor, or will he finally bite the dust? We'll find out later, but for now, let's welcome the next match!" The voice blasted through my ears, drowning out the criticisms of Two Kick. I didn't care what he had to say, I just wanted to get back to my cell and rest up for the next batch of ponies I'd have to murder before I got my shot at Hate. I didn't even listen to the names, I just returned to the door at the back of my cage.

Pounding a hoof against it, I waited only a few seconds before it swung open with a creak. Stepping through, I found that there were only two guards waiting for me. With the explosive collar around my neck, I guessed that they didn't feel they needed the extra security.

One of the two had a look in his eyes that made me uneasy. Staring into my eyes, he spoke low and level. "Ductwork was my sister. You killed her husband." Without another word, he slammed the butt of his riot shotgun into my face.

Darkness.

At least this time, I wasn't chained to a wall. When I regained consciousness, I was curled up on the floor of my cell, stripped of the weapons I'd carried into the Arena. My side hurt, and my eye was swollen shut. I was much more bruised than I had been last I remembered, so the guards must have given me a good beating while I was out. The long slash along my side had scabbed over, which was a little surprising. It was wide enough that I probably should have bled out depending on how long I'd been laying here. Maybe a side effect of the mask?

I lay there, for lack of anything to do, as I was actually sort of comfortable. Moving hurt my rib. My legs were shackled together, so I really couldn't go too far if I wanted to.

After a while, a click from the door drew my attention. Standing, I tried making myself as intimidating as possible. If they wanted to talk to Two Kick Rip, they were going to get Two Kick Rip in all of his monstrous power.

Fucking right they are.

The door swung open as a small dirty bulb planted in the ceiling turned on, giving illumination to the room. Through the door, however, walked the pony that had cleaned me before. Pearl.

The door slammed shut behind her, making her jump. She was carrying a bag slung over her bruised form, the bucket of water gripped in her mouth. Limping towards me, she was breathing heavily. I didn't speak, remembering what she'd said before, about being beaten. I didn't want any more harm to come to her.

I sat down and watched her approach me, watching the mare drop the bag tenderly next to me and open it to reveal two healing potions and a bundle of healing bandages. Pulling a potion from the bag, she popped the top out and offered it to me. "Drink... it will... feel better."

I gripped the bottle with my magic and drank the contents. Pulling the second, she offered it as well, but I shook my head. I pointed my hoof at her before making a drinking motion towards my mouth. She was injured, just as injured as last I'd seen her, and her constant wincing and shortness of breath had me worrying for the mare.

Shaking her head, she protested. "No. You need... to be... better. For... the fight..."

I could already feel my rib healing, which meant it wasn't as bad off as I'd thought. With the healing bandages, and what I was still getting from my use of the mask, I'd be fine.

I plucked the bottle from her tenuous grasp, pulled the cork, and sprang towards her. Her frail form put up little fight, and I held her down with one hoof easily. She emitted a short squeak before I put the open bottle to her mouth and forced her to drink it.

Despite her denial of the bottle, she drank greedily at it once it was shoved in her face. After she'd drained the bottle, I removed what little weight I'd been using to hold her down.

I watched the bruises disappear rapidly. I must have built up an immunity over the years, because my wounds never healed that fast when I downed one of the healing draughts.

"Why? Why did you do that, they'll only beat me harder." She spoke sadly, tears springing to her eyes as she stood steadily before me, her limp and shortness of breath gone.

"Then don't tell them." I smiled reassuringly to her. "Just fake the limp and talk in a halt, they'll never notice."

Glancing at the ground, avoiding my gaze, she shuffled uneasily. "I... I suppose."

Continuing with her duty, she began scrubbing the blood from my sides. Now that the light was on, I saw that I was at least half coated in blood, and most of it wasn't mine. That fight had not been clean, especially when I'd killed Dirge.

"I can talk now?" She hadn't begged me to be quiet when I'd talked, and I tried my luck. This would be a lot more pleasant if I could talk.

Nodding, she went back to scrubbing at the scab along my side.

"So, you're my... what?" Please don't say slave. Please don't say slave.

Nice little slave, too.

Speaking rather skillfully around the sponge clenched in her teeth, she nervously looked at me as she worked. "Your handler."

Phew.

"What's that mean? You clean me after fights and make sure I'm good to go?" Nodding she dropped the sponge in the water and stamped on it gently with a hoof to .

"Any needs you have. Injuries, hunger... other needs." She glanced away from me as she finished

speaking, grimacing but trying to hide it from me. I knew what “other needs” meant.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’m... I have a marefriend.”

Pussy.

Picking up the sponge again... she looked at me, searching my eyes for truth. I had no intention of touching her. Letting out a breath, she sighed. “Thank you.”

I stood in silence as she moved with more of a purpose, finishing cleaning the blood from me. Then, out came the bandages. She began wrapping them around me, the healing magic worked into them tingling slightly as she covered my chest and flanks.

Part of me enjoyed the bandages much more than made sense. A wash of nostalgia took me back to when I’d first woken up in that field, covered in very similar bandages. A simpler time, when death wasn’t the first thing on the agenda for the day.

The slam of the door swinging against the wall snapped me out of my ramblings, and sent Pearl skittering away from me, ducking her head to seem even more meek. In walked a pony I didn’t recognize, holding a strange device in his magical grip.

I heard a thunk, and felt a stinging on my chest, like an insect bite. Looking down, I saw a dart sticking out of my hide. I couldn’t feel that area, but I felt the effects of the dart pretty quickly. My vision started swimming, and I lost my balance, slipping and slamming chin first into the cell floor.

His voice was cool and even as he looked at the cowering Pearl. “Out.”

She quickly gathered the things she’d brought with her and rushed out the door, closing it behind her. Now I was here with this strange pony... though I was getting a familiar feeling from him. A feeling I’d been expecting since I got to Neighwhere.

This was a Paragon.

Trotting towards me, he put the dart gun away. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t feel anything. A slight nudge from his magic, and I rolled over. I stared up at him, trying to slur words from my now completely useless mouth.

Poking at my neck with a hoof, he spoke softly. “For lack of a better word... neat.”

Crouching, he looked into my eyes, a smile on his mouth. “Massacre said that he’d killed you. Turned you into a broken sack. No way to survive. Normally, I’d take him at his word, his expertise on breaking things is... second to none.”

He smacked me in the neck with a hoof, looking for any reaction from me. “Then, you walk into Neighwhere, twice dead but still kicking. Bravo, my friend, bravo.”

Pulling a magnifying glass and flashlight from a pouch at his side, he began examining my neck very closely. “Last pony I saw veins like that on was left a bubbling mess. Quite healthy, but mentally gone. Didn’t think anypony was strong enough for a purge. I only built that option in because I was curious to see if Massacre would ever find it and try it out himself.”

Epiphany.

He didn’t look like a Paragon. Pale coat, red mane, blue eyes, he didn’t seem to stand out at all.

Fucking egghead.

“This is giving me ideas... I’d ask you questions, but I’m not exactly here on any official business, as loosely as that term applies here. Just fulfilling my own curiosity. It’s not often I get to see a dead pony

walking, talking, fighting... you're a fascinating specimen."

I lay there as he prodded at me, and I could do nothing as he pulled a scalpel from his bag and cut open one of the black veins. After several minutes of poking, prodding, slicing, and testing, I guess he had his fill.

"Fascinating," he repeated. Standing, he placed the tools he'd been using back in his bag and turned away from me. As he reached the door, opening it and waving back the guards posted on the other side, he paused briefly.

Turning back to me, a smile flickered across his face. "Oh right. Best of luck tomorrow. You scared off most of the less... committed challengers with today's display. Don't die, I'd really hate to lose the opportunity to examine you further."

As the door slammed shut, I continued to lay there paralyzed. "Just an Eff Why Eye, 'Ripple', that should wear off in an hour or two." His voice echoed through the barred opening, and then it was gone. The light snapped off, and I was plunged into darkness as a cover was placed over the opening.

Great. Darkness that I was awake for.

Fuck that pony.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I jerked awake to the door slamming open. Something thumped into my side, and I looked up to see the hulking stallion standing in the doorway.

This morning's wake up brought to you by Massacre.

Looking at what he'd thrown at me, I spotted what my animal mind identified as food. I realized how hungry I was... I couldn't remember the last thing I'd eaten, and began wolfing it down as rapidly as I could while I kept my eyes on Massacre. I didn't worry that the food had been poisoned, because honestly, if they wanted to kill me I had an explosive wrapped around my throat.

"Done stuffing your fucking mouth? Good, let's go. Hate wants to see you."

Maybe this was my chance. I doubted that they'd arm me, but I really only had to get close enough to lay my hooves on him. They wouldn't be able to kill me until I'd beaten him to death, weapon or no weapon. I swallowed what little food I had left and stood, trying to fight back the grim smile I felt creeping onto my face.

Massacre walked up to me, grabbing my front manacles with a hook on a chain secured around his neck. That wasn't a good sign, I'd hoped to at least walk there. He started walking, dragging me across the floor of the cell.

Fuck.

The guards remained at the door as Massacre dragged me roughly out of the cell. It gave me time to take in my surroundings. Strapped next to the pipbuck on his leg I spotted the device that would blow my head off at the push of a button, and I briefly wondered why Massacre hadn't killed me the second he'd been passed the detonator. He must have been a good little soldier, listening to Hate more than his own feelings towards me.

The bumpy drag up a staircase set Massacre to chuckling, and got me my first look at Neighwhere in the daytime, outside of the Arena. Old, dilapidated buildings held together by more recent additions of scrap metal and masonry. It was a testament to the ingenuity of the Anchor ponies and the Stable dwellers working together that there were so many buildings over a single storey in height.

After leaving the underground where I'd been kept and where most of the slaves were held, I started getting some really mixed signals. Glares and threats of death came from raiders and Anchor ponies alike. I had fans and I had enemies. I had ponies that had won and lost money betting on me. It was a very different feeling from what I'd gotten in Blank or Underhoof.

During the day, Neighwhere was a living, bustling monster. There were shops lining the streets, each undercutting the price of their neighbors in an endless pursuit to sell their wares, ranging from medicine to weapons, food to slaves. The ponies hawking their wares also ran the full spectrum of seemingly trustworthy to obviously cutthroat.

Fluster could probably clean house here. Wherever she was.

A decently clean building, devoid of much of the graffiti that decorated the rest of the town, was apparently our destination. It seemed very familiar to me, but I'd had a sense of off-putting nostalgia since I'd stepped hoof in Neighwhere that first night. The doors were long gone, just a yawning hole punched into the front of the building, leading to stairs leading down. I was reminded of the stairs to the station, but that was on the other side of Neighwhere from our current location, by my guess.

At the top of the stairs, Massacre casually tossed me, sending me tumbling flank over hooves. It hurt, hitting each step on the way down and sliding to a painful stop against a metal console. Groaning, I pulled myself to my hooves as the chuckling monster made his way down after me.

Looking at what I'd run into, I saw the same symbol worked into my PipBuck. The Stable-Tec logo. To the right of the console I'd come to a rest against was a massive cog shaped portal worked into the wall of the basement.

Stable 87.

The place I was born and raised.

I guess I had been staring for a while, because an impact from behind threw me through the wide open door. "Keep fucking moving." Massacre stood there, growling down at me as I picked myself up again, now standing within the threshold. The hook went back in place and he walked past me, dragging me up another, thankfully short, set of stairs.

The Stable was a stark difference from the broken down and graffitied up Neighwhere. Brushed metal walls, clean floors, functioning lighting. It was like there wasn't a wasteland right outside the door.

It was a little unnerving.

Through halls almost untouched by two hundred years of suffering I walked, taking in the sights. Deja vu, everywhere. The Paragons had grown up in these halls, which threw a layer of blood over the clean veneer in front of me.

I found that I knew the way even as Massacre was dragging me along the thankfully smooth floor. Two Kick must have shared the layout of this place with me. He'd been quiet today, but as always I could feel his presence in my head. He wasn't the silent observer type, so I was expecting him to interject at any moment. To make comments about where we were. Reminisce. Anything.

Nope. I don't like it here.

Oh.

A door slid open on well kept mechanisms, leading us into the atrium. I knew the word, and that it meant this room, but I can't say I'd heard it before. Two Kick information again, I figured.

The first thing I saw when I was dragged through the door was the orange arsonist lounging in a tub of... something. Glancing at me, Cinder smiled brightly and splashed a wave of liquid at where I lay on

the floor. That acrid smell hit me, the smell I'd gotten off of her each time, and now I knew why.

"Hey there handsome."

A barrel next to the tub had three words stamped across it. Liquid Flame Retardant. She bathed in the stuff... which explained how she hadn't been literally bursting into flames each time we'd fought. Her coat and skin were soaked in it, and judging from the pile of barrels in one corner, she could keep soaking for a long time.

"Ripple, thank you for accepting my invitation." As Massacre unhooked and trotted off to a table covered with various alcohols, Hate entered the atrium through a side door. He wasn't wearing any armor, he didn't even have any weapons. His reign here was so secure that he didn't even see me as a threat.

"Crackerjack." I wanted to test the name.

Until now, he'd maintained a controlled, polite demeanor, save for the moment after he'd murdered Willow. At the name, his eye twitched and his lip quirked, just for a split second. It was enough to know that the name had gotten through.

Composing himself quickly, he used his magic to brush a few stray hairs back behind his ear. "Please, Ripple, I prefer Hate. Much like how, from what I understand, you no longer go by Two Kick."

"So why aren't I fighting? I thought you had a line up for me to cut through." I just wanted to get back to my plan. With my legs shackled and the bomb around my neck, I wouldn't even be able to make a move towards Hate before I was dead. I had to get back to my plan to challenge him and take him down in the Arena.

"Oh, your match yesterday was quite the show. Sure, it wasn't quite up to your norm, but it sent the message. Those ponies you slaughtered, they fought the hardest to get first run at you. They wanted it the most." A noise from Massacre, who currently was slamming back a bottle of whiskey clenched in his teeth, drew Hate's attention briefly.

"Ah yes, of course. I wouldn't let Massacre fight just yet, I wanted to give the ponies of my city their fair shot first. My Paragons get preferential treatment enough, wouldn't you say?"

Cinder, lounging in the bath, gave out a sharp laugh. "And we love it, Hate."

"Thank you, Cinder my dear, but I was talking to our wayward companion." Trotting nearer to me, Hate used his magic to lift me up. Looking closely at the veins, much as Epiphany did, he chuckled.

"Brought back from the edge of death, and you receive a rather fetching tattoo for it?" Hate chuckled lightly to himself, before dropping me roughly to slam back into the ground. Sitting next to me, a smile on his face, he gestured around the room.

"You miss it, don't you? Living the way we want, doing what we want, no one to limit us or tell us we're wrong. It's paradise here, it really is. You felt that way as well, once." The grin left his face suddenly, and he levelled a completely serious, even grim stare at me.

"So why betray me? Betray your family?"

"Betray you? You shot me in the face, why wouldn't I fight back?" I yelled at him. I couldn't help it, he was talking like it was my fault he'd shot me in the face and left me in that field.

A soft but piercing voice came from behind me, like a needle made of silk. "Before that. Trying to undercut your friend, our business partner."

I turned my head quickly, not trusting any voice I didn't know to be behind me. Not that a voice I knew

would be any better, but the evil you know is better than the evil you don't.

A griffin. Female, I guessed, from her feminine voice and lighter build compared to the... one other griffin I could compare her to. Other than that, she was very similar in look to Ash. Same coloration, save for lavender feathers rimming her eyes. She was wearing combat armor and had a long sword slung across her back between her folded wings.

"What?" What had Two Kick done? Had he actually done something to get himself shot? Was it not just Hate betraying us?

"Trying to sell your little discovery to Red Eye, cutting Hate out of the deal." The griffin tapped a claw on my withers with each word as she stood next to me. Her other hand was running those razor sharp talons along my neck, applying no pressure. I knew all too well what those could do to a pony, so I stayed still, feeling my heartbeat echoed in those talons dimpling my hide.

"It really was a bad move, Ripple. Not very respectable business practice, selling out your entire town for a little power." Hate was letting what sounded like disappointment to creep into his voice.

"Told Hate he shoulda ground you into a fine fucking paste, but he just shot you. Thought it'd be a mercy." Massacre snorted from across the room. "Now look at the trouble you caused us."

"Sweeps and Holepunch dead, Skyline missing... Things could be better." Cinder splashed playfully in the tub as she outlined the damage done to the Paragons. I was rather proud of most of that, a hint of a smile on my face as she said it. Sweeps still hit a nerve, but Holepunch had been an asshole. It was interesting that Cinder didn't seem to know about the cubes, or wasn't willing to bring them up with the griffin present.

"Luckily for us, Red Eye's liaison Miss Fraya decided to honor the contract we had drawn with her employer, and informed us of your betrayal." As Hate nodded towards Fraya, the griffin removed her claws from my neck and walked further into the room, snatching a bottle of alcohol from the table near where Massacre stood glaring at me.

"So, Hate, you said you had something special when you called me here?" Fraya the Griffin took a swig from a bottle, and for a split second I saw Ash. It made me miss my friend. Miss everyone I'd sent off through the tunnel. Everyone that had died, or was missing. I snarled at the world.

"Oh yes, of course. We have arranged a special match in the Arena, since our scheduling with Ripple here hit a bit of a bump." Hate gestured a hoof dismissively at me. "I'm sure you'll appreciate what he have planned."

I'd seen Ash grin enough to know that Fraya had a smile on her face. "Can't wait."

Hate walked towards the door, stopping and giving a short bow to Fraya as he neared her. "If you'll accompany me, we shall take in the festivities. Massacre, if you'd be so kind as to bring Ripple?"

Massacre snickered and approached me. I'd been on my hooves for some time now, and he kicked me in the side to throw me back to the ground. Attaching that hook back to my shackles, he dragged me out of the room after the Paragon and the Griffin.

"Bye Ripple. Come back soon." Cinder giggled from her tub, content to continue lounging in the harsh chemicals.

I sighed and braced myself for more stairs.

From Hate's platform, I could see every pony in the seats. Cheering and screaming as Hate and his entourage came into view. A trio of griffins lurked high in the stands, nodding to Fraya as we entered

the Arena.

Massacre pulled me to my hooves and unhooked the chain, leaving me to stand defiantly there. “Don’t fuck around.” Hissing a warning in my ear, he turned and left the platform.

Hate’s horn glowed briefly, and he opened his mouth. His voice boomed out, magically amplified to fill every corner of the Arena and ensure that his every word was understood. I got the feeling that he was very proud of his linguistic prowess.

“Greetings, my good ponies and honored guests. Today, we have something special for you. Yesterday, we watched our old champion tear through five ponies with grudges, ending each spectacularly.” Hate, the show pony, was gesturing dramatically as he spoke, building up the promise of what was to come. I wondered briefly who had been talking when I’d been in the Arena, because it certainly wasn’t Hate.

“Today, Two Kick is recuperating from his efforts, and we have decided to showcase some of our other talent.” As if I had a choice in this. They’d been dragging me around Neighwhere all day; I’d not gotten much of a chance to recover.

“For your enjoyment, I present nature at its finest. A predator fighting prey. Open the cages, and let’s all have a good time.” He bowed and stepped back, letting the crowd’s attention shift to the floor of the Arena. The cage doors opened, and out stepped four heavily armed ponies on one side, and...

Cutter.

I’d only heard of him once from Ash, but there stood a male griffin that looked very much like my friend. He was heavily muscled, his arms sporting armor plating that added blades to the already lethal talons he’d been born with. That wasn’t his most prominent feature though.

Cutter had no wings.

Two long, vicious scars ran along his back right above his shoulder blades, where they’d either been cut off or torn off. He didn’t look much like the young naive griffin that Ash had described, but at least he was alive. Ash would be happy to know that.

For now, it was the brutish griffin versus the four ponies in the Arena. As he took the first step towards them, I wondered if I had looked like that the previous day. Like a monster.

With a blur of speed, Cutter was on his opponents. They were armed with assorted blades and axes, but his natural speed and agility put him on another level. I realized that I was about to witness a slaughter.

Landing amongst them, the griffin grabbed a hapless unicorn by the collar of his barding, slammed him into a second, and hurled the unfortunate unicorn into the third, sending the unfortunate earth pony flying. The three ponies went tumbling in different directions, leaving him ample time to deal with the standing pony.

The single upright pony had been opening her mouth to yell something, but the muscles in his arms were strong enough to shatter her jaw as he forced his bladed forearm into the opening. The blades tore into her, spraying blood as they carved through her face, but it was the talons that killed her. Those razor sharp claws impossibly came out the back of her neck, grabbing onto the spinal column before ripping back out.

I’d thought that shredding Dirge’s head off had been brutal, but as he yanked his arm upwards and tore most of the pony’s head clean off her body, I almost felt queasy. The upper portion of her head spiraled away in a geyser of blood, but Cutter was already moving onto the next pony.

The first of the ponies to stand back up was the one that had been bludgeoned with his comrade, a burly unicorn with a patch of scar tissue where his right eye should have been. He threw himself at the

griffin, swinging a massive sword made of scrap with his magic. The pony was rather skilled, drawing a figure eight in the air with the blade, forcing Cutter to fall back and give the others time to get to their hooves.

One on one, Cutter would take them apart. Just like I would have. Fighting a group, however, attrition or even a single mistake would lead to death.

The unicorn made a wide slash, hoping to catch the wingless griffin in the side, but Cutter lept over the swinging blade. Landing at the pony's side, he came in low and grabbed the unicorn by two legs. The unicorn could only give out a confused yell as he was hauled into the air. Cutter, in a move very similar to what Massacre had done to me in that kitchen, swung the pony down onto the hard floor with savage force.

The blade clattered away as the unicorn hit the ground at a bad angle, his horn snapping off with a scream. On the second hit, his neck landed just wrong, and broke with a noise audible even over the cheering of the crowd. He was dead before the impact could even register with him. Cutter then used the now limp pony as a painfully familiar flail against the remaining two.

The survivors did their best to fend off his attacks with their friend's corpse. One of them, a unicorn mare with twin daggers, was surprisingly light on her hooves and kept springing away from his attacks. The other was the pony he had thrown at the start of the melee, who was nowhere near as fast as the lithe unicorn.

A hit to the pony's side knocked him off balance, and Cutter took the advantage he'd been given. An overhead arc brought the dead pony onto the back of the slower earth pony, driving him to his knees. A third impact drove him fully to the ground, at which point Cutter threw the corpse at the unicorn mare who narrowly dodged taking the full weight in the face.

The poorly fated pony had been wielding a large axe before he'd been thrown, and he had been trying to reach it where it lay when he'd been beaten with his partner's corpse. Cutter snatched the weapon up, spun it once in his grip, and struck. The sweep of his full swing gleamed like silver in the harsh sunlight, and the axe cleaved completely through the pony's back.

The blade cut through barding, flesh, muscle, spine, and organs before embedding in the floor of the Arena. The unicorn coughed up blood and tried getting to his feet. He managed to drag his upper half a short distance before looking behind in confusion. Once he had confirmed that he was no longer entirely together, he slumped over and died in a widening pool of blood, leaving a trail of viscera and lifeblood between his two halves.

Setting his eyes on the remaining unicorn, the bloodsoaked Griffin began stalking towards her, walking low on all fours. She was backing away from him, the blades held out in front of her defensively, and I felt that I should do something.

Just watch. This is fantastic. Don't deprive me of this.

I made to stand, but I immediately felt a pressure on my back. Glancing at Hate, I saw that his horn was glowing. He was holding me down, making me watch. I felt my head forced back towards the Arena, and I watched as Cutter got near enough to the pony to make his move.

Leaping forward, it looked like he was going to take both daggers in the chest. At the last second, he formed a shield with both arms, the blades impacting the blood drenched but still razor sharp armor. Batting both blades aside with enough force that one stuck fast in a wall, he landed and pinned the unicorn underneath him. Holding her hooves to either side, he reached in with his head and looked into her eyes. His mouth moved a little, but there was no way I was able to hear what he had said this far away through that much commotion.

Quick as that, he gripped her neck in his beak and twisted, snapping her spine cleanly. She slumped, limp and dead. Picking himself up off of her corpse, he walked solemnly towards his cage, not displaying any of the behavior I had expected. He didn't soak in the adoration poured from the stands, he didn't gloat or boast, he just walked back to his cage.

The crowd was going insane, cheering and screaming. Even the griffins were nodding and smiling, clearly impressed even though Cutter was a prisoner. They must not have cared what his situation was, provided he was still capable of combat.

With that, Hate turned to Fraya. "What did you think? It was quick, but I believe that I have quite the warrior there."

Nodding, she looked down at the bloodsoaked scene that Cutter had just vacated. "Yeah, he would make an excellent Talon. Only one issue though."

Hate made a questioning sound, clearly not expecting anything but praise. "Is it the wings? He did that to himself. There was nothing we could have done to save them."

Shaking her head, she dismissed it with a wave of a talon. "Oh no, nothing of that sort. The issue is that he was already one of us, but broke his contract and left."

Right. I knew that. I was surprised that Hate didn't, though. He was looking down at the remains of the seasoned fighters he had thrown into an Arena with a killing machine for potentially no reason. He didn't strike me as the kind to waste valuable resources. Hate frowned.

"His name is Cutter, correct?"

Hate narrowed his eyes. "I never told you that. Did you go digging into my surprise?"

The female griffin laughed. "Ha. No. Him and his brother left the Talons a while back. It was a big deal."

Hate slumped briefly before composing himself. His business deal had just fallen through, and in the back of my head I knew that the most important thing to this pony was that his plans succeeded.

"However, there is a standing bounty. So not all is lost. Don't worry Hate, your efforts have not been in vain." Apparently Fraya knew Hate well, speaking with a hint of laughter in her voice. She'd been toying with him.

"Well, it does please me hear that."

The griffin nodded. "I thought it would. Just one more thing I'd like to request before we wrap up our business though."

Hate's body language had relaxed, and he smiled. I didn't like that smile. "Oh?"

Fraya grabbed me roughly, hauling me up with those talons digging into me. "Make sure that he dies this time, or should I just rip out his throat right now?"

Hate laughed. A cold, hard laugh. "Oh, no need for that. We'll get a good show of him, but he'll die. I guarantee it."

Slamming me into the ground roughly, she kicked me in the side with one of her paws. I'd had worse. I didn't give her the satisfaction of making a noise, and I received a second kick as reward.

Fraya turned and walked away from the platform, leaving me and Hate. He ignored me for the most part, and I just lay there. Now that I thought about it, I was alone with him. This would be as good a chance as any.

There were ponies cleaning up the remains of the fight, and it was diverting attention. Not that anypony was paying attention to them, as the stands were filled with talk and the occasional fight. They were just waiting for the next match.

I decided to make my move.

Mustering all of my strength, I threw myself at Hate. If I could get my hooves around his neck, lock him in with the shackles, I had a very good chance of snapping his rotten neck like a fucking twig. Raising my front legs high, I saw the surprise on his face as I moved.

As I drove the shackles down past his head, I felt the impact in my chest. His horn had flared with light for only a fraction of a second, but as I went sailing off of the platform I knew that I'd messed up. I'd let him see me make my move. Sloppy.

I slammed into the Arena floor far below, the wind forcing itself from my lungs. As I choked for breath, I stared back up at Hate. He was gazing down at me over the pale corpse of Willow. I could feel the stomping before I heard it, and Massacre launched off of the platform as well.

Landing next to me, the large pony proceeded to kick me as hard as he could. I still couldn't breathe, and being hurled into the air to impact a wall didn't help. As I lay there, still fighting for air, I saw the chain placed around my shackles.

Then I was unceremoniously dragged back to my cell, apparently taking a route that involved every staircase in Neighwhere. I regained the use of my lungs somewhere along the trip, right before I was about to black out. Coughing and choking, I endured the gauntlet that Massacre decided to run before reaching my erstwhile home.

Opening the cell door, Massacre loosed the chain and hurled me against the far wall. He slammed the door and turned off the lights, leaving me in the little square of light provided by the door.

"Asshole." Talking made blood dribble down my lips, but I was too sore and bruised to do much about it.

After an hour or so of laying there, the door clicked open and Pearl entered. I didn't say anything, I was too busy planning how I could get the drop on Hate. I doubted I'd be given another chance like today's, and I was sure that whatever challenge I faced the next day would very likely be lethal. Hate had promised on that.

Pearl tried talking to me, but I didn't listen. I didn't talk. I just stared at the wall.

Eventually, she left. I felt a pang of guilt that I had ignored her, but I could only think of the next day. Of my death, and how I had to kill Hate before I went.

I couldn't allow anything in that would distract me from that goal.

"Ripple... are you okay?"

For a second, I thought that I was hallucinating. She couldn't be here. As I was roused from my fitful sleep by a hoof prodding at my neck, I opened my eyes. When I felt the prodding move to the explosive around my neck, a spike of adrenaline brought me to full wakefulness.

I snapped my eyes open and moved my shackled legs to stop the prodding. I didn't need the explosives going off before I had a chance to kill Hate.

"Easy Ripple, I'm only looking." In the dark corner I had crawled to sleep, I couldn't make out much that wasn't in the square of light. The hooded form before me was definitely Fluster though.

My throat was raw and my mouth tasted like blood, but I had to talk. Coughing, I cleared my throat. “Fluster? What... how?”

“I don’t have long. Ivory’s distracting the guards. I’m just checking on you.”

“What?” My mind just wasn’t wrapping around this. Fluster was dead. Ivory was off hunting Crossed Wires. They weren’t here. I’d checked.

“We need to get that collar off of you, or at least disarm it.” She went back to fiddling at the collar around my neck, a flashlight clicking on to get a better look. It was tucked back in her hood somewhere, a screwdriver held in her mouth.

“Fluster... what?”

Last I’d seen her, she’d been a quivering wreck of a pony. Here before me was the scavenger I’d first met in Underhoof, curious and vibrant. Ivory must have helped her through it, or... something. As she worked at the collar, she mumbled around the screwdriver. “Okay... this isn’t too complicated...”

“Fluster, what are you doing here? How... are you here?”

“I followed Ivory during the fight. We got here chasing Wires, and walked through the front door. A mercenary and her indentured pony. We saw you in the Arena, couldn’t just leave you here. You’re my bodyguard after all.” The image flashed through my head of the two of them walking up to the gate in the wake of the battle. Ivory in her battle armor, carrying some heavy weapons. Fluster following along timidly at her side. Yeah, I could see that.

“And... click.” As she said it, a sound from the collar matched the sound. “There... it at least won’t blow your head off if’n they press a button. Now let’s get it off.”

I shook my head. “I... I can’t leave. I have to kill Hate. I don’t know when, or if, I’ll get another chance.”

She punched me right in the mouth with a hoof, then leaned forward and hissed into my ear. “No, you’re going to come with us. Hate can wait. We saw you out there today. You got your chance, and you need to come with us. Alive, you can try again. You can make another chance.”

Damnit.

Fuck.

“You’re right...” I sighed, letting my whole body slump over. I had a chance of escape now. When I hadn’t, I’d been so set on getting to Hate that I’d lost sight of any other option.

Taking her screwdriver to my front shackles, she grinned around the screwdriver. “Of course I am. Now let’s get you out of those-”

A banging on the door preempted Ivory’s voice coming through the small square opening. “Fluster. Guard’s coming back, he out?”

“Not yet.”

“No time! Move, Fluster, now! Please!” Fluster was still working at the shackle until the ‘please’. She stopped, looking up at me with apologetic eyes.

“I’m sorry Ripple. We’ll figure something out.” With that, she clicked off the flashlight and rushed back to the door. Slipping out, she was gone. I was alone again.

Laying back down, the hope that had been building shattered, I couldn’t help but wonder one thing. Had that been a dream?

I was woken by Pearl, who came into my cell and started my day with food and some fresh bandages. What she'd given me before had done a good job of healing the bruises, but my ribs still felt a little off after the beating and dragging, both courtesy of Massacre.

"Sorry 'bout yesterday." I talked out of the corner of my mouth as I lay on my side, letting her work on my bruised ribs.

"Hmmm?" She was occupied by her work, and still seemed a little uncomfortable with talking to me. The bandages she was wrapping around my chest were her main focus right now.

"For ignoring you. I want to thank you for everything you've done for me." Any way I went about this, this was the last day I'd be in Neighwhere. Too many ponies had died without a goodbye. I wasn't going to be one of them.

"I... I should say the same to you." Pearl had finished wrapping the bandages and went to wiping the dried blood from my mouth. "I'll miss you when you're dead."

The two of us stayed silent, after that cheery statement. When she finished, I nodded silently to her, and received the same gesture. Once she was out the door, I went back to waiting. Either for a daring rescue, or my last trip out to the Arena.

The door clicked open.

In walked two guard ponies, one of which I recognized as the brother of Ductwork. So it looked like it was the brutal death option then.

Fuck.

There's still time. We could always kill everypony.

At least as many as we can.

As they attached their chains to me, I readied myself. I'd take down as many as I could trying to get to Hate. I'd have weapons and all my limbs. Nothing would stop me.

Stampede.

That... was an option I was starting to consider. I had ruled it out earlier, but the situation had changed. Two Kick was better at this whole killing thing anyways.

Thanks. I'll make our last hurrah memorable. Something they'll never fucking forget.

Walking through those halls, I stayed quiet as the two ponies escorted me to the room where I would get my weapons. Through the door, I was unchained and left to arm myself as they made sure that I behaved.

"Two Kick, I got a decent haul on you. Good match. I even pulled some strings to get you a little present for today. Big match needs bigs kicks, you know. Gotta make sure it's a fair fight, after all." Pulling a tarp off of a table with his teeth, he presented the gift.

I laughed out loud, the voice in my head echoing my reaction. My ballistic hooves and enough ammo to kill dozens. Broken was nowhere to be seen, but I'd take what I could get on my last day.

With practiced ease, I slipped the weapons into the grooves carved into my rear hooves. It had been a bitch getting them off after the mask, but I'd done it in what little resting time we'd had on our way to the tunnel. Chipping away with a sharp piece of metal, I had liberated the weapons from myself before carving the grooves back in. It had hurt, but it was worth it.

Now, I had them back. Once they were on, I felt more like myself. If I had Broken, I would have been complete.

Two thirds of Two Kick Ripple was still more than most ponies could handle.

Bring it the fuck on.

As I stood in the cage, the weight of several hits of Stampede reassuring in some pockets sewn into the crude armor I was wearing, I felt that this was the time. This was when I would kill Hate.

I would cut my way through whatever he threw at me.

I would climb onto that platform.

I would kick his fucking face in.

The cage door opened, and I strode confidently out onto the killing floor. The cheers were deafening. This was the last match of Two Kick, after all. I could definitely see how he had gotten addicted to this feeling. The cheers made a pony feel unstoppable.

Then I saw my opposition. I'd prepared myself for another swarm of ponies. I'd even toyed with the thought that I'd have to kill Ash's little brother.

As Massacre stared at me through that mask, I realized I'd missed an option.

The one where Massacre and I beat each other to death.

He chuckled, a throaty bass sound that I could feel in my chest. My recently repaired chest that he had all but caved in the last time we'd fought.

Stop it. I can beat him. Let me out.

As the announcer did his bit, introducing us and riling up the crowd to a nice boil, I took one of the stamped ampules from the pouch. Toying with it, I watched as Massacre stared at me across the way. The promise in his eyes was clear. He was gonna hit me until there was nothing left to hit.

Going against every urge I'd had since that day where Two Kick had almost done unspeakable things to Cinder, I slammed the needle into my leg. I needed Two Kick's help.

I just prayed that I'd still exist after all was said and done.

The rush of red flowed through my veins, this first time since I'd been remade. Since the mask, I hadn't felt the physical craving at all. That sense of weakness had been absent. I'd felt whole. Didn't matter much now if I ruined myself again, it wasn't like I'd be getting out of here. That window of opportunity had come and past. If I hadn't dreamed it, that was.

I never could tell the exact moment that Two Kick took over, but as I took a step towards Massacre without willing my legs to do it, I knew that I was riding side saddle on this pony.

"Ah... I do so fucking love this. So cramped in there, it's nice to get out and stretch my legs." Two Kick trotted in place, getting the blood flowing. Speeding up the flow of the blood made sure that the Stampede really got in deep.

Okay, just remember that I want the body to kill Hate with.

"Yeah, yeah. I got this, fuck."

"Who you talking to? Praying for it be over quick?" Massacre was taking a few steps towards us, the hooks on his front legs clicking with each step.

With a wicked grin, Two Kick stopped hopping and threw himself forward. Closing the gap between them in a second, he came up underneath Massacre. His horn pierced deep into Massacre's throat, pulling out sideways and spraying blood into our eyes as it tore through the soft flesh.

Hopping back as the choking Massacre made a swipe with a hook, Two Kick let out a laugh. "Shut the fuck up and fight!" As he bounced away from Massacre, I realized why Two Kick would win this battle.

I'd fought the massive pony in an enclosed area. I hadn't been able to get out of his range very quickly, where here in the larger arena, Two Kick was staying well outside of the range of those hooks.

Massacre's wound was already healing rapidly though, and the monstrous pony thundered at us like a bull. Needless to say, he was mad. The sound he made, spraying blood from his neck as it was busily knitting itself back together, was a bestial and angry noise.

Getting in close, he swung a meaty leg, the hook narrowly missing our ear. As a reward, he got a sharp hoof kicked into his fetlock. Two Kick angled it so that the edge dug in deep, scoring another wound on the seemingly unstoppable pony.

"Always had fun killing you, Messy. Not often I get to kill a pony multiple times. This will be the fucking last." Two Kick taunted as soon as he was back out of range, rolling away from the increasingly furious pony. I had to give it to Two Kick, he really knew how to make the body move. In comparison, it was like I was working with limits on my every movement.

Coughing a mouthful of blood at us, Massacre bellowed. "Fuck you! You shoulda stayed dead, and I'm gonna fucking end you."

Rushing at us, he demonstrated that he had the ability to learn. Jumping into the air, he tried using his greater bulk to crush Two Kick as he came down. Two Kick leaped sideways, and Massacre slammed into the ground where my body had been only a fraction of a second before. Rolling to his hooves, Two Kick reared back and sent a rapid flurry of kicks into Massacre's side, before jumping into the air and planting both rear hooves squarely into the large pony's armored side.

In an explosion of shattered armor plates and blood, Massacre was thrown away from us. Two Kick used the force to backflip and land cleanly on all fours, grinning at the pony. Fuck... no wonder he had so much respect, and I received so much less. Without me fighting his control, Two Kick was a monster.

Massacre shakily got back up, a crater in his side filled with broken bone and armor. Blood poured out of him, and I could barely understand how he was still alive. That was two kicks. No pony was supposed to survive two kicks.

Vomiting a mouthful of dark liquid, Massacre started taking steps towards us. He picked up speed, building into a full gallop. Two Kick chuckled and shook his head at the dogged determination Massacre was using. Bracing himself for another side leap, Two Kick didn't see it coming.

I saw the flicker of Massacre's eyes as he looked at our legs, judging where we were placing weight. As he got near enough to hit, Two Kick hopped to one side. Massacre did as well, plowing into our body and slamming us to the ground. We slid briefly, his bulk grinding us into the floor beneath him.

Standing with more speed than a pony with a hole in his side should, he managed to catch one of those hooks into my leg again. I knew what was coming.

"No!" Two Kick managed the one word before Massacre threw us with all of his considerable strength towards the platform. Slicing through the air, we slammed into Willow's bloated corpse with a sickening crunch. Coagulated blood and foul smelling liquid sprayed from the dead mare as we

knocked her loose from her place.

Willow and Two Kick hit the ground hard, the metal rods holding her in clattering next to us. The pain of another hook drew us up again, getting eye to eye with the furious Massacre. He was grinning through his rage, loving that he had us where he wanted us.

Two Kick gave him one decent blow with a front hoof before Massacre slammed him into the ground, stunning the pony in command. Lifting us up, he looked into our eyes. "I'll make sure you're dead this time."

Two Kick, coughing from the impact, smiled. "Same thing, fucker."

Massacre's eyes widened as he saw the glowing horn, which was the last thing he saw before the two rods that had been holding Willow up rammed down through the faceplate of that horrible mask and into his eyes. As Massacre stumbled backwards, screaming at the metal intruding into his face, Two Kick worked himself loose from the frantic pony's hook and hit the ground hard.

Two Kick rose, bleeding heavily from the wounds right above both ballistic hooves. He practically skipped after Massacre, gleefully laughing. "I got you, I got you, I fucking got you."

Massacre yelled at where the voice was coming from, swinging and kicking blindly in hopes of hitting his assailant. Two Kick dodged nimbly, very light on his feet for a wounded pony of our size. Snapping a hoof out, he drove it into the side of one of Massacre's legs, breaking the bone and driving him to the ground.

As the filthy red pony tried rolling back to his feet, Two Kick stood back and let him do it. When the Paragon was on his knees, trying to compensate for the shattered wreck of his leg, Two Kick spun and planted a single kick into Massacre's neck.

The blast destroyed Massacre's neck, laying bare sections of spinal bone gleaming white against the red ruin. Massacre slumped over, gasping for breath. He wasn't making noise anymore. Two Kick stood over him, looking down. "Messy, you're pathetic. That was for the fucking chains."

Turning slowly, he lined up for another kick. Turning his head back to look the dying pony in the eyes, he grinned. "This is for making me sink to your level."

Placing another kick straight into the exposed spine, he decapitated the giant of a pony. The head went sliding away, leaving a streak of blood as it went. Coming to a rest, it rocked slightly and ended staring up at the platform where Hate looked down at us.

Two Kick gave a little wave to Hate before pulling the shattered mask from Massacre's separated head. Placing it on, he breathed in deeply as the needles pierced and the fluid contained within flew into our drug stream.

I was shouting at Kick to not use it, not after the last time, but he did his best to calm my objections. "Just enough for the legs. Don't worry."

The drugs started healing the wounds in Two Kicks legs rapidly, but also started pushing the Stampede out of our system. He'd kept his word, and returned control after killing Massacre. Within seconds, I could feel my legs knitting, and I could move them myself. I pulled the blood soaked mask from my face with my magic and threw it to the ground. I spared a moment to stomp the horrible thing in half before reloading my hoofguns and running towards the platform. I had to make it up and get to Hate before they killed me. Everything depended on it.

The crowd had gone silent as I killed Massacre, apparently taking them all by surprise. Even the announcer pony, whoever he was, was dead quiet. As soon as I started running, they burst into activity.

I could see Hate yelling something behind him, probably the order to kill me. I jumped, scrambling at the wall in an attempt to get enough purchase to get up onto the platform. Sliding back down, I looked for an exit. I had to get out, and get up to Hate.

At that moment, one whole section of the stands erupted in a detonation that threw me sideways. The blast threw chunks of building, pieces of pony, and total chaos into the Arena.

Standing, I looked at the destruction for a few seconds, standing there with my mouth hanging open. My mind went to the only ponies I'd seen that could level a building that completely in that little time.

Crossed Wires? Viola?

I couldn't imagine the pony that wanted to be a Paragon doing that, and Viola with any luck was long gone by now. It had been three days.

A bullet hitting the wall next to my head and Two Kick screaming for me to move snapped me back to reality. A salvo of rockets thundered in from somewhere, slamming into the Arena and stands in a ripple of explosions and fire.

Neighwhere was under attack. I couldn't think of anypony that had that level of weaponry. That was wartime military level tech.

Oh. Of course.

The Steel Rangers.

That fuck Broken Arrow.

It had to be them.

I now had the cover I needed. I had another chance.

I ran into a cloud of debris and smoke, intent on hunting down Hate in this madness.

As ever, praise be to Kkat for creating the amazing story Fallout Equestria. Inspired a lot, it did.

Thanks a lot to Wirepony, who's getting better and better at fixing my story.

Also, if you want to ask Ripple anything [click here](#)

Chapter 18: Cutting Wires

I hit the wall hard, the pieces of it coming down around me. The arena was getting pounded by the rockets. Whoever was firing must have known that most of the ponies in town would be there, and the casualties would be maximised.

Ducking through a half-collapsed doorway, I found stairs that led up. As good as any place to start looking. I had to get to Hate before he got away.

Running into a door, I forced it open with all of my weight. The door was blocked, chunks of rubble pinning it closed. I wasn't going to let a simple door stop me, and after slamming again and again into the door, I pushed it open wide enough to slip through.

Leaping through a cloud of smoke, ready to kick Hate's face into oblivion, I was stopped in my tracks as soon as I landed. A rocket hit the platform, the force of the blast hurling me bodily back into the door, slamming it shut. Dragging myself back to my hooves, I shook my head trying to get rid of the spinning. At least the ringing in my ears drowned out the ongoing din of the rocket barrage.

A gust of wind cleared the smoke from the platform, revealing that I was alone. Judging from the lack of blood and chunks, there hadn't been anypony here when the rocket had hit. Hate had gotten away. Fuck.

Chase him. Kill him. Rip him apart. It's what you came here to do. It's about time you finally showed some fucking motivation, so get going. Fucker shot me in my face, let's return the favor.

Turning to leave, I sighed when I saw how twisted the door was after my bulk had been thrown bodily into it. That wouldn't open easily. Luckily, the blast had also torn down one of the walls, opening a path into a side hallway.

Navigating over the collapsed masonry, I found myself in one of the long halls that ran through the arena building. I was beginning to regain my hearing, and I heard a muffled shout from one end. Through the dust filling the corridor, I spotted a pony that made me grin. A wide, malicious grin.

It was the armorer. The pony that had Broken. My biggest fan. He was shouting away down another hallway, apparently oblivious to my presence. I trotted rapidly towards him, hoping to catch him off guard. Each step brought me closer, and I could hear more and more of what he was yelling.

“Get the fucking explosives down below! One hit and this whole place goes up!”

That wasn't good news. With the initial targeted barrage having shifted to random assault, it was only a matter of time before the magazine took a hit. I had to move faster.

I hit him from the side, bouncing him off the wall. I pressed one fetlock against his neck, driving the side of his face into the surface. Frantic eyes looked at me in stunned recognition, and he began stammering.

“Two... Two Kick. Oh shit! Oh shit! Don't kill me!”

Using the fear that came with his recognition, I growled low into his ear. “Where is my gun?” I asked, pressing a little harder for emphasis.

He tried smiling, pulling a thin mask of humor over his terror. The stuttering breath he choked down betrayed him.

“Broken? It's... it's in my room. Cleaned it up nice for you, its all ready to go. Just... just down that hall

a bit, on the right next to the primary magazine. Can't miss it." He gestured weakly with a hoof down the hallway he'd been shouting.

"You... you going to kill me? I did you right Two Kick, don't forget." His flickering smile showed that he knew just how terrifying I was, how terrifying the pony in my head was. He had no clue that Two Kick wasn't running the show anymore. In fact, he had evidence to the contrary, after my decapitation of Massacre.

I eased off, releasing him from the wall and taking a few steps back. "You did. Get out of here." He really had. I didn't know if the whole "fairness" thing was really supposed to be taken far enough to give me my weapons back, but I'd taken any advantage I could get. I'd need it to kill Hate.

Besides, I didn't have the time to beat him to death. I needed Broken. I needed every weapon at my disposal. The armorer's room seemed like a great place to start.

Taking off at a near gallop, I left him in the dust and smoke filled corridor, rubbing at his neck with a fetlock. I heard a faint insult, and then he ran off down the hall away from me. If he'd lied to me, I would find him and make him wish he hadn't.

Start with wiping that stupid smile off his face... with a knife. Never did like that asshole.

Rounding a corner, I came face to face with two raiders hurrying through the tunnel in the opposite direction. All of us slid to a halt, and just stared at each other for a long moment of stillness.

One of them, a shabby green unicorn mare, whipped a pistol out on a flare of magic. Her speed was impressive, and even ducking as soon as the gun appeared was barely enough to keep my hide intact. I felt the bullet pass through my mane and embed itself into the wall behind me.

I came out of the crouch into a spin, slapping the barrel of the mare's weapon away with a front hoof. As I came to bear, I kicked out into the unicorn's muzzle. The solid impact of my shotgun hoof was pleasant and familiar to both me and Two Kick.

Two Kick was laughing in my head.

The dead mare's companion was a much slower earth pony armed with some sort of assault rifle on a battle saddle. His reaction time was nothing like mine or the unicorn mare's, and he was still lunging forward to bit the trigger bit as I finished the spin. I skidded to a halt, braced and low, his fire going well over my head. The ratcheting sound continued as I surged out of my crouch, driving my horn into the underside of his jaw. I bull-rushed forward with my back legs, levering the heavy pony off of his front hooves with my horning pinning his jaw shut. The shots stitched up the wall and into the ceiling as he was forced completely upright, and I shoved him back with my forelegs, yanking the horn from the soft flesh under his jaw and thrusting it into his exposed neck.

Very nice. Saw a minotaur do that once. Cut his balls off and fed them to him after that.

Two quick stabs that sprayed me with earth pony blood, and I pushed him over. He sprawled backwards in a fountain of gore, his rifle crunching to a halt on an empty chamber.

No pony was going to get between me and what I came here to do.

Ahead, I spotted a pony loaded down with bags hurrying out of a large metal door covered with locks. That could only be the magazine, which meant that the smaller wooden door next to it was the armorer's.

As I got closer, I could hear another voice through the heavy metal door, cursing and stuttering frantically. It didn't sound like the pony inside was coming out anytime soon, so I ignored it, slipping through the rough wooden door into the armorer's quarters.

Inside was the lair of a pony that really, really liked guns. Experience had taught me that the raiders of Neighwhere were ill equipped, stupid fighters wielding crudely sharpened scraps of metal. The contents of this room would have made my life much, much more difficult until now.

There must have been hundreds of weapons, haphazardly stored. Some were in piles, neatly stacked to the ceiling in places, or carefully arranged on shelves. It had once been a storeroom of some kind, but now it was an altar to the ranged weapon.

Hate had to have known about this, which meant that all those raiders had been sent out with scavenged weapons intentionally. I did recall that there was always a back rank of better armed ponies, though.

They're called fodder. Gonna die anyways, why give 'em a fucking gun? Leave the guns to the ponies that know what they're doing.

Oh, right. Of course.

Now I just had to find a gun in a haystack made entirely out of guns. At least it didn't appear that lever-action shotguns were a common item, even in here.

Spotting a similar stock to my gun jutting out from the lower layer of a gun pile, I gripped with my magic and pulled. The whole stack shifted as I yanked, and it toppled over with a resounding crash. If the town wasn't currently being shelled, I'd have worried about the noise.

What floated before me wasn't Broken, but it certainly was broken. It had been another shotgun, once. Originally built for earth pony or pegasus use, the weapon wouldn't be killing anypony with its barrel and tube magazine missing. I tossed it aside, and continued my search.

I went through several piles before I came to where the armorer, whose name I'd never actually gotten, slept and lived. There was a dishevelled mattress with several half-built pistols laying on it. If he was as big of a fan of mine as he'd claimed, Broken would probably be nearby.

Using my front hooves, I flipped the mattress to check underneath. More weapon parts. That pony had a problem. With no luck at the bed, I started searching more randomly. Pushing over a pile here, overturning a table there.

With a combination of magic and brawn, I pulled an entire rack of assault rifles completely off the wall, hurling it across the room in a fit of rage. The rack smashed into a pile of splinters against a panel, and a light came on with a quiet click. The light revealed a shop table tucked into the back of the room, an oil stained sheet hiding its contents. Promising.

Making my way through the heaps of scrap and weapons, I came to the table. Gripping a corner of the cloth, I yanked it off the table and out of the way.

There.

Amidst an assortment higher quality weapons, some stripped down for service or cleaning, lay my shotgun. Broken looked just good as the day I'd woken up in that field. Picking it up with my magic, I checked it for any tampering or damage, briefly alarmed at the tools and metal scraps scattered around my old friend.

Immaculate. Good old Broken. Also laying on the counter was the holster that had accompanied my shotgun and I through thick and thin. I slipped it on and holstered the weapon in its home.

I felt better. More complete. I didn't have much ammo, but if magazine meant what I thought it did, then there would be plenty just next door. I'd make sure that I had enough shells to get the job done. Then I could kill Hate.

As I threaded my way back through the room, I noticed something, or more a lack of something. It was

quiet. The barrage of explosions had ceased. Whatever that meant, it probably wasn't good for me.

Us. For us.

I picked up the pace.

Before I reached the door, I could hear shouting in the hallway. It sounded strangely familiar, and I surged forward. I didn't even slow to open the door, rearing up and slamming it completely off of its hinges. I landed in the hallway on top of the door. Broken flew out of its sheath at my will, spinning in a magical glow to aim forward.

I was staring down the many barrels of a minigun. I recognized that minigun, but I'd last seen it on a shelf in Traffic's shop. I thought that it had been destroyed. The pony wielding it on a battle saddle had a surprised look on her face.

"Ripple? Where...?" Ivory took a step back, turning the minigun away from my face and releasing the bit from her mouth. Behind her, Fluster smiled and nodded, which was as good as a cheer from the reserved mare.

"Ivory? What...?" I found myself just as articulate as the pale pony in the heavy armor. With proof that I hadn't dreamt Fluster's visit, I knew that Ivory was in town, but with the attack I had sort of expected her to kill Wires and get out of Neighwhere.

"Not now. The fucker's cornered, and I'm ending this." Taking the bit back in her mouth, she turned and hurried into the magazine. Fluster and I watched her go, and then the robed mare followed her friend through the large metal doorway. I smiled, following suit. My vengeance could wait another minute if it meant I had friends at my side.

Also, gotta love that view. Something to look at before we die.

Shut up.

The inside of the magazine was much like the room next door, just much more organized. Racks of what appeared to be fully functioning weapons were spread through the room, intermixed with lockers and stacks of crates.

Curled up in one corner, whimpering like a foal, was Crossed Wires. The scrawny buck looked a little more beaten than he had in Blank, but the blood trail and pool from the wound in his side was new. Ivory stalked towards him, her steps dropping in the quiet like the ringing of a bell. A death bell.

She's sexier when she's mad.

"Oh... h-h-h-hey Ivory. Long time no s-s-s-see."

"Don't you open your filthy mouth!" Ivory screamed, looming over the cowering buck. Wires was naked and unarmed. No armor, no weapons, and no hope.

Fucker needs to die. He hurt us.

This was Ivory's deal. Wires had betrayed me as well, but not to the same extent. I'd lost my teammate of a single day. She had lost her brother, the most important pony in her world. Two Kick and I agreed on this. I stood by calmly, not wanting to deny Ivory the vengeance she sought.

"Was it worth it? Killing my brother?!" Ivory barked around the minigun bit, yelling through clenched teeth. The minigun spun up, its firing delay a gruesome mechanical counterpoint to the immediate punch of her words. The weapon fired a tight burst, carving off Wire's leg in a spray of blood and metal as the bullets ripped through the doomed pony into the decaying structure underneath.

Wires screamed in pain as the severed limb flopped to the ground, twitching as his freshly made stump

spurted blood.

I love this mare.

“You sold us out! Tried to kill us! For what?! So you could be beaten, used, and mistreated?” Stepping forward, she stamped down on his bleeding stump, ripping another scream from him that cut short as he fainted.

Ivory snatched a healing potion out of her saddlebag, smashing the top against a table with a jerk of her head. She jammed the broken container into the hole in his side, emptying the contents directly into his chest cavity. As the healing magic pumped into him, he jolted back to consciousness. Ivory, to her credit, didn’t give the sobbing wreck of a pony another kick. Levelling her eyes with his, she hissed out her question again. “Was it worth it?”

Sobbing gave his stutter very little help, and it took him a good amount of time to get out his answer. “No.”

I had warned him that becoming a Paragon wasn’t as easy as he had made it out to be. Every time I’d seen him since, he had been in worse condition. He’d been beaten, abused, and lost everything he had owned. He had suffered for his actions, and that suffering was about to come to an end.

Ivory bit down on the firing mechanism. The weapon spun just long enough for Wires to realize that he was finished. The coward pony closed his eyes and threw his remaining foreleg up to protect his face just as the minigun fired. The first rounds destroyed his leg and head, an explosion of meat, brains, and bone. As Ivory pulled the stream of bullets down his body, Wires disintegrated. Blood and viscera sprayed in every direction. When Ivory stopped firing, Wires was messily sawed in half. The wall was deeply cratered, spent brass and chunks of pony floating in a pool of crimson liquid. Ivory was just as liberally coated in blood and gore.

Turning, her face ran red with Wires’ blood, her breath coming in heavy pants. “Okay... hey Rip. What’s going on?”

I caught the pale mare up to speed with what had happened since I’d last seen her, ripping through the magazine as we talked. I filled Broken, my hoofguns, and the few pockets I had with shells. I missed the space of my saddle bags. I even missed the satchel I had thrown through the fire before I’d been captured, though that had been unavoidable.

“So everyone’s fine?” Fluster had been following me, stuffing supplies into her own bags. She was being much less discriminating than I was, choosing anything that she deemed to be of sufficient value. The life of a scavenger was not for me. I couldn’t have lived with that loose of a focus.

“Yeah. Last I saw them, Shade was doing fine. Ash and Viola led her and the rest through the tunnels.” I didn’t mention that Traffic was still unaccounted for, a fact I had realized while I’d had time to think in my cell. There had been too many deaths and uncertainties in that attack.

Fluster’s eyes lit up and she flashed the grin I’d not seen in some time. “Viola was with you? I always liked her.”

“Same here.” Ivory was off to one side, cleaning her face with a rag. With the amount of blood coating her, I doubted that she would be back to her normal color anytime soon.

Hate. Don’t forget about Hate. You’re wasting your fucking time. My time. Get a fucking move on!

Two Kick was right. I didn’t have time to sit around and reminisce. I turned towards the door, slapping Broken back into its sheath as I did so. “I suggest you get out of Neighwhere. I’m pretty sure things are

about to go completely to shit.”

“And what? Leave you here to die?” Ivory asked, having abandoned the blood soaked rag and her cleaning efforts. She would need one of Crimson Knife’s scrubbing showers to do what she wanted. I was about to suggest that she get to Underhoof when she continued.

“That’s not happening. I got Wires, but I still want to see Hate dead. You’re not getting rid of me that easily.” Pushing past me, she blocked my path and jabbed me in the chest with a hoof for emphasis. I nodded, letting the first real smile I’d had since I got here settle on my face. Ivory and Fluster would be so much help here. With their assistance, I could get into parts of Neighwhere that would have been suicide attacks solo.

“Fine. I won’t stop you if you want to come with, but we need to hurry.” The girls both nodded, and off we went. Making our way out of the magazine, we took off towards the Stable. With the rest of Neighwhere being blown to rubble by the Steel Rangers, that’s where Hate would have gone. The Stable was built to survive weapons designed to burn the world. It would just ignore the puny attacks thrown at it so far.

The silence following the rockets had given way to the more typical rumble of combat. Gunfire and screams echoed all around us, some even coming from underground. I had my theories on what was going on, and none of them painted a pleasant picture of the future of Neighwhere.

I took the first staircase out of the Arena tunnels. It dumped us into the streets of Neighwhere, in a grimy back alley. The immediate surrounding were familiar, and it was only a couple of turns before we stood before the building I had once called home. In my head, I pictured the rotting corpse in my closet.

We weren’t going into my room. I didn’t want the girls to see that part of my past.

Ah, why not? There’s a bed. A good bed, broken in. Can hold three easy.

“You know where we’re going, Kick?” Ivory had followed me around every turn, and it must have looked like I was lost. She’d been in town longer than I had, and had had free run as far as I knew. She could very well know this place better than me, right now.

“Yeah. I used to live here, I know the way.” The look in her eyes was skeptical, but she followed along anyways. Fluster was shadowing us, silent and unremarkable as always. It was comforting, seeing the drab cloaked figure out of the corner of my eye.

Cutting through the building, I walked past my door. It was still shut and locked, and didn’t look like anypony had managed to get it open since I’d been there. I had left two corpses rotting in the middle of the room; it was not someplace I wanted to go back to.

We were halfway through the building when the tremor hit. The hallway lurched to the left, throwing the three of us to the cluttered ground as dust sifted from the ceiling.

“What was that?” Ivory asked, just before the building shifted again. This time the whole floor tilted, accompanied by the sound of collapsing building. Something had given way, somewhere, and the building was coming down. I hadn’t heard any more rockets, so I figured that another building was collapsing into this one like dominos. Some colossal act of masonry vengeance.

Words would have been wasting time. We were running full out, heading for the opposite side of the building. The hallway had begun tilting dangerously to the side, the floors above collapsing the walls holding them up. If we stayed, we’d be pony paste.

The doorway to safety was warping as we neared it, the weight of the building turning the metal frame into putty. I made it through, followed by Ivory. The doorway slumped rapidly then, and Fluster barely

managed to squeeze through before it gave, the building collapsing into a shapeless mound of rubble.

“Fuck!” Ivory’s statement was apt. We could now see what had taken down the building.

I’d seen robots before, but never any of that size. Four heavily armored legs held its bulk up with hydraulics and wires. It carried itself more like a lizard than a pony, and it could have looked through the second story window on a building. Its head bristled with weaponry and wicked looking spikes, but it hadn’t used any of them to push the building over. It had demolished a path into Neighwhere, and this building had just happened to get in its way.

In rough paint on its head was a symbol similar to one I’d seen in Orchard. A sword and gears overlaid on a tree. I’d only guessed that it had been the Steel Rangers pushing this attack, and now I had definitive proof. I hadn’t seen anything like this when I’d been in that warehouse, but it made sense that there hadn’t been only one depot of wartime killer robots lurking in a compound primarily used to make weapons. If I’d known this had been there, I would have destroyed more indiscriminately while I’d had the chance.

You slip up, and my whole fucking place gets bulldozed. Way to go.

Dick.

Its head shifted until it was staring down at us over the collapsed building. As the dust cleared, I could see a red light set into its “face”. A second red light snapped on, a beam that focused on my chest. For a second, I feared that I was being disintegrated, but then I realized it was a targeting laser.

“Move. MOVE!” I pushed Ivory to get going, and we started running. A hissing whine led up to a flash of green light. Looking over my shoulder, the area where we had stood was now a smoking crater of cooling glass. Fluster was keeping up, a look of panic on her face. It was understandable. I was sure that I wore the same look.

Ivory was leading the way, and she almost fell into a stairway leading down. At the last second, she kicked off and sailed back into the underground maze of Neighwhere. Fluster and I followed with haste, and I missed the jump. Tripping up after the first few steps, I tumbled the rest of the way. It hurt, but it didn’t compare to being dragged. Fluster appeared next to me, unfazed, as though she had just teleported down the stairs.

The ground shook as the massive robot took a few steps, and its head loomed into view at the top of the staircase. We ran before that red beam snapped into existence. Our flight was already some distance into the security of the tunnels when the flash of green hit.

Once we were in the clear, we collapsed against a wall to catch our breaths. “That was some pretty heavy hardware... who the fuck was that?” Ivory was panting, the minigun and ammo strapped to her already bulky armor a significant burden.

“Rangers.” One word was all I had the time for. Broken Arrow would only complicate things further, which I didn’t need. I had hoped for a straightforward pursuit of Hate, but I really should have learned to expect shit to hit the fan. It always did.

“Fuckers.” Ivory snarled the word. She’d spent her entire time with them locked in a cell next to that pegasus scavenger. Cushy compared to what I’d gone through, but still not a fond memory for her.

“So where now?” Fluster asked quietly back at us, waiting further down the hall. Down here, the sounds of killing from up above were greatly muffled, and Fluster’s whispered voice carried easily.

Walking towards her, I started looking further down the hall. I didn’t recognize it, but if I was right then the Stable was... This way. “We keep going to the Stable.”

“Could you let me out first?” I snapped Broken out, aiming it at the voice. I stood next to a heavy metal cell door, much thicker than the one I’d spent a few days behind. There were a pair of golden eyes showing through the small space in the door used to put food in. Those eyes were looking at me hungrily; a look I’d seen before.

I lowered the weapon only slightly. I only knew the owner of those eyes by reputation, from his brother, and one fight I’d witnessed in the Arena..

“Cutter?”

“You’re Two Kick. Fallen warrior, returned on a quest of vengeance.” He growled as he spoke, like every word was a threat. His words were a lot more poetic than I’d expected though.

“Uh... yeah.” I didn’t know how to respond to that. I glanced over at Ivory, who had her eyes narrowed at the door cautiously.

“I know you have no reason to trust me. You don’t know me from any other monster. But if you would let me out, I would make it worth your while.” I was already thinking about letting him out, I was his brother’s friend after all. Freeing Cutter would deprive Hate of a trophy, and would lift a weight from Ashred’s shoulders.

“I’ve heard about you. You eat ponies like us.” Ivory’s voice was low, and just a little scared. My eyes widened, and I glanced at her for confirmation. Dipping her head in a tiny nod, she kept her weapon trained on the thick metal door.

I’ve eaten ponies like you.

I twitched my head at that. Didn’t want to know that little bit of information.

“He’s Ash’s brother.” I whispered from the corner of my mouth. Ivory tried saying something in response, but it stuck in her throat. She mouthed some words, not really finding what she was looking for.

After a few seconds of apparently working it over in her head, she lowered the barrels of her weapon just slightly, and gave me a concessionary nod. “Okay, I’m sold.”

Turning to the robed mare standing further down the hall, she indicated the door with a small twitch of her head. “Fluster, would you mind?”

Fluster started, she’d been staring at the predatory eyes visible through the slot. “Uh... yeah. Yeah, I can do that.” Rummaging in her robe with her mouth, she produced a small piece of metal and a screwdriver. Approaching the door, she started into the lock. I’d never really thought of what a feat it was to open a manipulate a lock without magic, but as she went at it I couldn’t help but be impressed.

With a click, the substantial lock popped open, and Fluster stepped back. Gripping with my magic, I pulled on the heavy metal. The door was heavier than I expected, and I strained to open it. The hinges squealed in protest, but the door ground open regardless.

The heavily muscled griffin was just inside the cell, which I now saw was a tiny space, more like a closet than a cell. No room to do anything but wait for the door to open. He was strapped to the wall with heavy shackles, only his head free to move. The bomb collar around his neck had company, as two similar devices were strapped around his arms. They were taking no chances with him, and I felt a surprising flash of jealousy. I hadn’t warranted that much security.

Fucking right. They should have been terrified of us... I’m with you there.

Looking up at those hungry eyes, I started having second thoughts. He wasn’t looking at me like I was his savior. He was looking at me like I was an entree. Nowhere in my plan did “get eaten by a griffin”

come into play.

“Cutter... I’ve actually been looking for you.” I knew that he had heard me say Ash’s name. He had to have, his kind had excellent hearing. He tilted his head to the side in a very familiar manner. Ash did the same thing when listening. “Your brother came here looking for you... but I sent him away to protect somepony I love. Ash was convinced you were still alive.”

“The brother that left me to die? Who saved his own feathered hide and left me in this den of evil?” That didn’t fill me with confidence that letting him out was a good thing.

“I’ll deal with him when I find him. If you let me loose, however, I swear on the feathers of my ancestors that I won’t attack you.” I wasn’t sure if that was actually a saying. I’d never heard Ash say it. Judging an entire species by one member probably wasn’t too reliable though; the only zebra I’d met was great, despite having heard nothing but negatives.

“Fluster, could you deactivate his collars?” The robed pegasus nodded and went to work, starting with his neck collar. Even as she worked on the neck collar, I could tell that she was staying as far away from that lethal beak as she could. I didn’t blame her.

Always wanted one of those. Could take a face or head clean fuckin’ off with that. One bite, Snap! all over. Messy. Love it..

As she worked, I rubbed absently at the disarmed explosive around my own neck. It was chafing after so many days tightly wrapped around my neck, but I luckily I couldn’t feel enough of it to bother me. Not being able to feel entire sections of my body came in handy at times.

“There. You shouldn’t blow up now.” Fluster backed away from the shackled griffin, who was grinning down at her with a hungry look.

“Thank you, my little pony.” Cutter said, twitching his head towards one of his shackled limbs. “Now would you mind freeing me from my physical restraints, since you’ve already released me from the implied ones?”

Fluster glared at the “little pony” comment for a few seconds before glancing to me. “Can’t I just leave him?”

I shook my head. “No, sorry. If he’s free, he can draw attention away from us.”

The griffin grinned, shaking his head. “That’s true. I know of many ponies that deserve retribution. None of you have slighted me, and I’m still a griffin of honor.”

Fluster went about the job of detaching the griffin from the wall. I couldn’t help but notice that she left his arms and their lethal looking talons for last. She didn’t want a predator looming over her while she was occupied.

He could break her neck with a single kick. Right to the throat, separate the spine. Dead, instantly. You should tell her. Come on, it’d be fun to watch her squirm.

When the last shackle came free, Cutter stretched, his wickedly equipped arms digging into the ceiling and his chest inflating. Dropped back to all fours, he nodded thanks to Fluster. On his way out, the griffin paused to pat her on the head, gently, as one would a pet. She flinched, pressing away from him as though she were trying to melt into the floor.

“I won’t forget this, you have my word. Should we meet again, I would be more than obliged, I would be pleased to assist in any way that I can. Until then, farewell and thank you.” The overly muscled griffin bowed, a tiny movement of shoulders and head, then turned. As he stalked away from us, the livid scars where his wings had once been were all the more visible.

Watching him go, the three of us stood there for a few seconds. Ivory's voice broke the relative silence of the underground hall. "I thought the big scary bird was gonna come with us."

I shrugged. I had as well, but with how he had responded to the subject of his brother I wasn't entirely sure that bringing him with us would have been a good idea. If the two got into it, there would be casualties. I didn't want to risk that.

"I guess not. Let's keep going." I turned and started trotting towards the Stable. I was now hoping that I didn't run into any more distractions from my goal. Every second wasted, Hate had a better chance of escaping.

You're fucking around. Get a move on.

That's just what I said, asshole.

The tunnel we'd found Cutter in was much less used than the others I'd seen. The cells were empty, though some had been converted into living spaces. From the decorations, I had to assume that it was raiders that were coming in from the wasteland. Gang graffiti, decorations made of pony parts. The usual signs of raider scum, though none of the rooms were occupied.

Most of them had probably been in the Arena when the rockets had hit. That first salvo had killed a lot of ponies, and I had to say that the wasteland was better for it. There were still plenty of survivors though. I could still hear the sounds of battle above, and now and then the more distinct sound of heavier weapons being brought to bear.

I could only hope that the raiders would stay alive long enough to distract the Rangers. At least long enough for us to get to the Stable.

Enough thinking, I had to get walking.

Finally.

Taking a derelict and rickety metal staircase up, we found ourselves in a very poorly lit room. A snort from across the room had me drawing Broken before I even saw the source. It was a unicorn laying in one corner, staring at the wall. Every couple of seconds, he snorted or huffed, but didn't make any movement. There were others just like him, scattered about.

Stepping fully into the room, my hoof connected with something that skittered across the floor before ricocheting off of a prone form. I'd kicked a used needle. The ground was littered with empty needles and inhalers.

We'd stumbled into a junky den. Everypony here was probably too stoned to even realize that the town was under attack. As if confirming my thoughts, a spray of automatic fire punched through one wall. The shots struck several of the ponies at random, leaving them to twitch and moan until they bled to death.

We were already on the move, staying low as even more bullets tore into the room. There was a heated battle just outside, and from the booming of a cannon and ratcheting of an automatic weapon, it sounded like at least one Steel Ranger was involved.

A hollow *choonk* from outside heralded a grenade, and the explosive whipped into the room. I saw it as if in slow motion, the lazily spinning green apple passing into the room in a burst of dust and splinters. The explosive was going to hit a load bearing beam, and instinct had me throwing myself at Fluster. Ivory would probably be okay, she had on heavier armor than I did. I slammed into Fluster's cloaked

form, hearing twin yelps of surprise, pinning her underneath my body as the grenade went off. The explosion came with a deafening bang and a wall of dust as a chunk of the building collapsed on itself and us.

When the dust settled, I picked myself up from the robed mare, apologizing and pulling a long splinter from my flank. We seemed okay, but now the firefight outside was no longer separated from us by a wall. A raider hopped through the collapsed section backwards, an assault rifle held out in his magical grip. He was firing as he went, frantically spraying behind him with bullets.

Then he popped.

He must have taken a grenade to the chest, because he ceased to be a pony in the functioning sense. Liquefied, he splashed the room and us along with it. Ivory let out an offended noise, and began patting down her armor. I assumed she was hunting for a rag, but the last scrap of cloth I knew of was lying in Wire's corpse. I looked for Fluster, but the crunch of stone beneath a metal hoof and a blast of mechanically augmented laughter stole my attention.

I knew that it was the Steel Rangers attacking. Their building hating robot has proven it. But, until now, I hadn't actually seen one. I'd forgotten how intimidating that armor was, and the heavy weapons mounted on the side only added to the look.

Scanning around the room with that blank green gaze, he chuckled to himself. The modulated sound bounced through the room, a horrible noise. There was a stoned pony near him, partially covered in rubble. The pony was dead already, coughing his last around a spear of rebar. That wasn't good enough for the Steel Ranger, though. With a whine of servos, he walked over the junkie's neck. Meat and bone alike flattened under his tread, killing the pony instantly.

"Heh, like a bug." I didn't recognize the voice, but I only knew a few of them in any real way. I was aiming Broken at him, and Ivory's minigun was already spinning up when he decided we were his next targets. "Oh look, more bugs."

Ivory's minigun sounded like a sheet being torn in half, just like when Sweeps had been using it on me. Unlike my hide though, the Ranger's armor shrugged off the storm of lead. His nigh-invulnerability set him off chuckling again, and he braced himself. As he aimed, I could see down the barrel of the grenade launcher, could imagine the lethal munition inside readying itself to kill me.

He fired, and I only barely avoided the shot. It slammed into the wall at the far end of the room, destroying it in another blast of dust and shrapnel. I took my chance to run as he cycled another shot into the big gun, finding that Ivory had bolted as soon as he'd aimed.

Once we had a thick wall between us and him, I began digging through my pockets. Anything other than buckshot. I needed a slug, or flechette, or anything other than buckshot. Nothing.

"Ivory, anything?!" I shouted at her over the din of the fight outside.

She shook her head frantically. "I've only got hollow points!"

So we had nothing that could actually hurt the metal pony calmly hunting us, like it was a game. I swore, looking inwardly for any advice.

You could try kicking him.

Like I'd really get the chance. Thanks for nothing.

The wall between the two of us burst in a spray of wood and plaster, the Steel Ranger charging through. I really hated any pony that came through a wall to get me, they were never easy to deal with.

He was actually giggling now, spinning up his own miniguns to rip us apart at close range, when the

brown robed figure sprang onto his back from behind. A long scalpel in her teeth, likely the same one she'd cut Doc Care with, Fluster landed well forward on the Steel Ranger's back. Stretching around with her wicked little blade, Fluster stabbed the Ranger in the throat. The steel found a gap in the protective layers, and Fluster pulled back with all her might. The razor edge dug a line of red through undersuit and flesh. Bright red blood sprayed from the wound, and she hopped off of his back with the blade clenched firmly in her teeth.

The minigun began firing, but he was too surprised by the sudden injury to aim properly. The stream of fire pitched into the floor between me and Ivory as he crumpled. I'd seen a wound like that before, and while he didn't have long to live, it was long enough to kill both of us.

Hopping forward, I spun and delivered a two-hooved kick into the side of his head. I felt the sting of buckshot in my flanks as it ricocheted off that damned armor, but the blast was still sufficient to knock him over. The minigun growled in mechanical fury as it dug into the floor, unable to fire.

All that metal made getting back up difficult, and we took cover just in case he got a lucky shot off while trying. In a very short time, his attempts began getting weaker and weaker, the blood loss finally getting the best of him.

When he'd stopped moving, Fluster reappeared at his side, cooing at a small leafy muzzle jutting from one of her pouches. I kept forgetting about the timberwolf pup, and was glad to see that I hadn't hurt it when I'd crashed into the two of them.

Ivory and I approached the dead Ranger, our jaws hanging open. "Fluster... wow." Ivory was the best at putting the situation into words, and I knew that I couldn't really think of anything that fit the situation more.

Looking up at us, Fluster let the little timberwolf disappear back into its home. The grin on her face was tiny, but it went all the way to her eyes. "I noticed the gap while he was shooting at you. Simple, really. Now help me with the helmet." She dipped her head and began fumbling at what I saw were a series of metal clasps around the base of the armored head covering.

I gripped the clasps with my magic, popping them open. She stopped her attempts when I got the first one off, and in short order she was helping me pull the entire helmet off of his head.

"Why are we doing this?" I thought she maybe wanted a trophy, or even the salvage that she could get off of a suit of power armor. Honestly, though, I didn't know how she was going to transport it. I was strong, but we were in no position to drag around a piece of armor the size and weight of a pony.

"They have to be communicating, right? I just want the headset." As she dug into the helmet with her own head, I got a sight of the dead Ranger. He was a light tannish earth pony, with a short red brush of mane. The lighter highlights in his mane made it look like a flame. I was struck again how surprising it was that these terrifying Steel Rangers looked just like everypony else without their armor. They weren't as super-equine as they liked to put forward, they bled and died just like everypony else.

Fluster pulled her head back out of the helmet, a thin black wire connected to a small box dangling from her teeth. There was a curved piece of metal attached to it, and she tucked it up under her hood.

"Perfect." The robed mare smiled, then tilted her head to the side as though listening to something. "They're still looking for the Stable, though they're having trouble with some griffins."

Fraya and her crew. I'd expected them to clear out with the attack, if they'd survived the rockets at all. Apparently they had, and the heavily armed Talons were fighting back against the Rangers. I guessed that it was a good thing that not every creature in the Arena had been killed, it made dealing with the attacking force that much easier.

“Okay, then we need to get to the Stable first. Hate will be there. Fluster, can you keep us updated on the Rangers?” I had stopped viewing Fluster as helpless. I never should have in the first place. She’d helped me kill Holepunch after all. With the headset, she gave us a valuable resource into avoiding the Rangers and their apparent purge of the town.

“Yeah, no problem.” She was still trying to find anything she could reasonably salvage off of the bulk of the armored pony, but seemed to be failing. That armor really was self sufficient, and it almost seemed like cheating in the wasteland to have anything that kept you alive that well.

“So let’s get going before his friends come looking for him.” Ivory had been trying to strip the ammo out of his minigun, but was also failing. Her ammo was belted five millimeter, his was something different entirely, a block ammunition of some kind..

I nodded, and the three of us made our way back into the main room and through the gaping hole in the building. Outside, we encountered the group of raiders that the Ranger had been fighting. It was hard to tell how many there had been; that Ranger had been really fond of hitting ponies with high explosives. There were chunks of pony and splashes of blood everywhere. Hurrying through the cratered street, we did our best to get away from the location and to the Stable before the Rangers could get there.

As we hurried, I kept hoping to not run into any more distractions. Raiders, Rangers, figments of my past suddenly appearing for vengeance, anything was an option. With my luck, I kept expecting the worst.

The luck of the girls must have overridden mine, because soon I saw the building that contained the entrance to the Stable. There were no guards. Not a single pony in sight. If it weren’t for the noise of war, one would almost think that nothing was happening.

I led the way, hurrying down the stairs that I had previously been dragged both down and up by that sadistic asshole. I grinned at the thought of his decapitated head, laying there with a look of surprise.

Of course, though, the Stable door was closed.

The panel to the side had been smashed, effectively locking it from any regular means of opening. “Fuck!” I yelled at the door in frustration. “Fluster! Do whatever you can, we’ll buy you time.” The robed mare looked at the control panel warily, eyeing the wires spilling past the destroyed metal. She nodded, and set to work.

If she didn’t get it open, we’d have to leave Neighwhere. Maybe head along the mountain until we found where the tunnel I’d sent Ash and the others down came out. Find the others... and I didn’t really know what past then. If Hate had locked himself in the Stable, then there really wasn’t any hope of getting at him. They were meant to stop the strongest weapons ever conceived. Nothing I could do would even scratch that giant metal cog-shaped deterrent.

Hurrying back up the stairs, Ivory and I took cover in the building looking out into the street. “What do we do if she can’t open it?” The pale mare’s voice sounded confused, as though she hadn’t really thought ahead either.

I shrugged, keeping my eyes aimed down Broken’s length. “I guess... we leave. Meet up with the others, go on with our lives...”

“You’ll just give up on Hate? I doubt that.” She said, voicing the inner dialogue I’d just had. It was annoying.

“Well what the fuck can we really do? If he’s in there, he’s in there. We’re out here.”

A raider stumbled into the street, bleeding from multiple wounds and heading straight for us. Part of me knew him, knew that he was a Stable dweller just like I had been. It didn’t really matter now. I fired. He

hadn't even seen me, and the buckshot took him full in the face. The raider was dead before he'd even hit the ground.

"So we can either die here trying to get through the door, or we can leave?" Ivory sounded defeated. I knew just how she felt. This was not going well.

"Pretty much."

You're giving up far too fucking easily. Maybe that giant robot. The Steel fucks have to have something to get through the door. Find it, take it from them, and use it.

I screamed in frustration as Two Kick jinxed us. Down the street, a building collapsed as a huge metal shape tore its way through. The metal behemoth that had destroyed my old apartment made its way into the street, its head tracking back and forth as it looked for targets.

"Oh crap!" Ivory started firing down the street as soon as it locked onto us, trading its sweeping search for a determined lope.

"Fluster. Fluster! We need to go!" I yelled over my shoulder, down the stairs.

"Gimme just a few more seconds!" Her soft voice drifted back up, barely discernable over the sound of Ivory's sustained barrage.

I didn't fire, honestly not seeing a point. The street in front of us was too wide, I doubted that we'd be able to make it to cover before the lethal weapons planted in the thing's face turned us into radioactive goo. As it got closer and closer, I watched our window of escape shrink. Maybe I could hijack it somehow... get on top of it and see what I could do.

Now if only I could fly, or had any idea what I was doing with robots. I turned my focus inward. I was desperate enough that even Two Kick was a valid source of help.

What the fuck is that?

Fuck.

A high pitched whine filled the air. I threw myself away from the wall as a shot of lethal green light tore the wall apart. Chunks of rubble melted by the blast rained down, green glowing splatters of base elements. I mostly avoided those, yelling profanities at the beast.

It locked that red laser onto me, and I gave up. Raising Broken to attack, I charged headlong. I was about to die. I was nowhere near cover, now that much of the building was gone. Time to do as much damage as I could before I fell.

A blast of pressure knocked me flying. I landed on a shoulder, a foul stench of melted stone blowing over me. As I forced myself back to my hooves, I saw my unexpected savior. The metal monster had missed because there was now a large, wingless griffin attached to its face. Cutter had used his weight to pull the machine off of its aim, and it had shifted its attention to the opponent attacking its face with a metal axe.

Hacking at its optics, Cutter managed to rend through the glass and get at the fragile machinery within. Reaching through the hole he had opened, he gripped something and tore a bundle of parts and wires out with a roar. The machine reeled, as though in pain, and whipped its head violently back and forth.

Cutter let go, arcing through the air and gracefully landing on the roof of a nearby building. The machine had lost track of everything now that it couldn't see, and it had begun rampaging randomly. It probably still meant to kill us, it just couldn't see us and was hoping to crush us beneath its bulk.

It was acting like a creature, not like a robot. That gave me pause, but just for a few seconds. The other

Rangers had begun showing up. A rocket streaked through the air, exploding against the far wall behind me. Ivory was firing, probably hoping to hit the small chink in the armor of the impervious metal ponies approaching us.

Cutter sailed through the air, landing next to me. “Do you have a plan, or was my valiant rescue in vain?”

I was about to explain to him how screwed we were when a shout of victory from down the stairs was cut off by a loud squealing sound. Fluster had the door open.

“We get inside!” I yelled in the griffin’s face, shutting my mouth when I realized how close he was. He started back, but Ivory heard, and her fire slackened and ceased. The three of us pelted towards the ruins of the building that held the Stable door.

Rushing down the stairs, the three of us found the door wide open, a triumphant Fluster just inside. “Great job! Can you close it?” Ivory yelled joyfully as she bounded down the stairs, taking several steps at a time.

Fluster shrugged, and turned towards the inner console.

From the top of the stairs, a whirring sound came just before a stream of bullets ripped down and through the opening. Fluster jumped to the side, avoiding the spray of death. The console, however, was ripped to shreds as armor piercing rounds scythed into it. Once that had been accomplished, the Ranger at the top of the stairs turned his aim on those of us rushing down.

Ivory made it through, but both Cutter and I took a few hits. The shots passed clean through one of my front shoulders, an echo of pain flaring through my system. It suddenly became a lot harder to move.

Cutter was only grazed, a few flesh wounds and a talon blown off. He bellowed in rage, but we both managed to get through the open door.

Inside, Fluster was already waiting past an open door, gesturing for us. She moved fast, I had to give her that. The three of us ran as fast as we could, clearing the opening before Fluster pressed a button and it slammed shut. Pressing several more, a light above the door went from green to red.

A slam on the other side of the door a few seconds later told us that there was at least one Ranger now in the Stable with us. We had to move quick, before they got through the door. I knew that they liked to keep technology intact, but that wasn’t going to help the ponies that could stand between it and them. Namely, us.

“Where do we go now?” Fluster and Ivory asked in unison, looking to the Stable dweller amongst us for guidance. That was me. Off the top of my head, I knew how to get to the Atrium. That was better than nothing, I supposed.

Cutter followed the three of us, growling and clutching his shredded digit. We hurried, and I did my best to recall the path that I had been dragged through.

The Stable was empty. I had thought for sure that more ponies would have come here as soon as Neighwhere was attacked, but I didn’t see any of them. I knew that very few still lived inside, but for there to be no pony around meant that Hate had basically rushed here and sealed the door. This was Paragon territory, and apparently no pony had thought to even try to get in once it had been closed. There had been no pony outside.

Ahead, I spotted the Atrium sign over a door, and smiled. Even if it didn’t help, I at least had known how to get here. I hit the door button with a hoof, and it slid open. I had hoped for Hate to be standing there, ready for our final confrontation, but I was sorely disappointed.

I rushed into the empty room, looking for anypony. Cinder's bathtub sat to one side, empty apart from the non-flammable chemicals. Assorted furniture sat unoccupied, and the collection of alcohol lay undisturbed.

Hate wasn't there. Had we just boxed ourselves in with the Rangers, or was he somewhere else?

A flash of movement must have caught Cutter's eyes, because he jutted the stump of his index talon at a window higher up on the wall. I followed the brief spray of blood, and saw Epiphany looking down at us. His eyes opened wide as my gaze met his, and he quickly vacated the window.

Ivory started running. "Overstallion's Office!" I didn't know how she knew what that room was.

However, a sign over one of the other doors, the one Hate had entered the atrium through earlier, bore that title. It made sense. Crackerjack was the Overstallion, and Hate had kept the position after his name change.

I followed. The four of us got to the door at the same time, but found it locked. Fluster pried open a panel to the side of the door with practiced ease, and quickly stripped two wires. Pressing them together, there was a spark and the door slid open. I realized that if it was really that easy, the Rangers were very likely already through the door we'd stopped them at.

Rushing up the stairs, we came to another door. Not locked, this one slid open obediently at our approach. In the Overstallion's office, I knew that it had been too much to hope for to find my target. Even Epiphany had gone elsewhere. The ornate office was as empty as the rest of the Stable..

I trotted to Hate's massive curved desk, looming in the center of the office. Examining the assorted screens on the desk and wall, I could get a good picture of the inside of the stable. The security cameras showed six Rangers with their oversized implements of death, systematically checking every room between the front door and the Atrium. We didn't have much time.

Where had Epiphany gone?

"A door! Find it, there has to be one! He couldn't have just disappeared." I said it with haste, already beginning to search myself. Around the room, Cutter, Ivory, and Fluster joined, tossing the room quickly and thoroughly. Ivory began searching a bookcase, Fluster took to the console on the desk, and the griffin threw a metal bedframe against the wall.

I started feeling along the wall, looking for a crack or any sign that there was a door. I had no leads, no instinct, not even Two Kick knew where Epiphany had gone. He'd been chattering in my head about not spending much time up here, but I was ignoring him. His sniveling about Hate getting away wasn't helping in the slightest.

Fuck you.

As I searched, I didn't noticed the haze of white moving in on the edges of my vision until the voice snuck into my head. It was faint, but I went cold as soon as I heard it.

"Hello, my messy pony."

Pandemonium. He was near... or at least an unshielded cube was near. Epiphany had the cube, and was apparently still near enough for the Draconequis to communicate with me. I just had no idea where either were.

"The desk. Check the desk."

I nodded at the voice, painfully aware that I was the only one that could hear it. I hated that voice. Voices in my head, and I couldn't even talk back without looking like a madpony. The others continued their search, but I approached where Fluster was still reading whatever she could find on the console.

“Excuse me for a second.” I pushed past her, and began looking at the desk itself instead of the console where Fluster had focused most of her attention.

There. Beneath the desk, there were a pair small buttons. Looking closer, I saw that they were plainly labelled **OPEN** and **CLOSE**. I tapped open with a hoof.

The wall where I had first looked popped out just enough for there to be a clearly defined seam. It swung on well greased hinges, not making the slightest sound. Past the door was a long hallway, leading further into the mountain.

Now I knew where Epiphany had gone. I’d have to thank Pandemonium, who was now apparently out of range. I couldn’t hear him anymore, and the white edges had left my world.

The secret door had been so quiet, that Cutter and Ivory were still tearing the room apart in their search. Fluster was already peering into the opening. I barked at the two, pulling them from their preoccupations. “Hey!”

They turned as one, grins crossing their faces as they saw the now open portal. Cutter dropped a dresser he had been tearing apart in a clatter of wood scraps and broken drawers, while Ivory stopped pulling magazines off of a shelf.

As they filed past into the secret passage, I checked the security cameras to see how we were faring. The Rangers were nearly in the Atrium. Maybe a minute before we would have unwelcome company. I slipped into the hall, finding that Fluster was again waiting with her hoof on a button. She seemed to like doing that. The door hissed shut behind me, and I couldn’t help but grin.

Let the Rangers figure that one out.

The hall was long, well lit, and completely unadorned. Just polished steel running into the distance. I could see a door at the far end. We trotted at a rapid pace, or at least as fast as I could move. My shoulder, even if it didn’t exactly ‘hurt’, it didn’t seem like it was working properly. There was a popping feeling with every step, something that I could feel reverberate through my body.

As I walked, I worked a healing bandage around the area, hoping to at least cut off the blood flow. Now that we’d bought a little time from the pursuing Rangers, I had that chance.

“So, I asked before, and I’ll ask again. Do we have a plan?” Cutter didn’t seem as willing to rush into things as his brother had, but the question was very familiar. Ash had asked me the same thing on multiple occasions, always mocking how I had a preference to throw myself into action before thinking it through.

“We catch up, and we kill them. Figure out what to do after.” I shrugged as I laid out my current plan, Ivory nodding along with me. She was better at planning than I was, and if she was agreeing with me I knew that my current plan was solid. Either that, or she’d given up on us living since her primary motivation had been fulfilled.

Though if Hate had run back here, as I hoped he had, then he had to have a plan of escape. Some way of getting out, or he wouldn’t have locked himself into a deathtrap.

The door at the end was a thick door, and I fully expected it to be secured against us. Pushing a hoof against it, I found that it swung freely open, unveiling the room beyond. It was very similar to the entry to the Stable, with only one major difference.

Where at the entry of the Stable there was a massive, secure door designed to keep everything out, here there was a solid looking elevator car. It looked like it was designed to hold dozens of ponies, bringing

them down from whatever lay above. Huge blast doors, nearly the equal to the main Stable door, hung open to permit the car to leave. Heavy security glass covered the openings of the elevator.

I fired Broken, however, at the grinning face I saw. Hate was there, staring right at me. The buckshot hit the reinforced glass between us and him, stopping dead on the tough transparency. Ivory opened up as soon as her minigun revved up to full speed, peppering the car with lead to just as little effect.

Nothing. The car was as sturdily built as a Stable itself. Past Hate I saw Epiphany, staring at the cube cradled lovingly in his hooves. "Hurry." When I heard the voice, I ran forward, slamming the butt of Broken into the glass. Not even a scuff mark.

"Fuck! Come out here and fight like a pony, you coward!" I screamed at Hate, who just returned a deadpan stare. Pressing a hoof onto a console in front of him, his voice boomed through the chamber from speakers on the car, tinny but clear. He sounded annoyed.

"You never could let well enough alone, could you? I should have killed you when you got your cutie mark, now that I think of it. Getting involved... what sort of stupid special skill is that? You just interfere everywhere you're not needed. I won't make the mistake of letting you live again. Goodbye Ripple." He narrowed his eyes as he spoke, clearly long past any playfulness. Even without the Ranger attack, my killing Massacre had made Hate look bad. He wanted me gone.

The door slammed shut behind us, audibly locking as it did so. Hate had just sealed us in.

With a hiss of releasing pressure and a final thunk, massive clamps released the elevator car from their firm grip. It jerked upwards at first before beginning a steady ascent into the shaft. I slammed on it again, Cutter joining in. He was trying to find a place where he could pry his way in, but was just slowly dragged off the ground. The elevator started picking up speed, and I bit onto a corner.

I had to let go when the elevator went fully into the ceiling, dropping a fair distance to the ground. Bouncing when I landed, I fired Broken up at the bottom of the elevator, expending shells as quickly as I could until the blast doors sealed the shaft from us. We'd done nothing to it.

I was still screaming at the ceiling when Cutter started dragging me away. "We have to go, we need to fight another day."

I heard Ivory's exclamation of "Oh shit!" That got my attention, and my gaze drifted down from the ceiling. In an alcove that had been covered by the elevator, I saw the bomb. I knew it was a bomb from the timer counting down on top of it. Other than the timer, it was just several large drum barrels and stacks of explosives. I didn't know much about bombs, but even my ignorance could recognize a whole lot of boom.

Even if the door hadn't locked, there was nothing at the end of the hallway but a squad of Rangers dead set on killing everyone between them and their prize. We were doomed, even if we could get past the heavily locked door that trapped us in here with the bomb.

"Find a way out!" Ivory yelled, glancing around the room quickly. Fluster was doing the same, and before I could even start, both girls shouted "There!" at the same time.

A hatch on one wall, labelled **MAINTENANCE**. Both of them were in their element right now, underground and out of time. The Red Dogs had seemed to thrive on that, and Fluster was a scavenger. Fluster was already undoing the screws holding the metal plate in place, while the rest of us waited nervously as our death counted down behind us.

"...And done." She stepped back, making way for the maintenance hatch to drop into the room. It didn't budge, and she tried prying it open with the flatheaded tool.

"Move." Cutter pushed her aside and dug his talons into the edges. Pulling with all of his might, his

muscles strained beneath his fur and his feathers puffed out at the effort. Grunting and straining, he started pulling on it in quick tugs. The fierce effort broke his injuries back open, drawing a spurt of blood from his missing talon. He ignored the pain and pulled harder.

With a screech of tearing metal, he ripped the hatch free. Cutter dropped it, unceremoniously letting the metal plate plummet to the ground with a gong-like noise. The maintenance tunnel was cramped, but even in the half-light spread down its length I could tell that it went far. Far enough that we could probably make it past the Rangers and back into the Stable proper, if the time on the bomb permitted.

It was just under two minutes, and I knew that it was probably the exact amount of time that the elevator car needed to get safely away. Knowing what little I did about Hate and Epiphany, it would allow just enough delay for them to escape, and not a second more.

Fluster and Ivory were already heading down the maintenance tunnel as Cutter pulled himself in. His bulky form was just small enough to fit, but he kept hitting his head and shoulders on the edges of the tunnel. I clambered in after him, hoping that we had enough time. I was also hoping that this wasn't a dead end, and we weren't funneling ourselves to our deaths.

Hurrying, I hit my horn on ductwork or caught a hoof in loose wires several times, but we made good time. I didn't know how long we had left, but it wasn't much. My shoulder popped occasionally, but even the small magic of the healing bandage had helped enough that it didn't slow me down.

Fluster had stopped up ahead, working on something with her screwdriver. With a pop, she disappeared from view, Ivory giving a shout of alarm. She'd dropped into the room below, and called back up to us. "I'm fine! Hurry!"

I dropped into the room after the others, quickly finding that it was both cramped and pitch black. A jingling from overhead brought about a dim glow, as Cutter's groping hand found a hanging light. We were in a utility closet of some kind, one that hadn't been used in some time judging from a thick layer of dust. There was very little room to move, the form of a robotic janitor taking up much of the available space.

Fluster got the door open, and we tumbled out. I recognized where we were immediately, seeing the entry to the Stable through an open door. The Rangers hadn't closed any doors in their search, and much of the shelter was now open to the outside through the giant front door. Whatever had been in that bomb would sweep through this place without much resistance.

I couldn't help but feel that this was somehow all according to Hate's plans.

Probably is. Fucker always thinks way ahead.

I pushed my way out of the closet, nudging Ivory forward with a quick prod of my horn. She startled and surged forward, shooting me an indignant look over her shoulder. "Go, go! We don't have a lot of time."

Luckily, we didn't see any Rangers as we made the frantic dash towards the open door. Cutter made it out first, his predatory physique allowing him to run faster than the rest of us. The sounds of battle still filled the air of Neighwhere, but it was safer than being locked in a Stable with a bomb. I'd take ponies trying to kill me over the indiscriminate promise of death from a bomb any day.

I kept running, piling on as much distance between myself and the open Stable door. The girls were keeping up with me, and Cutter disappeared into a building up ahead. I didn't know if it was safe enough, and suddenly, it didn't matter. We were out of time.

A deep rumble filled the air, a shock wave travelling visibly through the ground, throwing dust in its wake. Several of the older buildings nearby began collapsing at the shock, already weakened by the

robot's blind rampage. The air was suddenly filled with dust and debris. I was thrown from my hooves as I ran, sending me sideways to slam into a low brick wall.

A plume of flame and heat rocketed up the stairway. The much abused building that concealed the Stable entrance gave up, exploding into a spray of rock and splinters at this fresh insult. The air filled with shrapnel, and a massive fireball left the stairwell to rise high into the air.

Then it began raining burning debris across Neighwhere. A flaming chunk of what appeared to have been a cabinet bounced off of my side, singing my coat but doing no real damage. As the sky filled with fire, I pulled myself to my hooves and looked around.

Fluster and Ivory were taking shelter in a doorway, the rest of the building collapsed by the robot. Cutter was pulling himself from the building he had rushed to, which was still in mid collapse. It was slowly slumping over, like it was wounded.

Where had Hate gone?

Looking up, past the plume of smoke blotting out much of the mountain, I could only really see until the clouds ever clinging to the peak. I knew Maremack was up there, that military base I'd seen mentioned only in text. The elevator must have led up, providing a fast escape to the military stationed there during the war. Hate had gone up to Maremack, that mysterious fortress above the clouds.

How the fuck was I going to get up there?

Walk? Grow wings? Teleport? Maybe if you tap your hooves together three times.

Fuck off, Two Kick. We'll have to walk.

A bullet smacked off the wall next to my head from an unseen battle in the dust, and I knew that first we'd have to get out of Neighwhere.

Escape from a war zone. Maybe reconnect with the others that had escaped. Walk to Maremack. Kill Hate.

I was really looking forward to the last step in that plan.

Much love and thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria.

Tons of thanks to Wirepony, his help has been indispensable. Editors make the world go 'round.

[Ask Ripple](#) some questions, and he'll get back to you, time and duress permitting.

Chapter 19: Birds of a Feather

The air was barely breathable now, swirling around us as the collapse of buildings and the roiling smoke pouring up from the hole in the ground intermingled in a choking cloud of havoc. Pieces of anything that had been in the Stable drifted to the ground, burning after they had been blasted out of their home in the ground by flame and force.

All that deathly imagery was shattered as a raider barreled out of a bank of opaque smoke, bleeding heavily from a head wound and waving a razor edged shard of metal in his teeth. His eyes were wide with panic, a muffled scream pushing its way around the weapon in his mouth.

As soon as his eyes locked onto us, they got impossibly wider and his legs ceased moving. Locking up, he slid a short distance before coming to a halt in front of us. The weapon dropped from his mouth as his jaw went slack, a strangled tone emanating from his gaping maw.

I understood immediately. Ivory and I had our weapons out, we were all bleeding from minor wounds and filthy with the accumulated dirt and grime of battle. Cutter had his hand in his mouth, probably attempting to stem the bleeding, but blood still flowed freely from his beak. Even in the pitched battle of Neighwhere, a group like ours was a bizarre and unsettling sight.

Cutter's eyes narrowed at the frozen raider, and he dropped his short-clawed limb to his side. Taking a few quick strides, he snatched up the pony. Biting deep into the pony's neck, he tore out a huge chunk in a single, swift bite. With half of the terrified raider's neck gone, it took only seconds for the pony's lifeblood to pump violently from the mortal wound.

I expected Cutter to spit the chunk out, as I'd seen Ash do whenever he'd needed to use his beak in a fight, but the larger griffin swallowed with a contented sigh. He dropped the limp corpse to the ground, and only then seemed to notice the horrified looks shared amongst his current companions.

"What? I was hungry." He shrugged dismissively, picking a scrap of flesh from the corner of his beak with a wicked talon. "A warrior needs to eat."

Ivory, drenched with gore though she was, looked very pale. Fluster was hiding her face in the depths of her hood. A very primal part of me, the part that was always just a little terrified of being near a griffin, was screaming in my head.

Knew he could do that. Didn't I tell you? Graced with natural weapons. Born killers, the lot of 'em. Griffins fuckin' rock.

I was suddenly eager to get out of here. Hate was either pinned at the top of Maremack, or had an escape route I'd have to chase him down. Either way, the scrawny fucker could wait for an evening or two. I needed Shade. I needed to know my mare was OK, and I needed a rest. It was time to make our escape from this hell. Determination filling me, I just nodded at the griffin. "Okay, but we have to move fast. No more snacks." It sounded weird as I said it, but it was the first thing that escaped from my mouth.

Nodding, he turned and surveyed the greyed out environment. "So, where to then? What destination awaits us?"

I nodded my head to my left. "Out. Out of Neighwhere. Try and find a way up the mountain. Then we find Hate, and we kill him." I left that out, hoping to Escape from a war zone. Maybe reconnect with the others that had escaped. Walk to Maremack. Kill hate.

“Very well.” He turned, dropping to all fours as he did so, and started stalking into the gloomy distance. As he quickly began disappearing into the concealing smoke, I tried getting my legs working. I had need to follow the predator, in direct opposition of my survival instinct.

His voice drifted back to us over the sounds of war. “Shall we?”

I nodded back to the mares behind me, and the three of us hurried forth. Into the clouds, out of Neighwhere.

It seemed that visibility in the whole of Neighwhere had been cut. It looked like there was more than one of the giant robots bulldozing their way through the ancient buildings and recent slapdash tenements, but I couldn't see far enough to find out for sure. Much of the town had been leveled in the direction we were moving, which meant we were probably heading towards where the Rangers had staged their assault. The gash was a canyon, cut through the center of town by the giant robot. With any luck, it would be clear of hostiles, and we could get out without another fight.

Of course, as soon as I thought that we ran into a lone Ranger sifting through the wreckage of what must have once been an armory or private stash. His matte grey armor blended in perfectly with the concrete dust covering the rubble of the building, and I didn't even see him until he lifted his helmeted head.

I sprang back, snapping off a shot with Broken more out of surprise than any hope of doing damage. My shoulder popped and ground, and I got the feeling that there was still a bullet in there. The Ranger, to his credit, was very fast on the draw. Figuring that the hulking griffin was the most obvious threat, he fired a shot from his side-mounted grenade launcher in the general direction of the predator.

I lost sight of Cutter in a flash of flame and blast of noise. I was already rushing forward through the stinging spray of rock from the explosion, needing to get in close with the Ranger. It was fairly open here, and without cover we wouldn't last long against the metal-clad pony's heavy weapons.

A loud metallic sound told me that another explosive round had been cycled into the weapon, and the barrel turned to aim straight into my face. I jumped as hard as I could, the weapon flashing and hurling a metal orb of death right between my hooves.

I hit the ground and stumbled as the blast went off behind me. A sharp pain seared through my side as my shoulder tried its best to hurt me. The girls had scattered, and I could see Ivory off to the side lining up a shot with her minigun. I doubted that it would be any more effective against this Ranger than it had with the previous, but I couldn't blame her for trying. Fluster was gone; I never could keep track of her in a fight. For all I knew, Cutter had just been blown into shunks. Her minigun was our only hope, as faint as it was..

I tried bull-rushing the clumsy metal armor, slamming into the Steel Ranger with all of my might. It was like hitting a wall, and the pony within the armor barely flinched at the impact.

“Shit.” The exclamation escaped my mouth. There was no way this would turn out well for me.

A female voice, light in pitch but cruel in intent, snapped out from the speakers built into the helmet. “Yep.”

If we survive this, I want her. This mare's got style.

Her head dropped down with the whine of servos and hiss of hydraulics. It slammed into my side, the mechanical assistance greatly enhancing her power. The hit sent me stumbling, putting a dangerous amount of distance between myself and the barrels of her murderous weapons. My injured leg gave out, and I hit the ground hard in a puff of dust.

A chunk-whir threw a metal dart driving into the rubble next to my head, pinning my ear to a chunk of concrete. The small metal dart began beeping, and I scrambled away from it, painfully tearing my ear as I did. It exploded, a smaller detonation than the grenade, but still enough to pick me up from the ground and slam me into a broken stump of support column.

Hitting the ground in a daze, I tried to gather my wits before she could kill me while I was down. I coughed, blood speckling the ground in front of my muzzle. Pulling myself to my hooves, I blurrily aimed Broken towards where I was sure the Ranger stood. Her next shot would probably kill me, but I didn't want to go down without putting up at least some fight.

I heard the tearing sound of a minigun fill the air, and my eyes finally focused on the Ranger, as she turned away from me. She'd been bearing down on me with her explosive weapons, ready to blow me into little pony pieces, but the hail of ineffective bullets had pulled her attention away. Ivory stood fast behind her, pouring on the lead.

There was the thump of a grenade launcher, and Ivory disappeared in a burst of dust and rock. I was still wobbly, but I had to take advantage of what little time she'd bought us. Stumbling forward, I tripped. Catching myself before I plowed into the ground again, I kept my forward momentum going to get near the Ranger mare and... I didn't know what I would do when I got there, but I'd do my best to kill her.

I had to assume Cutter was dead, because I could see the shape of the griffin lying in a heap off to one side. This was all me now.

I got up to a gallop, and snapped off a shot towards her in faint hope of doing any damage. The buckshot bounced off of her thick armor, and her helmeted gaze swiveled to lock on to me. Her body followed her head, and I found myself staring down both barrels.

Dive. Duck! FUCKING DO SOMETHING OTHER THAN CHARGE HER!

If I could have seen the mare's face, I knew that she would have been smiling. I roared in defiance as I charged, narrowing the gap rapidly. Charging down death seemed to be a theme for today. That was all that went through my head as I worked the lever and fired another shot at the Ranger, who appeared amused at what I was doing.

Then she blew up. Blood, meat, and armor sprayed outwards in every direction.

Had I gotten a lucky shot? Hit the grenade aimed at me while it was still in the barrel?

Fuck if I know.

As the concussive blast threw me back the way I came, I noticed that she wasn't just gone. There was a lot of fire where she'd been. That should have been blown out by the force of the blast, as the explosion forced the air away from the flames.

My split second of thought was cut short by my impact into a large chunk of building bristling with jagged metal. A piece gouged deep, slicing into my side through several of the leather straps composing the armor I was wearing. The jangle and clank of metal on concrete followed as the scant armor around my body slid to the ground, leaving only my legs protected.

Now that she'd exploded, though, I figured I had a chance to catch my breath and regroup.

I was wrong.

"Why? Why all this? Why couldn't you just stay away?" The voice behind me was, as usual, not one I wanted to hear. The fire made sense now. The ordinance carried within the armor had all been cooked off at once by an intense, magical heat.

An orange hoof pressed into my neck, and a surge of heat singed my face. I froze, Broken out of my magical grip and lost to me in this moment.

How did Cinder get the drop on me every time? How?

I've been asking myself that for years. How a fucking road flare can be that sneaky, I'll never know..

My gaze drifted up until it met with hers. Her eyes were bloodshot. Her coat was filthy and matted. She'd been crying; tears cutting clean paths through the caked ash that has turned her face a filthy gray-orange.

"Everything was getting back to normal... and now Hate's left me. Everypony's dead. Massacre's dead... Everyone is leaving me!"

Holy crap.

Pressing her hoof further into my throat, the promise of immolation rising with the temperature, she screamed into my face. "It's all your fault! You left, and everything went to shit!"

Let me talk to her.

The last thing I needed was Two Kick threatening her again: she looked much more on edge than usual. The last time I'd seen her, she'd been lounging luxuriously in a bath of flame retardant. She'd seemed happy. She was as far opposite of that as could be right now. Hysterical, furious, terrified. Not a good combination for a walking force of nature.

She was my marefriend. I can do this. Let me talk to the crazy bitch.

"It's uh... not my fault?" I don't know why I let it out as a question, but it was the wrong thing to say. She stomped into my throat, flames catching in the hair around her hoof. I was sort of glad she was stomping on my neck, though. I couldn't feel the burn; only the denial of breath.

I coughed when she eased her weight off of my throat, pulling air back into my lungs. It tasted of soot and burned with heat, but bad air was still better than no air at all.

"It's all your fault! We were happy... you and me. Then you betrayed Hate. You betrayed me!" Tears ran down her face, evaporating as soon as they dripped off of her into the haze of heat surrounding her. I was really hoping that Ivory would shoot her, but I couldn't see the blood-drenched mare from my vantage point. I had no clue if anyone but me was alive after the Ranger's grenades.

This was all on me. I hoped Fluster wouldn't do one of her back leaps. The little pegasus would immolate if she tried it. Wherever she was, it was safer than helping me right now.

I managed an apologetic shrug. "I'm... sorry."

She kicked me in the side at that, screaming in rage as she did so. "That's not good enough! You can't fix this! I'm gonna fucking burn you alive!"

The air brightened as the flames of her fire dragon began forming. It was getting much harder to breathe as she began burning the air around us. I wasn't sure how she could stand it, or how she could scream like that without air.

Who gives a shit how Cinder works!? If you don't let me in, we're going to fucking die. Do as I fucking say, or we're both fucked. Fucking listen to me, you stubborn piece of shit! LET ME IN!

It was getting hard to deny him. I could feel his influence slamming into the edges of my consciousness. It was like he was kicking a door down. I didn't know if I could keep him out for much longer...

Will you let me back in after you talk to her?

If we're not dead, sure. You work better with those fucking wastelanders, while they might have trouble dealing with a real stallion. You can take the reins for a bit after. I fucking promise, now let me in.

The tone of my voice when I next opened my mouth was different, the softer purr of Two Kick rather than my gravelly monotone. I'd given up the constant internal struggle, the willpower I'd been using to keep the voice at bay. It was all that he'd needed.

"Hey there, beautiful."

Cinder's eyes widened, and she backed away from me. It was the same reaction she'd had outside of Blank. "Two Kick?"

"You know it. Look, Cinder, you're acting crazy. You know what happens when you get like that." He pulled himself slowly to our hooves, taking a deep breath as the incendiary pony put a shred of distance between us. The temperature was already dropping, and the dragon was fading rapidly.

"But... but you left me. Everypony's dead or gone, and it's just me now."

We smiled, a malicious grin with no kindness behind it. Cinder seemed to take comfort from it though. I was now wondering if she'd been crazy before Two Kick, or if the pony in my head had destroyed the mare that stood before us. No pony could be that emotionally unbalanced without something traumatic happening, right?

You're distracting me. Shut the fuck up. I'm working.

"You're still here though, aren't you? You're the only one left. A fucking goddess amongst the rabble." We stepped towards her, the confusion in her eyes clear as day. I wasn't sure what Two Kick was getting at, but it seemed to be working. We weren't dead yet.

"I know you're not over me, and that makes sense. We were close. Real fucking close. But now I'm gone, and you gotta let me go." We were now close enough that Two Kick nuzzled the crazed mare's cheek, and a fresh set of tears sprang to her eyes.

"I... I don't want to." Her voice hardened as she said it, the scared little mare leaving her voice for just a second. She repeated it, much softer and sadder. "I don't want to."

"You have to. Hate ran like a fucking coward, but you're still here. You just blew up a fucking pony tank. You don't need him, or me. You have you." Every word was hard to believe. Two Kick was empowering her, but I could tell from inside his head that every word was a lie. He was just doing this to save our hide. I didn't even want to think of what a Cinder that wasn't subservient would do. She could burn the world. Again.

I really hope you're setting her up to kill her. Don't let her free.

Shut the fuck up. I'm driving now, and you don't get to fucking tell me where to go.

She was starting to smile through the crazy. Two Kick's plan was working. As much as I hated what he was getting at, I had to admit that it was working.

"You get rid of the Steel fucks destroying your town, and it will be you at the top. No Hate, no pony to tell you what to do. You could run everything. You could be a queen. Claim the position through any means necessary. It's what we were taught as foals, after all."

She nodded, an entirely different look rising onto her face. The look of a tyrant. A filly that had just been given a loaded gun and free reign to do with it as she pleased.

"I could... couldn't I? Ponies are afraid of me... I should use that for myself." She had shrunk while

talking to Two Kick, but was beginning to stand tall again. When she'd been under orders to kill me, she had carried herself like that. It seemed that having either myself or Hate in charge had kept her focussed and self-assured. She'd never considered running things on her own.

Don't do it. Kill her. Kill her now. You're right next to her, and her guard is down.

Nah... this is more fun. Not often I get a chance to create an uncontrollable killing machine.

This mare was so easy to control for Two Kick. She hated me enough that nothing I said would get through to her, but the mixture of blind love and fear she held for Two Kick was sickening. He grinned wide, well aware of the control he had. This had not been a healthy relationship.

"Seize the day. It's your life, make use of it. Kill the Rangers, and take your town. Be your own mare." He stepped back from her, crouching just slightly to make her feel taller. It worked.

"Yes... Yes! I will! This is my town, and those fuckers are making a mess of it!" The manic glint in her eyes was back in full force, and the dragon was beginning to reform around her.

Turning her head to us, the flames of the draconic form flickering around her, she smiled. "Thank you." Leaning forward, she planted a kiss on our cheek. Even with the flickering snaps of her fire dragon and the background rumble of battle, I could hear the sizzle of meat and the smell of burning flesh.

Then, with a grandiose flourish and a slight pirouette, she turned and trotted away from us. Two Kick chuckled under his breath, immensely pleased with what he had done. As she rounded the demolished rubble of a building and disappeared from sight, he spoke to me out loud.

"See. We're alive, and the Rangers are going to die. Job fucking done."

Give me my body back.

"Nah... I'm gonna keep going for a little bit. I said I'd give it back, but not when. I'm gonna hang out here for a while, stretch my legs and take in the fuckin' air." As he put the word to deed, a sickening pop from our shoulder flared pain through our body. He flinched, but the grin didn't leave his face.

"Well, as much as I can. You really fucked me up, didn't you? Rent a joint out, and you never know who's gonna fuckin' move in."

No! Give me control back! Do it now!

He ignored me, walking over to where I'd last seen Ivory. I was yelling in his head, but he didn't even break stride. Damn it. I was getting way too trusting of him. He'd just fucked me over. I needed control. I needed back in. I started fighting to move, to stop, to make my body do anything. Nothing worked. As I struggled I got the feeling that he'd been learning from me, all this time I kept him imprisoned and drugged in my head.

"Ivory! You still alive?" He was doing his best to imitate how I spoke, dulling down his more charismatic tone.

A cough and a groan from past a large chunk of shattered wall drew his attention. Peering around it, he found the form of Ivory bleeding heavily. Her own blood flowed from several injuries, red stain against the dull brown of Wires' demise.

Fluster was there, a roll of healing bandage at her hooves as she worked on getting a healing potion open with her teeth. She was working frantically at it, but kept missing the stopper. Reaching out with his magic, Two Kick snatched the potion away from her.

"Here, let me do that. Can you check on Cutter?" Two Kick's suggestion drew a startled look from the mare, one that he relished. He knew how afraid she was of the griffin, and took full advantage of it.

Fluster's gaze lingered on the bleeding form of her friend, but when she glanced into our smiling face she nodded. To her, this was Ripple. She trusted Ripple. If she could hear me, I would have begged her to stay with Ivory. To not leave the injured mare with the murderer running the show.

She turned from us, leaving the roll of healing bandage on the ground near Ivory. Two Kick stared as she retreated, and I felt the warm burn of his lusty appreciation for the cloaked curves. Turning away, Two Kick approached the prone and bleeding mare, offering the open potion to her. Draining it in one go, Ivory sighed deeply as the healing magics started working. Her eyes had been clenched in pain, but they opened and settled on my form standing over her. With a weak smile, she greeted me.

"Hey Rip. You win?"

Giving a short chuckle, Two Kick nodded. "Yeah. Blew that fucker up."

It must have been a concussion keeping the mare down, because the wounds peppering her face and neck healed up quickly. Her eyes looked a little unfocused, and I knew from experience how she was feeling. She wouldn't notice any strangeness about me, not with her head messed up as it was.

Just don't do anything to her. Please.

Calm the fuck down. I'm not going to. Little miss robes and scars will be back in a minute or two, with or without the griffin. She loves this piece of tail or something. I dunno. Take me a lot longer than a minute to do what I want.

The chuckle in my head was really unnerving. That he was in control revealed a whole new level of malice. He'd been evil, but I could see what he was thinking of doing to her. It was horrifying. And it would take a lot longer than a minute.

"I... just need a moment to clear my head... Where'd Fluster go?" Ivory was struggling to stand, and Two Kick jumped in to assist her. He savored the rough warmth of her gore spotted hide on his, and wanted more. Letting her lean on his side, he began helping her towards where Fluster had gone in search of Cutter.

"She's just over this way. Went to see if Cutter is fucked or not." He was doing a good job of imitating me, but the frequent profanity was a slip, something I hoped Fluster and Ivory would pick up on.

With a nod, she leaned into me. I could feel the damaged shoulder grinding against itself under her weight, making walking difficult. The absence of pain was nice, but the limp was annoying Two Kick.

The sound of battle was beginning to drift away, and I could hear the occasional roar of flames. Cinder was hunting the Rangers, and an earth shaking blast made me think that she'd just cooked off another one. Carrying that much artillery was not a good thing when fighting a pony that could flash fry your ammunition before you used it.

Cutter lay in a blast crater. Before the events of the day, this had been the mouth of an alleyway. Now the collapsed building left a shallow valley in the rubble. Cutter lay reclined against a slab of concrete, breathing slowly and heavily as Fluster busily bandaged his torn hand. Other than that, the griffin appeared to somehow have escaped any significant damage from the blast. He'd gotten incredibly lucky, or he had internal injuries. He was slamming a healing potion as we crested the ridge of the crater, looking down at the two.

"Is the Ranger dead?" Cutter asked, but quickly answered his own question. "Of course, or you wouldn't be here." Two Kick nodded. He liked the griffin, which was beginning to make me question the predator. No being that Two Kicked admired could really be good, could they?

Cutter looked strangely at us as we approached while supporting Ivory. Could he tell that I wasn't in control? Was he sensing another monster? I didn't know, but thinking that made Two Kick aware of it.

He looked away with a cough, then rubbed idly at the wound in our shoulder.

“Yeah. Weapons malfunction killed her.” No pony had seen Cinder, I realized. It had just been me and smoking bits of Ranger when she’d had her conversation with Two Kick. A misfire made enough sense that Cutter and the girls bought it, and it certainly *could* have happened that way. Nothing else we had would have taken out the Ranger.

“Now we gotta go. We can heal as we walk, but we need to get out of Neighwhere.” Two Kick said. I had to give it to him, latching onto my agenda would certainly help him better blend in. With nods of agreement, Cutter and Fluster climbed out of the crater. Fluster had looked at me shouldering Ivory’s weight, but had just smiled and nodded. She was the smallest of us, and Ivory was more than she could take, considering how much she carried under her robes as it was. At least Two Kick was helping, even if it was purely for his own benefit.

The word “shield” popped out of the low murmur of his thoughts more than once. Fucker.

It was a clear shot out of the city, as long as we followed the path that had been cut into Neighwhere by one of the robots. I kept dreading that we would find another one. Normally, this would have warranted the immediate arrival of two stories of metal death, but apparently Two Kick was luckier than I was. Our passage was uncontested, with the only exception being a group of frantic raiders running right in front of us. They hadn’t even given us a second glance, and by the time we’d pulled our weapons to bear they were gone into a side alley. I didn’t know what they were running from, as we never saw it, but I could guess. Either Rangers or Robots.

I came up against the wall of Neighwhere, or at least the new opening that had been plowed through it. Two Kick sighed audibly. To the others, it must have sounded like a sigh of relief. I knew better. He was sad to see the wall torn down. To him, Neighwhere was symbolic of his superiority. Even when it had betrayed him, he still loved the city for what it mean to him.

Hurrying through the hole in the wall as quickly as we could, we found the wasteland outside to be completely devoid of life. The Rangers hadn’t even left a rearguard. They had gone into the city full force, not interested in keeping anyone from escaping. They wanted the tech of the Stable.

Though as soon as they realized that it had been destroyed, or at least burnt, they would not be in a very hospitable mood. Especially if they managed to link me to the bomb. I hadn’t set it off, but it had been used in the aim of killing me. I didn’t know much about how they thought, but it seemed that since they already didn’t like me very much, they would probably use that as an excuse to hunt me down.

Probably. That’s why I’m trying to get out of this fucking town, even with the dead weight you drag around.

Ivory had recovered enough that she was walking unassisted, but she was lagging behind under the weight of her minigun. Cutter and I led the way, while Fluster fell back into step with her friend. Cutter kept giving us strange looks, and I took every chance to tell Two Kick that the griffin knew. He knew that I wasn’t in charge, and even if he didn’t know that Two Kick and I were different ponies, he didn’t like what he saw. He hated the Paragons, and Two Kick was a Paragon. Technically, I was as well, but I hoped that I had won into his good graces by helping him out.

We piled on the distance as fast as we could, getting away from the burning city.

Behind us, the column of smoke coming from Neighwhere was blending into the already dark clouds, making it impossible to tell what time of day it was. We were moving as quickly as we could. Shared between us were enough cuts, scrapes, burns, and bruises to kill a singular pony, but we couldn’t really stop and lick our wounds. We didn’t know if there were Rangers nearby, or if raiders had fled in this direction.

We just kept walking, hugging the dead forest that covered this side of the mountain. Once, it had been lush and vibrant, but it was long dead now. It wasn't quite as lifeless as the bleached forest had been, but then that forest had only appeared lifeless. Fern was proof enough of that.

The little timberwolf was still hidden somewhere amidst Fluster's gear, but he had started making noise as soon as we'd neared the forest. I didn't know if it was him wanting to run, or if he could smell other timberwolves. Fluster kept cooing into her robe, trying to quiet the little beast, but his noise continued.

Cutter had fallen behind now, between me and the girls. His injured limb was slowing him down, he kept looking at the missing digit and licking the wound. The worst of the blood had dried by now, leaving a filthy red sheen on his black feathers. I was looking forward to the rain that was now threatening, if just to wash him off. I didn't know much about timberwolves, but I wouldn't be surprised if the smell of blood would attract them. Not that we couldn't handle them, but as battered as we all were, I preferred to avoid any fights we could. Especially if I wasn't in charge of my body.

As one, we flinched and drew what weapons we had. A deep bass thump came from behind us, as something in Neighwhere went off. Cinder had probably just taken out another Ranger.

Perfect. Fucking love it when things work out.

Give me back my body, you traitorous fuck. You promised. Give it back. They'll find out it's you. What do you think they'll do? Cutter will kill us. You had a part in ruining Ivory's life. Ash will kill you if he finds you. Just give the body back.

Little longer. I'm enjoying this. Fuck you.

What happens if we run into Shade?

That mere mention of Shade made Two Kick stumble, and for a split second I felt the rough ground underfoot. I knew that her proximity had an effect that I still had no explanation for, but now I had found that even the thought of her was damaging to his control.

Without Stampede running through our system, I had just found a way back in. I began concentrating on the mare I loved, as hard as I could. The way she walked. The way she felt curled up next to me. The way her hair curled in front of her eyes if she was being shy.

Her eyes.

Two Kick fully lost it, tripping on a half buried tin can. Hitting the ground hard, he let out a short yelp of surprise. So that was it.

Her eyes. The most beautiful things I'd ever seen. Those mismatched orbs, blue and violet. The only thing that made me forget about the horrors of the wasteland. Paradise.

I stood up, and laughed out in triumph. I shook out a fetlock, and found I was back in control. I had beaten Two Kick. I had fucking won.

You slimy fucking cunt. I'm going to cut you out of my head with a fucking spoon! The things I will do to your pretty little mare will make the whole of fucking Equestria sore.

Go fuck yourself.

I slammed three hits of Med-X into my back leg at once, exhausting the supply I kept in one of the pockets built into my front leg armor. His screaming voice faded into the back of my head, dulling to a furious whisper. I would never make the mistake of letting him back into control again.

I was getting too easy on the psycho, and had almost paid too great a price for it. I would need to keep medicated until I found Shade again, and then I wasn't going to leave her side until I found a way to

extinguish him once and for all.

Looking up, I saw that I was getting very odd looks. They'd just seen me stumble, trip, laugh out loud, and take a huge dose of painkiller. I rubbed at my shredded ear unconsciously, wincing as the pain of it reminded me I'd taken a metal dart through it, and laughed a little. "I'm... I'm good. Just surprised we're all still alive..." And that I had regained my body with nothing more than the power of positive thinking.

Ivory shook her head, smiling. "Yeah. We did good... so where are we going?"

I sighed as the drugs hit me hard. I'd never taken that much Med-X at once, and I suddenly found it hard to care about anything. I sorta wanted to go run in the woods. Play hide and seek in the trees, run through some dead leaves, frolic with the timber wolves.

Wait... what the fuck? No. No, no.

I forced my eyes to focus, and then turned dizzily to Ivory. With three doses at once, the Med-X was kicking my ass. I really hoped we didn't run into any more trouble. I felt more like hugging a raider than shooting them.

"There's a tunnel that runs from Hornsmith." I was still a little light headed, and had to pause to collect my thoughts. "Viola blew it up, but it keeps going..." I looked past the group. I wasn't seeing the rise of the mountain. I was seeing the tunnel underneath it. Our fight with The End had blocked the return to Hornsmith, which left the north line.

"Somewhere along here, hopefully soon, there's a group of freed slaves. Whitecoats, Blank ponies, and some others." Ash and Shade, I hoped. I needed to get to Shade. "We can rest when we find them, and figure out our next step.

"Ripple... are you really okay?" Fluster was looking at me from within her hood, her bright eyes catching the dim light of the overcast day. I nodded, hoping to be convincing enough to get us on our way. I began trotting the way we'd been heading anyways, eventually hearing the sounds of hooves behind me.

I could hear the girls muttering to each other, my name catching my ear as we walked. Between Two Kick's acting, and my efforts to bury him, they'd noticed. They knew something was going on with me.

It was probably just the several days without drugs in my system other than the Stampede I'd used to finish off Massacre. The massive dose of Med-X had just hit me harder than usual. That was all.

I wasn't losing it.

After about an hour, we couldn't see the smoke column that was Neighwhere. We hadn't seen any evidence that anypony had been this way, neither Raider or Ranger. The time had flown by, and I'd managed to convince Fluster to give me some more Med-X, to keep the voice down. It had been easy, with the bandage we'd put around my shoulder showing spots of blood, and my ear torn into two ragged flaps.

The forest was still just as dead, and the wasteland just as desolate, as everywhere else. We'd come across a single difference though. There was a road now, running along the edge of the forest. Even Fern had lapsed back into quiet, and the clip clop of our hooves was the only sound.

The first time we'd come across the remains of a caravan, we'd stopped and searched around. It had been there for a long time, partially sunk into the ground next to the road. It was raining, and the broken pieces of a wagon were jutting up out of the muck. The pony bones told us what we really

needed to know though. These were the remains of one of Neighwhere's hits.

We counted at least three adults, and two younger ponies amongst the bones. With the amount of wreckage though, this had been a much larger group. The rest had presumably been taken hostage.

I felt like shit.

I'd done this. Even if I hadn't been a part of the raiding group that had struck here, I'd sat by and condoned it. Participated and revelled in it. This was no way to live, preying on the weak.

The caravan had been picked clean, anything left behind completely unusable. We saw three more in rapid succession past that. It was hard to tell how old each one was, but they had all been there for some time.

Past the last caravan, Cutter spoke up for the first time in a while. "A pony came this way."

I stopped, and looked back at him. He was off the side of the road, kneeling in the muck and poking at something sticking out. I approached him, and he pulled something out of the mud.

Shaking it off, he unveiled a Neighwhere bomb collar. Much like the one I still carried around my neck for lack of a means to remove it. Lifting the little explosive to the end of his beak, he inhaled deeply.

"It's recent. Real recent. Maybe about..." He didn't get to finish the sentence, as he was hit from the side by a dark blur. Sent tumbling into the mud, biting and scratching, he fought against his attacker. In the rain, it was hard to make out any details, but that didn't matter. I was pulling Broken from its holster, ready to assist the large griffin. Luck was on my side, as it ended up.

A heavy shot slammed into my weapon, driving it into my side. I went sprawling, and Broken spiralled off into the wet earth. Pulling myself up, I scrambled for the weapon as Ivory's gun ripped out a stream of bullets at the second attacker I had yet to see.

I found Broken, pulling it up out of the sucking ground. The barrel was filled with mud, and I shook the weapon hard to try and clear the fouled barrel. There was a scuff mark on the side of the weapon where it had been struck, and I stared at it for a second. It had never been scratched. That shot would have blown me in half if not for the unnaturally durable piece of hardware.

I spotted my attacker as it wheeled through the air to avoid the wall of lead that Ivory was throwing at it. A griffin in dark body armor. A quick glance to Cutter showed me that he was facing off against another griffin wielding a longsword. A glint of light on glass brought me back to the flying griffin, who was lining up another shot on me with a large sniper rifle. He was focusing on me, content to just avoid Ivory's attacks with a practiced ease.

For a split second, I thought it was Ash. The color was all wrong though, this griffin was brown under his black combat armor. I threw myself to the side just before there was a flash from the end of the weapon. The bullet struck mud, cratering it and splattering me with ooze. The rain wasn't making moving easy, and I knew that I had to get back to the road.

There was still mud in the barrel, but I hoped that there would be no ill effect as I aimed the weapon. It was still loaded with buckshot and the griffin was a good distance away, but it was better than nothing. The weapon barked, a spray of liquid mud and propellant exhaust firing into the rain.

As I fired, the griffin dodged the ineffective shot, but it proved lucky for Ivory. Several shots sawed through the griffin's wing, and he dropped out of the air. As he fell, he racked the slide on his rifle and snapped off a shot at Ivory. The shot blew through her ammo feed, right on top of her armor. Ivory screamed as she was forced to her knees, the minigun clattering on empty as it spun down.

As the griffin hit the road and bounced, I was already charging. He sprang to his paws, aiming that

huge rifle at me as he angled for a shot. I fired right before he did, my buckshot digging into his dark armor and kicking sprays of blood from one shoulder. The heavy weapon fired, but it missed coring me. The shot tore along my side, drawing a long strip through my hide and spraying blood along the street. It actually hurt, but it was just a flesh wound. A really, really long fleshwound, but a glancing blow all the same.

I got to him as he was reloading hastily, and spun with a sickening crunch issuing from my shoulder. I fought through the pain and wrongness to deliver my signature blow, both ballistic hooves impacting at once with the griffin's body armor. It may not have pierced, but I heard the blood gurgling in his throat as he reeled back, his fragile avian bones giving way under the impact. I could only imagine shards of rib shredding his organs as they shattered. He dropped to all fours, the rifle clattering onto the ground, and vomited a stream of gore before slumping to the ground, clutching his chest as he died.

I fell over, my shoulder giving out on me, and hit the ground hard. I kicked at the ground, trying to regain my footing to help Cutter. I could see the two griffins fighting. The sword wielding griffin was Fraya, holding the upper hand with her impressive weapon's reach. Cutter was at a disadvantage, a rusty relic of pipe his only weapon.

Ivory was struggling with her ammo belt, trying to feed it in with the help of Fluster, who was frantically pulling at it with her teeth. I began hobbling towards the combat as quickly as I could, reloading Broken as I went. With my magic, I wiped what mud was left from the weapon, clearing it for reliable use.

Cutter was still holding his own, and Fraya was now favoring her left arm, her right hanging limply at her side. He must have gotten a lucky hit in, forcing her to one-hand the heavy weapon. Both were looking beaten down, and the fighting was beginning to slow. I'd never seen two griffins fight before, but it made me glad the many ponies I'd fought had possessed fewer natural weapons. Both were cut in a dozen places, and it looked like Fraya had taken a bite out of one of Cutter's thighs.

They were dodging and weaving too much for me to get a good shot in, and I didn't want to have to explain to Ash how I blew his brother's head off by accident. I decided the best I could do was serve as a distraction.

As soon as I got near enough, the griffin apparently knew that I was there. Spinning, she lashed out with the wicked blade. I'd thought for a second that she'd missed me, a warning slash before she went back to dealing with the unarmed griffin, but an intense pain gave lie to that notion. She'd sliced through the end of my muzzle, not deep, but enough to bring about a great amount of blood and pain.

My eyes watered up immediately and I recoiled instinctively as blood poured from the end of my snout. "Bitch!" I yelled through the blood flowing freely from my face. "Celestia damnit!"

She fainted to the side, telegraphing a slash that Cutter moved to block. Cancelling out of the movement, she darted forward and slammed the pommel of her weapon into the side of Cutter's head. He went down, hard, and the female griffin turned her attention back to me.

"You know what sort of shit I'm going to be in?" She screamed as she slashed wildly at me. I jumped backwards and my leg crumpled, sending me sprawling to the ground. Looming over me, the blade gripped angrily in her talons, she glared hate down at me.

"It was my job to ensure that the slaves make it to Red Eye. Now there aren't any. You ruined an entire stream of labor, and I'm going to have to pay for that. You stupid little fuck!" She slashed out as I scooted away, scoring a shallow wound across my chest. I rolled over and forced myself to get up. I had to get away from her. The tables had turned on me much faster than I'd expected.

"Maybe if I bring back the heads of a fallen Talon and a pony that personally fucked up Red Eye's

business? That might smooth things over for me.” She was snarling at me as she approached, spinning the blade in her one good hand. The other arm was still tucked in tight. Her wings were flared out, probably to make her look more intimidating. It was working. Griffins always touched off that little primal part in my mind, and she was doing a great job of it.

She snapped her head to the side, pointing the sword across the street. The mares were still fumbling with the damaged ammo feed, and both froze and looked up as the griffin screamed at them. “You just wait! You’re fucking next!”

It was then that she noticed her comrade dead on the road. He’d died from the massive internal injuries he had no doubt suffered when I’d crushed his rib cage, now crumpled in a puddle of watered down blood. The sound that came from her beak was nothing that a living creature should have been able to make, rage personified.

Turning back to me, she grumbled, her voice lowered to a murderous growl. I knew the look she was giving me. I’d worn it myself before. “No fucking pony hurts a Talon and lives. Those Steel bastards took out two of mine. They died for that. You, you’re special. I’m going to put your head on a fucking sign!” Raising the sword above her head, she readied to gut me in a single blow.

A muddy pipe smacked her in the back of the head, inciting a screech of pain and rage. Snapping around, she charged at Cutter, who was rising out of the sucking muck like a creature from the abyss. He roared, and ran to meet the female griffin head on.

The sword hissed as it cut through the rain, overhead and with all the might that she could put behind it. Cutter threw his injured hand up towards it, the blade hitting him between two of his remaining digits. It went through his hand in a spray of blood, lodging in his wrist, but he grinned maniacally. He’d trapped her blade, and still had one hand free. Fraya looked up in surprise right as he punched her straight in the face with his good hand.

The force of the blow sent her cartwheeling back into the mud, the blade still lodged firmly in Cutter’s forearm. He shrieked, an avian cry of pain, as he grasped at the grip of the weapon and pulled it free. His arm dangled at his side, his hand and wrist a ruined mess of blood, bone, and meat. He one-handed the blade confidently, his size making it look appropriate. Where Fraya had had to work to use the weapon, Cutter wielded it easily.

“You and your Talons can burn. Every one of you that dies is a step towards fixing our race. Leaving wasn’t enough...” Cutter intoned, stalking towards the fallen Talon. Fraya was picking herself up as he approached, and was still game. Instead of backing down, she lunged forward, drawing a dagger from behind her back.

With a snap of her wings, she plowed into Cutter, bowling them both over into the mud. He didn’t react in time, and took the dagger to his shoulder. It bit in deep, and Freya sank her beak into his other shoulder. She kept flapping, buffeting at him with her wings as she tried to rip into his neck.

Cutter didn’t let go of the sword, slashing at the griffin in close range. The first hit was with the flat of the blade, letting out a loud slapping noise, but the second he used the pommel. He drove it into her gut, knocking her off of him and into a coughing fit. He used that chance to get one of his feline rear paws in between them and kick as hard as he could. She flew off of him, leaving the dagger embedded in the meat of his shoulder.

She hit the ground in a slide, hopping back to her feet with cat-like grace. Standing at her full height, she placed herself in the perfect position to counter his follow up lunge. The long blade, spinning through the air from Cutter’s throw, took her right in the chest. The weapon stood proud from its new sheath. Fraya stood there, a shocked expression on her face as she stared at the hilt of her own

weapon, sticking out of her chest.

I saw the tip of the weapon sticking out of Fraya's back as she fell to all fours. Cutter was approaching her slowly, flexing his ruined hand. I didn't know what he was planning, since he'd already won. I'd been transfixed by the fight, and only now found the will to move.

He got behind her, grabbing both of her wings where they met her back. Placing one of his paws into the center of her back, right below the piercing sword, he leaned in close to her ear. "I wanted you to feel this before you died. It's quite the experience."

Then he pulled. His ruined hand had a weak grip, but he put his all into it. Blood spurted from the ruined appendage, but he gritted his teeth and kept pulling. Fraya screamed, and Cutter joined in after only a few seconds. The two screaming griffins made a sound that hurt, and I could see Ivory and Fluster covering their ears. Then there were two sickening pops, barely audible over the screaming.

With sprays of blood and torn flesh, the wings separated from her back and she slammed down into the ground, landing directly on the handle of the blade piercing her center. Her scream turned to a gurgle, and she slumped into silence. I wasn't sure if she was dead, or just unconscious, but she was finished.

Cutter threw the two severed wings into the mud, approaching Fraya's body. Kicking her to her side, he reached down and gripped the blade. Pulling it from the limp meat that had once been a dangerous opponent, he stood there in the rain looking down at her. I don't think he'd killed his own kind before, but he seemed to be taking it rather well.

He leaned down and pulled the sheath from her corpse. Slinging it over his shoulder, it caught on the dagger still sticking from his upper chest. Pulling the blade out, he threw it into the mud. Sliding the sword into the sheath on his back, he claimed his prize from the fight.

Then, he dropped to the ground, passing out from blood loss.

We'd dragged him down the road, finding shelter under a collapsed billboard. These seemed to be fairly common in the wasteland, and were always a welcome shelter. Ivory had done most of the pulling, while Fluster and I did our best to help. He was heavy. Really heavy.

Gathering all of the medical supplies we had, we used most of them just getting the bleeding to stop. His ruined hand was the hardest, and Fluster put together a rough tourniquet. We didn't know exactly what we were doing, but the bleeding stopped.

Luckily, the wound in my shoulder had stopped bleeding some time before, and I didn't need any of the bandages. Ivory insisted on wrapping up my snout though, as it wouldn't stop bleeding, and the only way to secure it was to tie my mouth shut.

So, with my head wrapped in bandages, and Cutter unconscious but no longer bleeding heavily, we had little to do but rest. Ivory's minigun was back to functionality, and I held Broken in the rain to clear any more mud from it. It still showed the slight scuff mark from the sniper's shot, but was otherwise undamaged. Until I had access to proper cleaning tools, it was the best that I could do.

Ivory voiced the question that I knew was all in our heads. "So, what do we do now?"

Moving my shoulder, I felt another crunch and a spasm of pain shot through me. I was beginning to suspect that a bullet had lodged in there. I shrugged my good shoulder, shaking my head. I didn't know. I pointed a hoof at Cutter's form, and shrugged again.

"Yeah, we can't really go anywhere like this, can we?" She sat down, but not before clearing the ground with a brush of her tail. The rain had cleaned most of the remaining gore from her coat, but she

was just pink now instead of dirty red.

Fluster, playing in one corner of our little shelter with the timberwolf pup she carried in her pocket, spoke up. “We could... build a cart! We’ve got the supplies down the road, we could come up with something.”

That was a good idea. All that caravan wreckage, we were sure to have enough to kludge one together. I nodded, because the last time I’d tried to talk Ivory had scolded me about loosening the bandages holding my nose together.

“Fluster and I will go get the parts. You watch... you watch the griffin. You can barely walk as it is.” Ivory stood, shifting so that her battle saddle fit properly after sitting down. Fluster stood as well, scooping Fern back into her robes. I drew Broken, cradling it in my foreleg as I leaned back against a wall of our little enclosure. With my bad leg, I gave a little wave, then immediately regretted the movement. That noise was really starting to concern me.

“Be careful Ripple.” Fluster’s eyes were filled with concern, and they darted to the unconscious griffin for a second. Looking back to me, I gave her a reassuring nod. He was more fucked up than I was, even if he tried anything. Not that I expected a lot from him, being unconscious.

“Seeya in a little bit Rip.” Ivory ducked through the opening, out into the rainy evening. It would be dark before long, and we’d chosen the shelter we were in for a nights stay. I just hoped the girls would be back before the light disappeared, or I’d really start worrying.

Then Fluster went outside, and I was left with the unconscious form of the shredded griffin and the pounding rain on the billboard. I sighed, and leaned back, my eyes on the entrance. This was going to be a long wait.

I turned on the light on my PipBuck, and stared at the screen for a little bit. I still had Sweeps’ third message, but at this point I wasn’t sure I wanted to listen to it. All it would bring me is more guilt, some new atrocity that I hadn’t known about. My hoof lingered near the button that would play the file, until my shoulder started complaining at holding my leg like that for an extended period of time.

It was the first downtime I’d had in recent history where I wasn’t imprisoned or in immediate mortal peril. It was... boring. Really, really boring.

Across the way from me, I spotted a satchel that Fluster had taken the time to take from the dead Fraya as we’d been dealing with Cutter. Seeing no harm in my searching through it, I grabbed at it with my magic. My range wasn’t great, but I managed to snag a leather strap and drag it across the shelter to me.

Unsnapping the clasp that held it shut, I opened the bag and dumped its contents in front of me.

Meat jerky of some kind, which I pushed aside. I wasn’t nearly hungry enough to shake the image of Cutter bolting down that chunk of raider. They’d fed me well enough in Neighwhere that I was still good, even if I hadn’t eaten since that morning.

A few lockpicks, which I stashed in the now empty pouch that had once held Med-X. Speaking of which, I pulled another dose from the pile Fluster had left behind and jabbed the needle into my leg. I was keeping a steady flow going, because I really wasn’t in the mood to hear Two Kick.

There were a few odds and ends, personal stuff that didn’t mean much to me. A few teeth from assorted creatures, a trinket made of beads and leather. At the bottom of the pile was what looked like a photograph, and I pulled it free from the miscellania.

The picture was old and faded, but had four griffins on it. I wondered briefly where they’d gotten a functioning camera, since it was clearly taken in the wasteland and wasn’t some throwback from before the war. I stopped when I actually looked at the picture.

There was an older, grizzled griffin standing behind the other three. He had Talon armor on, and had his arms around the others. He was smiling. They all were.

The one in the middle I'd last seen with her wings ripped off and a sword jammed through her chest. It was definitely Fraya, if a little younger looking. She had the armor of a Talon on, and held the sword proudly before her, point down.

The other two griffins were what caught my attention. Every griffin in the picture was black feathered and dark furred, as Fraya had been. I'd thought that she'd looked a bit like Ash when I'd first seen her in the Arena, and now I knew why. The other two griffins, much younger than they currently were, but unmistakable, were Ash and Cutter. They weren't in their Talon armor, but stood proudly with their sister and who I assumed was their father.

They'd been a family. My jaw would have dropped if it could have, and I stared at Cutter. If I wasn't taking this picture way out of context, he'd just impaled and then ripped the wings off of his sister.

Holy shit.

"Hlmh fmht." I mumbled through the bandages, staring wide-eyed at the unconscious griffin. What had happened between them that he'd done that to his sister? How was there that bad of blood between the brothers and the rest of their family?

A noise outside drew my attention, and for a second, I thought the girls were back.

No, it was too soon for that. They'd not been gone nearly long enough, which meant something was wrong or it was somepony else. I aimed Broken at the entry, and shut my pipbuck light off with a nudge of magic .

A dark, taloned hand gripped the inside of the door, and the figure pulled itself through. I didn't fire though, staring in disbelief.

"Kick! You're fucking alive?!"

Ash stood there, dripping wet and aiming a revolver right between my eyes.

"Hmph?" Ash?

He sprang forward, drawing me into a hug. I let out a sharp noise as he put pressure on my injured shoulder, and he set me down, apologizing.

"Kick... Wow. I'm glad I didn't come in shooting. I've been patrolling this road since we heard explosions from Neighwhere... trying to see if anypony was headed this way. We picked up a few escaped slaves and killed a few raiders... but were losing hope of seeing anyone friendly after a while. Fucking... Kick, I can't believe this."

He was just staring at me, seemingly oblivious to the other griffin laying next to him. I guess he was just as surprised as I was.

"I heard gunfire over this way... and when I saw a light on in here, I decided to check it out... but fucking wow. I didn't expect to find you and..." His eyes locked on the unconscious griffin. I suspected that the last time he'd seen Cutter, the younger griffin had been thinner and had wings. The hulking, wingless brawler that lay there must not have been anything like what he remembered, but I saw the recognition in his eyes.

"Cutter?" His voice was low, and just a little scared. He turned his glance to me, pointing at the griffin. "Cutter?"

I nodded, knowing that I couldn't even begin to explain what I'd been through with my mouth

bandaged shut. I pointed at myself and Cutter, and then held up my hoof twice, hoping that he would understand. Simulating drawing a hood over my head, and then combing my mane, I finished my message.

“Ivory and Fluster?”

I nodded my head, pleased.

He looked around, then back at me. “Where are they?”

I pointed out the opening, into the fading day. This whole charades thing was hard to get detail across with. I thought that I should share one more bit of information with the griffin. I floated the picture to him, urging him to take it.

He took it, and I turned my PipBuck light back on to help. Looking at it, his glance hardened. He held the picture up, his voice low and threatening. Not towards me, but just in general. “Where did you get this?”

I tapped a hoof on the female griffin in the middle. His eyes widened a bit. “Fraya? Where is she? What happened?” It wasn’t the frantic questioning of a brother scared for his sister’s whereabouts, but more the questioning of someone looking for a threat.

I pointed to Cutter, and then made a gesture of drawing my hoof across my throat.

“He did?”

I nodded solemnly. He slumped down in the middle of the clear area, next to his unconscious brother. “Is he gonna be okay?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t a doctor pony. All I knew was that he wasn’t dead yet.

He put his head in both claws, sighing. “My family is so fucked up...” He drifted off and just left it hanging. Even if I could have said something, I wouldn’t have. I had no way of knowing what to say in this situation, I just let the griffin take in what information I’d given him.

We sat like that for a while, the two of us in silence with only the sound of rain to occupy the space. Eventually, a sound outside drew our attention and our guns, but Ivory ducking into the shelter caused us to lower them quickly.

“Ash? What are you doing here?” It was the first thing she could ask after she’d screamed in surprise at the beaked face that greeted her.

Ivory and Fluster had gathered enough supplies to build a basic cart. Ash helped with the simple task, while the girls caught him up on our time in Neighwhere. I stayed under the billboard with Cutter, keeping my bandages out of the rain. Occasional raised voices, and once a bark of laughter, drifted in to my resting place. I wished I was out there with them. I was curious how their point of view differed from mine.

After about ten minutes, the griffin stepped into the shelter. “Okay, we’ve got the cart ready. Can you help me get him outside?” He gripped his brother under the arms, and I did what I could to grab the griffin’s legs. With a combination of magic and propping his legs up on my withers, I made due. My limp wasn’t helping, but we got the Cutter’s hulking form onto the cart. I was struck by the similarities between the two griffins, as well as the differences. Where Ashred was wiry and tough, Cutter bulked massively. The wings, of course... But even at a glance, they were obviously birds of a feather... or something.

“So where are we heading? Somewhere with a shower?” It was sort of funny that she would ask that question while we stood in the pouring rain. Ivory had a one track mind, most of the time. Now that Wires was out of the picture, I guess that she was latched onto the prospect of personal grooming.

Ash pointed down the road. “About half an hour that way. We found an old MoP building off of the road a bit. We’ve been laying low for a few days. We were waiting for word from Kick, honestly.”

I glanced at him, and he smiled. “You had us worried, buddy. Most thought you were dead, but I didn’t give up hope. You’re too hard to kill. Shade didn’t give up hope either... somepony’s gonna be real happy when I bring you through the front door.”

He picked the ends of the haphazard cart, and pulled it onto the road. Ivory lent her side to me in support, and I limped along with her. Pulling down the road, we continued on with our journey. This time, we had a destination though.

Shade. Shade was my destination. After that, medical attention.

Shade first.

After limping down the road for a while supported by Ivory, Ash led us off of the beaten path into the forest. I realized that this had once been a clearly marked side road, but with two hundred years of mutant growth and rain, it was hidden. I hadn’t even seen the path until we were on it, heading into the forest.

Ash hissed back at us, “Now keep it down. There are timberwolves in here. They haven’t attacked anyone, but it’s best to play it safe.”

The road was soup at this point, thick and sucking, just like any other unpaved surface we’d encountered since leaving Neighwhere. The going got hard, and I could hear Ash grunting and straining as he hauled the cart containing his brother. I would have gladly helped, but I could barely walk as it was.

The sun had dropped from the cloud cover to the horizon, and it was now fully dark. I had my PipBuck on, lighting the area directly around my right leg, but it was very dark in the forest. Ash seemed to know where he was going though, stopping only long enough to make sure that he didn’t lose us. Fluster was sticking right next to him, clearly remembering what had happened the last time she’d walked through a forest. True, she’d gotten a new friend out of that ordeal, but she’d almost been eaten.

“There we are.” Ash spoke, picking up his pace. I couldn’t see anything at first, but as I squinted through the gloom I could just pick out a light in a window. I urged Ivory along, and limped as fast as I could.

The front door was a massive thing, and Ash’s balled up talons rang it like a bell as he knocked. There was a loud thunk as bolts were drawn, and the door opened to reveal two filthy looking Whitecoats pointing assault rifles at us. When they saw Ash, they lowered their weapons, allowing us entrance.

Ash yelled as the door closed behind him, and I was grateful that he did. “Hey Shade! I found something you might wanna see!” He gave me a wink, and started giving orders to the Whitecoats to get a medic.

I was too busy listening to the sound of hooves coming down a flight of stairs. They were hesitant, pausing on each step. Then she came into view. My Shade.

Her eyes widened when she saw me, filthy, injured, and wrapped in bandages, but still alive. She took the last few steps at once, covering the distance between us almost too quickly for Ivory to get out of

the way. She would have slammed into me, but seeing me with one leg tucked up against my body, and the blood-stained bandages around my face, she slid to a halt just in front of me. She threw her front legs around me, giving me a deep hug and burying her face in my mane.

I couldn't do anything but stand there, as she acted as a replacement for my injured leg. Not that I wanted to do anything else, I'd been looking forward to this moment since I'd thrown that bag through the fire.

Closing my eyes, I did what I could to nuzzle her neck. Neither of us cared about the blood soaked bandages, we both sighed at the contact.

I lost track of time, being that close to her. Eventually, I felt a nervous prodding in my side. Opening my eyes, I looked at who was doing the prodding and saw a pony I realized I'd completely forgotten about. Bruised, beaten, injured, sporting a fresh black eye, but smiling all the same, was Pearl. My handler from the Arena. In our haste to survive the attack on Neighwhere, I'd completely forgotten about her.

I guiltily looked back at Pearl, who was standing there with a box clenched in her teeth. It had the butterfly symbol of the Ministry of Peace on it, and I realized that she was the medic. She couldn't have been here more than a few hours, but they already had her healing the sick and injured.

"Umm... Hi Ripple." Shade gave the scrawny medical mare a quick glance as she spoke, then went back to the hug. Her jealousy always amused me a bit. "Could... uh... could you follow me? We need to get you cleaned up."

I nodded, and started moving with Shade still latched to my neck. As we followed Pearl, Ash caught my eye and waggled his brows suggestively. I knew exactly what he was thinking, and I shook my head at him. Being dragged to a shower with two mares? Yeah, maybe sometime, but not now.

The room that we were lead to housed a few slaves that were resting after their escape, and I could tell that they'd gotten out in the attack. I noticed that none of them had their collars on. Mine itched at the thought. Even if it was no longer active, the weight of it was a constant reminder of the pens.

I gave Shade a quick hug with my damaged leg, and then pushed her away with a quick nuzzle. I had to take care of my injuries. I was also missing the ability to speak. She followed along, trying to catch me as I forgot that I couldn't use one of my legs and slammed into the hard floor. I groaned, picking myself up with the assistance of the two mares, who now supported me to a faucet along one wall.

The two of them worked together, unwrapping the bandages holding my face and shoulder together. Once the bandages were off of my muzzle, I worked my jaw. It had been a while since I'd said anything, and I got right to it.

"Hi Shade." I smiled and kissed her, then grimaced as I saw the bloody mark I'd left. "Oh... uh... do you have any potions Pearl?"

She passed me a bottle of purple liquid, and I ripped off the cap and slammed it quickly. I felt the dull sensation I got from healing, that everything was becoming less messed up than usual. Turning on the tap, she ran a sponge under the flowing water and wiped down my face. My face stopped hurting, and she began cleaning the blood covered area, cleaning the sponge several times under the running water.

As Shade cleaned my blood from her face and Pearl began cleaning my shoulder, I started talking to her. I was really curious about the collars. "Pearl... how did you get here?"

"The griffin found us. We were running from Neighwhere." Like it was the easiest thing in Equestria. She hummed at my wound, and dropped the sponge. Rummaging through the box of supplies, she pulled out a pair of stainless steel tweezers. Big ones.

“Uh... what’s that for?” I barely got the question out before she jammed the tweezer into the wound in my shoulder. I barked out a yell at the unexpected shock of pain. I had known what was coming the moment I saw the tweezers, but I didn’t think it was going to hurt so much. That shoulder had been fairly numb, so long as I didn’t stretch the leg out.

Shade gasped and covered her mouth in shock, staring at the pony digging a metal tool into my shoulder. I felt Pearl grab onto something, and she pulled back out of the wound. Clutched at the end of the tweezers was a deformed bullet.

I blinked back some surprise tears, and looked at the bullet. “Ow! Tell me before you do that. Please?”

Dropping the bullet, and picking back up the sponge, she apologized through clenched teeth. “Sorry. Most of the ponies I’ve done this on were unconscious.” Right. She learned healing as an Arena handler. Comfort didn’t seem to be a major part of that.

“So before Ash. How did you get the collars off?” I tugged at mine with my magic, unwilling to move my freshly tweezed shoulder. Shade gave me another potion, and I downed that eagerly. I wanted the hole in my shoulder to heal, even if only aesthetically. Even with the potion, I knew that I would be limping for a few days. Joints were hard.

Once it felt like I could, I gingerly placed my hoof down and put some weight on it. It still felt wrong, but it didn’t collapse under me. An improvement.

“It was a slaver. Black Berry. He was always a little less mean than the rest.” Pearl continued, and I looked up at her with a confused look. Oh right, the collars. “He pulled his kicks...”

She stared off into the distance, zoned out with the bloody sponge in her mouth. Shade nudged her to continue helping me, and she snapped back to the present.

“He turned off the collars. Deactivated them all, and told us to run.” She twitched, her expression unreadable. “His hoof hit me in the eye when they tore him apart.”

She was staring again, and Shade took the sponge from her and started on my side, cleaning some of the blood that was covering my leg below the bullet wound. I sighed, sorry for what Pearl had experienced and simply glad that nopony was trying to kill me right then.

Pearl slowly came back into the real world, staring at Shade as she worked at the blood caking my side. I stood there, favoring my injured leg. Pearl smiled, and I smiled in return. “You’d said you wouldn’t... you know... because you had a marefriend. I see what you were talking about now.”

I froze. I’d told her I had a marefriend to explain why I wasn’t going to rape her. This was suddenly much more uncomfortable than it had been just seconds earlier. Very cautiously, apprehensive as though expecting to be hit, she wrapped her legs around Shade in an embrace.

“You have a good guy there.” Pearl smiled. “Thank you.”

Shade mumbled a thank you in reply, clearly not as adept at talking with a sponge in her mouth as the malnourished medic was.

Then, Pearl released Shade from the embrace and left the room, almost fleeing without another word. Shade stopped, giving me a strange look. “What was that about?” The sponge dropped to the ground, most of its job now finished.

“She helped me out in Neighwhere. I’m glad to see she made it out safely.” She shut me up with a kiss, then went back to pressing herself against me. She’d missed me. I’d missed her. Nothing short of the screaming death threats of a wounded griffin could have pulled us apart.

“You traitorous, cowardly fuck! I’ll rend your head from your shoulders with my beak!” Oh shit. Cutter

was awake. Shade had gotten good at this support thing, and we ran towards the sound of the yelling as one, her soft warmth supporting me where my injured shoulder wouldn't.

Entering the room where they'd taken Cutter's unconscious body, I came upon a scene of havoc. There was one Whitecoat in the corner, bleeding heavily from four long slashes in his face. Several more were holding down the struggling griffin with both magic and muscle, but he had his good hand clutching Ash's throat as though he were trying to squeeze the older griffin's head clean off.

"Cutter... calm down... I'm sorry." Ash choked through his clenched beak. I could see blood trickling down Cutters claws, and knew that he could tear out his brothers throat at any time. I'd seen Ash do it in the past, and Cutter was much more the stronger of the two.

"I... had... no... choice." If the dark griffin could have turned blue, he would have. I could see his eyelids flickering, on the verge of passing out. Somepony had to stop this. I wasn't really in the mood, but as I limped towards them as I drew Broken from it's holster. I was getting mad now.

I jammed the barrel of the weapon into the prone griffin's eye, getting my face in close and hissing at him. "You need to cut that shit right now. I didn't bring you along so you could murder my friend, so you'd better fucking reconcile." If I didn't know better, I'd think that Two Kick was back. Shade was keeping him at bay though. That was all me. "I've earned some peace and fucking quiet, as have all the ponies here, and you're just making an unnecessary racket. Now you're gonna let them heal you, let go of your brother, and I'm gonna go spend time with my marefriend. Got it?!"

My eye was twitching with rage by the end of that, and all of the ponies holding Cutter down had backed up. He'd released his brothers throat, but the talons were now next to my face. Cutter looked at me, a hard glare that would have made me back down if I wasn't so angry.

The talons bounced off of the table he had been laid out on as he dropped his arm to his side. Sighing, he deflated a little. "Fine. Just... get him out of here."

I looked at Ash, who had an almost sad look on his face. I nodded towards the door, and he went, lingering at the end to stare at his brother for a few seconds before disappearing. Then he was gone, and the Whitecoats went back to cleaning Cutter's wounds.

"Do you have somewhere quiet?" I asked Shade, and she just smiled with a nod. I was tired. I just wanted to lay down for a little while, rest and turn my back on the specter of death.

"Follow me." It was really less following and more limping along while she guided me as a crutch.

As we left the room, I heard bits of a conversation behind me. "Who put this tourniquet on? It's all wrong... we're gonna have to take the arm."

I felt a pang of guilt, but I kept walking. Fuck him, he made his bed trying to stop a sword blow with an arm, he could live with the consequences. Shade nuzzling into my neck changed my frown to a smile, and I was fully grinning by the time we got to the top of the stairs. I only barely saw the look that Ash was giving me as I followed her, his head peeking through a half open doorway. A confused mix of anger, concern, and sadness.

Shade's room was a utility closet. Or rather, it had been a utility closet two-hundred years before. Now it was a space big enough for a fairly clean mattress. In one corner, on a partially collapsed shelf, was the satchel I'd thrown to her.

Grabbing the satchel and opening it, I checked. Shotgun shells of various kinds, medicine... and the long black box. Everything was here. Even if I wanted that box gone, it was better that I have it than Hate. I didn't know what he wanted the Cubes for, but I was going to do my damndest to keep them

from him.

I sat down, avoiding the mattress due to the barbed armor I still wore on my legs. I pulled at them with a combination of magic and teeth, suddenly very interested in getting the filthy metal off of me. There was still pony bits on a few of the barbs, and I had every intention of burning it once I had the time and some fire. For now, though, as I pulled the shotgun shells I still had stashed out, I would just leave them outside.

Shade was sitting next to me on the mattress as I took stock, her eyes closed and her body close to mine. "I knew you weren't dead. Ash tried to get me used to the idea... but I knew you weren't."

Should I tell her I'd given up as soon as the door had cut us apart? That I'd expected to die at the top of the stairs, less than a minute later? No... no, I wasn't proud of that. My priorities had been warped by the promise of revenge... but hadn't I done enough?

Hate's raider army scattered to the winds. Most of the Paragons dead. He was up above the clouds, in the poisoned remains of Maremack. That fact I had remembered when I'd first woken up. The mountains had been hit by Zebra weapons in the war, and weren't fit for life. I didn't know if we were taught that in the Stable, or once we got out, but it was all I knew about Maremack.

True, I may have been taking credit for much of what the Rangers had done, but I felt like I had earned it. I had suffered for it, and was well on my way to revenge when they had attacked Neighwhere with their stupid robots. I'd only seen a few Rangers, though, and knew that there should have been more of them. I still had every intention of killing Broken Arrow for what he had put us through, but I hadn't seen sight nor sound of him during our flight. If they had gotten the drive to hit a Stable surrounded by raiders, maybe they were headed up to Maremack as well. It only made sense. The military base promised to have exactly the kind of technology they were looking for, even if it was just a little bit destroyed, and a little bit radioactive. Maybe they would kill Hate while they were at it. I'd have to look into that. For now, Shade's searching eyes were waiting for an answer. I'd drifted off into thought again.

"Yeah... it was rough." Rough didn't come anywhere near accurately summing it up, but I didn't feel like listing the tortures I'd been through. Right now, I had to apologize for abandoning her in my quest for revenge. "I'm sorry I did that to you, but I couldn't let Hate have what he wanted." I dropped my head a bit as I spoke, but she just nuzzled me under the jaw. Shade was being much more affectionate than usual, but I was not a pony that was going to complain about that. I'd earned a little rest and relaxation, and spending it with the mare I loved was the best thing I could imagine.

I smiled, now that I was back down to the worn, shredded pony I felt like. No raider armor, or bloodstained bandages. I caught sight of myself in a filthy mirror Shade must have propped on a shelf. I lifted my good front leg to play at my ear, which was now slit down the middle into two. The healing potion had fixed the relatively minor injury, but the skin was still split almost clear to my skull. It was even on the side that I already had the scar on. My head was beginning to look downright lopsided. I sighed as I got a better look at what was yet another permanent and disfiguring injury.

"Does it hurt?" Shade was looking up at the ear, and I instinctively hid it from her. She'd already seen it, but I felt self-conscious for some reason.

"Not anymore. I feel... good. Really, I do." It was true. I must have had dozens of aches, pains, and bruises riddling my body, but I couldn't feel them. My leg hurt if I moved it in the wrong direction, and my nose was still tender, but I felt good overall. The proximity to the lovely mare probably didn't hurt none, either.

"Do you want to feel even better?" She asked, her voice low and suggestive. I quickly looked at her,

meeting her eyes dead on. They had power over me. Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have said no to those eyes.

"Uh...." My brain had stopped. My jaw hung open, and my eyes rapidly searched her for any hint at the answer I was questing for.

"I'll take that as a yes." She kissed me, hard, and pressed even further into me. She began pushing me over with her entire body, and before I went down I noticed one single thing.

The door was still open. Reaching out with my magic, I closed it. It swung smoothly, clicking shut and denying the outside world a view into our private place.

Then I locked it, for good measure. The rest of that night was nopony's business but mine and Shade's.

As usual, many thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria.

Tons of thanks to Wirepony, who filters what I want to say into something readable.

[Ask Ripple](#) some questions, and he might have something to say. Also, my very occasional ramblings can be found [here](#).

Chapter 20: Exodus

The morning came far too quickly, but was not unwelcome. I woke not to the pounding of hooves on a door, the din of battle, or even someone calling my name. When I awoke, all I heard was the soft breathing of the mare that lay next to me in the tangled sheets. I smiled, and sighed, a sign that her unconscious form took as a go ahead to nestle even further into my side for warmth.

Laying there, I thought back to the previous few days. I'd survived Neighwhere. I'd survived being a slave, and I'd survived a Steel Ranger attack. I'd lived through the worst that Hate and his crew could throw at me. Now what?

Kill Hate.

It didn't have the urgency to it that it had possessed while I was in a cell below Neighwhere. Here, safe and warm with Shade by my side... Was there another way?

The thought crossed my mind that I could just take the cubes and leave with Shade. With half of the black Cubes, what could Hate do? I didn't know what he planned to do with all of them, but if it was anything like what Pandemonium had promised me, it couldn't be allowed to happen. I could leave, and live a peaceful life with Shade.

Have a family.

Give up fighting, and only kill to defend the ones I loved.

No more revenge. No more constant injury. Just as quiet a life as I could find in this hell called Equestria.

I needed to take a walk. Well, take a hobble. My leg still hurt. I'd not given it much of the rest it needed, but it had been worth it. I grinned stupidly as I stood, and silently unlocked the door. Sliding into the hall, I quietly shut the door behind me. Shade had a smile on her face that I wouldn't dream of disturbing.

Turning, I immediately saw the griffin. Ash was sitting against the wall across from the door, Sight to the Blind propped next to him. He was staring at me, while holding Fraya's sword across his lap. Giving me a slight wave, he made no effort to stand.

"Morning Kick. Have a fun night?" It was said without the joking manner that I would have expected, but I knew that he was poking fun at me.

Yeah. I did. "I nodded, crossing the hall and sitting next to him. "Sitting silently, I waited for a joke. A playful jab. Anything. Ash just kept staring at the wall, running a talon along the length of the blade absently.

"How's Cutter? You talk to him?" I broke the silence, asking what I was sure was on his mind.

"They cut off his arm last night. He's too drugged to move right now." Ash was distant. I was sure that he saw this as a failing on his part. He seemed to hold himself responsible for his younger brother's imprisonment and current condition, even though it hadn't sounded like he'd had much choice in the matter. "Sure is convenient we found this storehouse... or he probably would have died."

"I just... I tried to get back to him. I tried, but I couldn't do it alone. Now... you bring him back to me, and he's not the naive griffin I knew." He shrugged, defeated. "It's not what I had expected... or hoped for." He went silent, the only sound in the hall was the impact of rain on a metal window awning at one end of the hall.

"So... that picture..." I trailed off, not quite sure what to ask, but eager to break the silence. How his family was torn apart? Who the older griffin was? Why Cutter had so little remorse for his sister?

"Taken when I was still practically a cub. Cutter and I weren't old enough to join the Talons..." He tapped his claws rhythmically on the steel of the weapon. "Fraya was, though. She joined, and Dad gave her this sword. Family heirloom."

I'd gotten him into the reminiscing mood, which is what I'd been going for. He always seemed to get better after getting whatever weighed on his shoulders into the open.

He held the blade up for me to look at, the weapon now clean of the combined blood of the griffin sibling's fight the day before. "This blade was in the war, you know. Been around a long time before that, too. Killed everything under the sun. Ponies, griffins, zebras... even a dragon, if the tales are to be believed."

He spun it in one hand, the blade catching what little light there was in a gleaming arc. "Been passed down to the oldest in the family for generations... I never expected to hold it. Guess I'm the oldest now, huh?"

He had been looking for an answer from me, and tilted his head towards me. I nodded, still not sure if this was a happy or sad conversation. His siblings had just torn each other to shreds, and he hadn't been there to save either.

"It's not for me though... I don't deserve it. I'm gonna give it to Cutter. He earned it... I'm just not sure how to talk to him." Shoulders slumped, he sheathed the blade into its leather home and placed it next to him. The griffin was as healthy as I'd ever seen him, unwounded and in his prime, and yet I'd never seen him more beaten down. His eyes were bloodshot and sunken, and I could tell that he hadn't slept.

"Look, Ash... Cutter knew that we were looking for you when he came with us. I don't think he's looking for revenge... I think he just wants some answers." I put the hoof of my good leg on his shoulder in what I hoped was a reassuring gesture. "He's your brother, I think he'll listen if you explain it. Just... don't go unarmed. Just in case."

He nodded, a slight smirk crossing his beak. "Yeah... yeah, I won't."

Nudging me with an elbow, he grinned wider. He still looked like he'd been dragged through Tartarus, but at least he was smiling. "So you and Shade, huh? That was a long time coming."

I smiled along with him, fondly remembering the previous night. "Yeah."

"She's not exactly quiet, is she?" I blushed deeply as Ash chuckled the sentence out, aware that she was indeed not. I suddenly envisioned every Whitecoat and escaped slave listening to the private act, laughing and placing bets.

Luckily, Ash cut in with something else to get my mind off of that little question. "So, did you say hi to Gentle yet?" As he spoke, my eyes went wide. I'd been so distracted when I'd gotten here, between the injuries, Cutter, and Shade, that I'd forgotten about my sister. The possibly unstable Paragon. Who'd been with former slaves and Whitecoats for several days. Armed and out of her element.

He chuckled slightly at my growing alarm. "Don't worry... she's kept away from everyone. Spent the last few days on the roof. I've taken her food and water, but she's just been staring into the woods with her rifle. She'll say a few words to me, but hasn't talked to anyone else. I think you should see her."

I glanced at the door behind which Shade still slept, and he caught the movement of my eyes. "Don't worry, I'll be here when she wakes up. I... I need to think on some things anyways, so I'm not going anywhere."

I nodded, standing slowly. My body hurt, and my shoulder ached. I still felt better than I had in a long time. I grinned my thanks at the dark griffin. "Thanks Ash... you're a good friend."

"Technically, I'm a good employee. But I'll take it." He chuckled, settling into his spot against the wall. I turned from him, trotting down the hall towards the stairs. I assumed I could make it to the roof that way.

The halls were clear of debris and easy to navigate. They weren't very well lit, but there was still enough light coming through windows or the occasional hole in the wall to make everything visible enough to not smack my fetlock on rubble. There were a number of doors like the one I'd spent the night behind, but many of them were open. I could see visible pry marks on some of them, and shelves within. The recurring butterfly logo told me that there had been medicine within many of them, and supplies had been raided in just the last few days if the tracks in the dust were any indicator.

The stairs up to the roof were only missing a few steps where the metal construction had rusted through. I made my way up with a care for my still hurting leg, and before long found myself at a large metal door.

There was a hole in it roughly the size of my head, but it swung open easily despite the damage.

Out on the roof, I found that it was still raining just as hard as the previous day. I had to wonder if my sister was still out here, or if she'd been driven inside. Only then did I see the lean-to. It was a ragged construct of old wood and a tarp she'd scrounged up somewhere. From one end jutted the long barrel of her rifle, and the faint glow of her PipBuck lit up the tent from within.

"Gentle?" I called out softly, but still loud enough to be heard over the pouring rain.

"Ripple." She didn't sound mad that I'd left her with a bunch of strangers and pushed her out into the cruel world. She sounded sad.

I rounded the edge, finding the smaller mare scooting over to make room for me. The bulky rifle perched on one side of her battle saddle, and I again marvelled that I had survived being shot with it. I backed my soaking form into the little shelter alongside her, and she dropped her head to the side, taking comfort in my neck despite how cold and wet I must have been.

"We really were wrong, weren't we. Hate lied to us. These ponies aren't bad... they aren't monsters." I'd told her as much when we'd been below Neighwhere, but I wasn't sure that she'd really believed me. Now, having been with Shade and the others for this time, she must have seen the truth of the matter.

"We've done such horrible things... ripped apart families, murdered foals, sold ponies as labor to some horrible red eyed monster..." She let out a deep, sad sigh. "I guess I always knew. The rifle scope just... it just put me so far away from the truth. I didn't want to get close enough to know for sure. I was scared."

"Yeah... Hate messed up a lot of ponies. What I was..." I drifted off, the memory of Two Kick taking full control coming slamming back into my head. His voice was still a distant murmur, which I was very glad for.

"You were one of us. For better or worse, we were a family."

"Hate knew us. He knew you. That most of us lost family in that convoy was useful to him..." Scratching absently at the roof, she drew my attention to a well worn section. The motion had been done repeatedly over the last few days, it seemed, and she was wearing a decent groove into the roof.

"He was very convincing." She continued speaking, either unaware of my discomfort or determined to get that past out in the air. "He knew what our talents were, and how we could use them. He went after you first. Me and Sweepy... I followed you because you were my only family. Sweeps followed because she wanted to be close to you."

I slumped even further. Sweeps' death was still weighing on me. It had been since I'd buried her outside of Blank.

"She's dead, isn't she." It wasn't a question.

I nodded slowly, even though she was still leaning into my neck.

"Did you do it?"

"Yeah..." I let it out as a sigh, mournful in tone. It was painful to tell my sister I had murdered her best friend. I'd avoided it the last time Sweeps had come up, but it was unavoidable now.

Picking her head up, she turned to look at me. Her eyes were sad, but understanding. I'd expected anger, but there was none I could see. "Did she suffer?"

Two Kick was a sadistic fuck. She must have thought that I'd drawn it out, being more familiar with the old me. I recalled Sweeps' last words, how she had expected it to hurt more. She'd seemed fairly peaceful in those last moments.

"No, she didn't. I killed her defending a town, and buried her after." It was probably best to leave out that I had crushed her under a big sign, and that she'd probably not felt the pain because her body was in shock from the scale of the injury.

She leaned back into my neck, seemingly comforted at the closure with her friend. "You were protecting ponies? That's good... It makes me glad to see you've changed. I was afraid of you, especially after Uncle

was killed.”

“Uncle Deal? He’s not dead. He’s with the Whitecoats now; trained most of the warrior ponies downstairs.” Stuff was always slipping my mind. I’d put my uncle out of my thoughts after the death threat. I’d been trying to avoid thinking about that whole topic, especially where Two Kick was involved. The last Gentle had seen of him was probably when he’d been exiled, set on fire, and shot in the back.

Her voice lightened at the first good news she’d gotten. “Really? Well... that’s good to hear...”

She went silent, and we both just stared into the rain for a while.

“Ripple... I’m glad that you’re alive... but I can’t be near you. I can’t be near any pony... I’m leaving.” It was my turn to pull away from her. I looked at her with surprise, not expecting that. She had seemed happy to see me alive, and I’d been looking forward to having my sister around.

“What? Why?”

She sighed, looking me in the eyes. “I already said it. The things I’ve done... the things we’ve done... I know you are working to fix things, but that’s not me. I need to go. Somewhere... away... just not near here.”

“No... you can help ponies, too. It’s easy.” It was best to leave out how my helping had arguably made the wasteland a much more violent place. The dozens, maybe hundreds, that had died as a result.

“How!?” She yelled in my face, tears springing to her eyes. “By shooting ponies I’ve lived with my whole life? Ponies that you and Hate turned into raiders and slavers and monsters!?”

Her horn glowed and the revolver she carried floated in front of us, Gentle matching the dead gaze of the barrel before pointing it into the pouring rain. “I hate that I’m a good shot, did you know that? I fucking despise that I am gifted at killing! I was just too scared to go off on my own, out into the real world.”

Slamming her revolver into its holster, she struggled to her feet against the weight of the rifle at her side. “I need to go... somewhere away from all the killing. I can’t do it any more. Don’t try to talk me out of this... please. You convinced me to be a monster... convinced me to leave my home behind, and now you want me to stay with ponies whose lives I’ve ruined.”

Tears were streaming down her face, but the look she was giving me told me that she was absolutely determined to leave. Detaching the rifle, she broke it down into separate pieces with practiced ease. She began stuffing it into a carrying case as I tried to find the words that would stop my sister from leaving.

“,, at least take supplies with you.” I wanted her to live, and dying in the wasteland from lack of medicine or food was a fate I did not want for my sister. If she was going to leave, I had to make sure that she would be as well off as possible.

Without looking at me, she snapped the case shut and picked up a bag that had been at her side. “I have supplies. I gathered them a couple nights ago, while most ponies were asleep.”

Stepping out into the rain, she was soaked in seconds. The tears washed from her face, but the sadness remained. “I’m sorry Ripple... but you’ll be fine. You have new friends, and they love and treasure you... I just can’t do that anymore. I’m sorry.”

Mouthing that she was sorry, she turned from me and slowly trotted to the stairs. I stood there, on the roof, watching my sister go. Off into a world filled with danger.

No, this wasn’t right.

I followed after her, catching up quickly in the stairwell. As the door banged shut behind me, I tried pleading with her once more. “Gentle...”

She rounded on me, anger in her eyes. “No, Rip! Ever since we left the Stable, everything has gone bad. Ponies weren’t meant to kill, and that’s all we do. That’s all we’ve done since we came out into this world. You led me out here, made me what I am, and then GOT OUT! You got away from Hate and had your little redemption quest. Now it’s time for me to get away from YOU and do mine!”

Her eyes softened, and trapped me with her gaze. “Please... let me go, Ripple. Goodbye, brother. I love you.”

Then she turned, and left me in the hallway. I stared after her, even after she had left my sight. I slumped back, sitting at the foot of the stairs, dumbstruck at how this day had just taken a complete one-eighty.

I was devastated. I'd just lost my sister, because I'd tried to help her. I would never fucking understand mares.

“That’s rough, buddy.”

I turned, finding Ash leaning against a door jam. He was still in the hallway where I'd left him, but he'd apparently gotten up and moved around a bit.

I didn't know what I was supposed to be feeling right then. I'd had the best night of my life, and then my sister had left because I'd forced her into horrors that no pony should have gone through.

Ash, however, seemed to know how to take my mind off of her. The griffin put a set of talons on my shoulder, similar to the gesture I had made, and gave a little grin. “She’ll be fine. She’s a Paragon after all, and you’re all pretty damned tough.”

I glanced past him down the hall, to where the closed door held my slumbering marefriend. He chuckled. “Don’t worry, she’s fine. You, however, have ponies looking for you.”

He received an alarmed look from me, but laughed it down with the wave of a hand. “Miss Traffic was looking for you. They’re having a meeting downstairs, said you should probably drop by.”

It had been a long time since I'd seen the polite Ash, that persona he only took on when dealing with ponies that he really respected. Traffic was his favorite pony for this phenomenon to appear towards, and it still took me for a loop. I was used to the rude and irreverent griffin.

I could only nod at him as I replied. “Yeah... okay. Thanks, Ash.”

Giving me a slight push towards the stairs, he stepped back. Ash gave me a mock salute, turned, and marched to Shade’s door. He took a relaxed guard position against the wall there, and motioned at the stairs again. I chuckled and headed off on my limping way.

He really was a good friend.

Downstairs, the mood was just as somber as the previous day. A few of the more capable Whitecoats were patrolling as best they could, and the labored moans of injured ponies drifted from where most of them were resting. It was earlier in the morning than I'd suspected.

A familiar voice drew me to a door that was slightly open. Pushing it open, I came upon a low table surrounded by three ponies. Traffic, looking a little worse for wear than she'd been in Blank, was nearest to me. Viola was across from her, carrying a grenade launcher she hadn't had when I'd last seen her in the tunnel. The third was a stallion I didn't know, but recognized as one of the rescued Whitecoats.

Viola saw me first, and her muffled voice rang out in the small room. “Ripple! Good to see you awake. Care to join us? We’re planning the future of the wasteland.”

Traffic snorted a laugh at that. “We’re sorting refugees.”

“Victims and wounded, if you please. Hate and his lackeys did a lot of damage to a lot of ponies... my own order was decimated.” The Whitecoat spoke, a low, rumbling tone that filled the room. I was immediately wary of him. Willow had been complicated, Raw Deal had threatened to put me down, and Rhapsody was a straight up asshole. I didn't have too much luck with any Whitecoats in a position of command.

Walking around the table, I came to the empty side. It seemed like this was too official of a meeting for me to be involved in, but they had wanted me here. I was responsible for this whole mess, so I guess it made sense that I take responsibility.

“So, to catch you up a bit, I was explaining to Traffic and Vigil here that we could probably house a good number of ponies in the tunnels near Underhoof. Just... we’d have to clear it with Rail Spikes and make sure the gnashers are all dead.” Viola was smiling with her eyes as she spoke, clearly enjoying that I was in the

room now. She glanced quickly at Vigil, then back at me. I didn't know what that meant, but I was already suspicious of the stallion simply for who he represented.

As I settled in, Vigil glanced in my direction. When he caught my eye, he nodded towards me. "We've never been formally acquainted, Two Kick. My name -"

"Ripple. Not Two Kick. My name is Ripple." My eye flinched as I cut him off, growling as I spoke.

He stepped back slightly, clearly surprised at my tone. "My apologies. I meant no disrespect. Ripple, then." He continued where I had cut into his words. "My name is Candlelight Vigil, and without any of the higher ranking Whitecoats about, I am in charge of our number in this locale."

"So, Rip, any thoughts on the plan?" Traffic was looking rather cross with me. Was it that she'd been held captive, or that I'd not noticed her in the ranks of those we had freed? She had always played an important supporting role in my plans and adventures, and now she was angry at me.

This was just another brick in the weight currently building on my head. I pushed all that aside for the moment, and focused on the discussion.

"The plan to put everypony underground?" I paused, thinking about that for a second. Underhoof was the single safest place I'd seen in the wasteland. The only real issue were gnashers, but they died easily enough.

I shrugged. "Sounds good." I didn't know the first thing about planning a refuge. I knew even less about dealing with large amounts of ponies. Killing gnashers... well, I was a practiced hoof at that.

After the confrontation with my sister, my mind was elsewhere. I was going to head up the mountain and show Hate his own goddamned entrails. I knew that I could just leave, and start a new life... but leaving him alive would come back and bite me. I just knew it would.

"There's still the issue of the remnants of Neighwhere. If what we've heard is truth, Neighwhere has been demolished. That puts a large number of ne'er-do-wells out into the cold. It won't be safe to move." Vigil had an odd way of speaking, but what he said was dead on. The rest of the ponies at the table seemed confused, so I took it upon myself to translate.

"Many of the raiders died, but plenty escaped into the wasteland. They're still out there, and I know that they'll see a group of injured refugees as easy prey." Vigil nodded as I spoke, but Traffic was just shaking her head.

"So what, we just stay out here forever? What about Blank!?" Traffic stepped forward, slamming both front hooves onto the table. "What about my ponies, Rip?"

Shrugging, I waved her gently back into her seat. "Most of Vigil's friends are in what's left of Blank. They're about as safe as possible, as far as I know." I looked at the representative Whitecoat. "How about you? Can your ponies get the refugees to safety?"

He nodded, slowly, but he didn't seem too confident. "We have the skills necessary, but we lack any armaments beyond sticks and stones. The raiders are certain not to share in that deficiency."

"Yeah, that's true. I'd say give it a couple more days, let them spread out, then make a move for it." I shrugged again as I spoke. I didn't know what I was doing at this meeting.

Traffic and Vigil started talking at the same time, and I couldn't make out what either was saying. Glancing across the table at Viola, I received an apologetic smile. She knew that this wasn't my kind of show, but seemed happy that I was here to get between the arguments of the Whitecoat and the salespony.

A knock at the door saved me from that awkward moment. All four of us glanced towards the intrusion, and saw Ivory sticking her head into the room. "Sorry to interrupt." She smiled, but then leveled a serious look at me. "Rip, Cutter's awake."

I was moving towards the door before I even realized it. I nodded at Traffic as I passed her, apologizing. "Sorry, but I have to go. Good luck with the planning."

Then I was out into the hall with the pale mare, who had a playful grin on her face. "Master strategist, are we

now?”

That got a grin from me, and I stepped around her. “Heh. Thanks for saving me, didn’t know what I was getting into.”

We were trotting quickly towards the room where I’d last seen Cutter, where he’d had his arm removed after the damage Fraya’d done to him. I could hear a growling sound ahead, which was an improvement over the screamed death threats from the night before. I still picked up my pace a bit. I glanced at Ivory, whispering to her in hopes that the griffin’s keen hearing wouldn’t pick it up. “Stay back a bit. Cover us.”

The pale mare just nodded and fell back a few steps, to follow me. I didn’t know what we were walking into, and her heavy weapon could mean the difference between a chat and me losing my life.

Entering the room, we found Cutter sitting up on a bloodstained cot. He was cradling the heavily bandaged stump of his arm, emitting a low growl as he did so. He glanced up as we came in, then went back to staring at his ruined limb. “I was sloppy. Should’ve dodged.”

It seemed that he was talking to himself more than to either of us, so we stood back a bit. I wasn’t sure if he was unstable or not, but the sight of one of the Whitecoats that was playing medic rummaging through a bag within arm’s length of the griffin was a little reassuring. He wasn’t munching on the pony. The memory of him eating that raider drifted to the surface before I buried it again.

“Cutter. How are you doing?” I regretted the question immediately as I saw the look that the griffin shot me. Rage and hunger. Not a combination I wanted to see from a predator.

“How am I doing? I lost my arm. I’m so drugged I can barely see you. I’m doing fucking great.” The sarcasm was dripping from his growled assessment. He glanced around the room at the various wounded still sleeping in the early morning. A few were awake, and staring wide-eyed at the wounded predator sitting amongst them.

“On top of all that, I’m chained to a wall again.” He tugged at the thick chain that was wrapped around his waist, running to a sturdy metal beam running near the wall. It made sense, after the chaos of getting Cutter sedated. The Whitecoat medic turned to leave, revealing the stubby shotgun holstered at his side.

My view of the griffin had been heavily influenced by his reaction to Ash, and I wasn’t sure how I would have dealt with him. Chaining him to a wall didn’t seem right. It wasn’t up to me though, he was in the care of the Whitecoats at this point. If they wanted him shackled for their safety, I wasn’t willing to fight them on the issue. My position here was undefined, the larger group of Whitecoats torn on how to deal with me. The ‘normal’ slaves just tried to stay out of my way.

Ash, on the other hand, had spent the last few days guarding them. Cutter attacking Ash had not gone over well with the Whitecoats.

“Cutter, they chained you to the wall because you threatened Ash.” A guess, but it was probably accurate. He had threatened Ash, and I realized that I didn’t have any weapons on me as I stared him down. I was glad he was chained to the wall, but I couldn’t let any fear show through.

The griffin scowled. “They could let me wander... chaining me to the wall makes me believe they’re no better than the slavers.”

“There’s a difference here, Cutter. These ponies have you restrained because you hurt one of them. Because you tried to throttle the life out of one of theirs while they were trying to help you.”

“Ashred is my broth-!”

“Ash is a valued member of this group, and if all you get for trying to choke the life out of him is chained to a wall, you should consider yourself lucky!”

He hissed at me. “Who are you to make that call?”

I took a step towards the drugged and crippled griffin. “I’m the pony that got you out of a fucking tomb under Neighwhere, Cutter. I could have easily just kept walking. You would have died in that cell.”

His eyes narrowed. "If you're suggesting that I owe you... I saved you twice. You owe me."

I shook my head, and snarled at him. "No, I don't. I got you out, and brought you here when you were fucking bleeding to death. We're even."

Now face to face with the killer, I tried keeping my voice low but intimidating. I was just hoping he wouldn't kill me. I needed this distance to make my point. "I'd suggest that you try to play nice! These ponies are trying to help you, and your brother wants to fucking apologize!"

I jammed the tip of my hoof into his chest right below the feather line. "Ash is my friend. These ponies have all been through a lot, and they don't need you scaring everypony. So I'm telling you right here, that if you put so much as a scratch on Ash, or any of the ponies here, I will fucking end you."

His treatment of his sister had just rubbed me the wrong way. I no longer had any time for him, and I was serious. I would kill him if he threatened any of my friends.

Do it anyways!

My eye twitched and I recoiled at how loud Two Kick was. I hadn't heard a peep from him since I'd drowned him out with painkillers, but here he was, louder than hell and twice as nasty. The only thing I could think was that the emotion I was feeling towards the damaged griffin must have brought him out. I turned my head just enough to see Ivory at the door, weapon trained on the griffin. She was frowning heavily, an ugly look that wasn't quite fitting on her normally beautiful face. Her shapely face. Her curves.

Fuck.

I'd had enough of Cutter. He hadn't said much, but it was enough. I needed to get away from him and back to Shade. "Ivory, can you watch Cutter for a little bit?"

She took a long, cold glance at the griffin. While she was doing that, Pearl appeared next to her in the doorway. I didn't know where she'd been, but I really should have expected her to be around the wounded ponies.

"What... Ripple, what's going on?" Pearl looked very concerned at the heavily armed mare at the door. Without waiting for an answer, she stepped past Ivory, making her way over towards us. Without hesitation she walked past me and began checking on Cutter's injuries.

As I replied, I noticed that she flinched. A habit of hers, literally beaten into her over the years. "I'm discussing Cutter's attitude with him."

She looked at me with those sad eyes, and part of me wanted to do unspeakable things to her. I blinked hard, twitching slightly as I did so. I could feel Two Kick clawing at the edges of my mind.

Cutter, surprisingly enough, let Pearl check his bandages. He must have recognized her as a handler. A handler that you could do anything to, and no one would care.

Anything you want. For hours.

Damnit, I had to get out of this room.

"I gotta go." I pushed past Ivory, who shouted a question after me but I was already hobbling towards the stairs. I didn't hear her, and I didn't stop. Two Kick was jabbering non-stop. Threats against me, threats against those I loved, promises of horrible things done to everypony around me. I was at the bottom of the stairs when my legs stopped working.

I slammed face first into the lowest step, a spray of blood shooting from my still injured nose onto the worn material.

We're not going back upstairs. We're not going near her. I don't like how you've been treating me, and this shit is going to stop right fucking now. You're going to give my body back, and you're going to leave my head. You fucking hear me!?

I forced control back into my legs, thinking hard about Shade. Her eyes, her smile, her laugh, her scent, her warmth. Anything and everything. I'd forced him out before like that.

It wasn't working.

I got control of my front right leg, but the left kicked it out and my body dropped again. I tried again, but Two Kick again knocked me down. I slammed my head sideways into the ground, hoping to stun him.

Stars shot through my vision, and I tasted blood. I'd hit hard enough that I'd done damage, and I felt that Two Kick had gotten the same share that I had. I just hoped that my resilience was higher than his. I'd beat him to death if I had to. I could probably survive it.

He wasn't going to give up.

I tried calling for help, but all that came out was a strangled gurgle and more blood. I'd bitten my tongue pretty hard when I'd tried stunning Two Kick.

What, you're going to kill us both? Fuck you! I was here first; this is my fucking body you're using!

"It's... mine!" I grunted through the blood. I forced my rear legs to propel us across the ground, leaving a streak of blood as we went.

I was watching. You and your little marefriend. I knew she was a screamer. I was right, I can always tell. I would have really given her something to scream about.

His voice sounded pained. I knew he was just doing it to get a rise out of me, and it was working. We ran into the wall, and my legs just kept spinning. I didn't know if I'd lost control, or if the two of us fighting was just triggering the muscles to keep going, but our legs just bunched us up against the wall.

"Stop!" I managed a shout as our body slid to the ground, legs spiralling in the air.

Why? I'll never stop, you know. I will take back what's fucking mine.

I heard a concerned voice calling my name, and I fought to turn my eyes towards the origin. It worked, and I found what I needed to beat Two Kick.

Blue and Violet. Shade. My girl.

Two Kick faded fast as she looked at us, the calming effect she had on my mind hitting as fast and hard as Two Kick's influence had after my confrontation with Cutter. She had a worried look on her face as she took in my injuries. I could still taste the blood in my mouth, and was pretty sure that I'd torn open my scalp.

Ash was there quickly, helping me to my hooves. As I stood, I took in just how much blood I'd lost in the brief battle with my mind. It was pooled against the wall, and a smear ran all the way to the stairs.

"I... ugh.. I fell." My mind was sluggish. Probably from the blow I'd dealt to both of us.

I looked at Shade, who was searching my eyes for something. I choked, tasting only blood, but gulped a mouthful when she asked a question regarding a matter I'd forgotten she knew about.

"Was it Two Kick?"

I gagged at how much blood I had just swallowed, but managed a weak nod. I was pretty sure that I had bitten through my tongue, but that wasn't my concern right now. I'd almost lost control, and I'd only been away from Shade for a short while. Two Kick was getting more powerful.

Also, from the confused look on his face, Ash was figuring it out. I'd only told Shade about Two Kick in my head. I couldn't avoid the matter any longer as I was supported by the griffin.

"He's.... he's fighting back more. My head hurts..." I rubbed a fetlock against my face, pulling it back covered with blood. My speech was slurred, but I wasn't sure if it was my tongue or the concussion I was pretty sure I'd just given myself.

"Kick... you okay?"

"I need a potion..." Shade was running before the words were fully out of my mouth. Ash slowly helped me into a sitting position. I hated being concussed... but I really only had myself to blame. I wasn't sure when I'd first started trying to bash Two Kick out of my head, but it never seemed to work. It was just an angry over-

reaction. One that I should probably work on stopping.

“Kick... so he’s still here? Two Kick?” The griffin was looking cautiously at me, like he would need to take me out if I made the wrong move. Probably a safe move on his part. Then his eyes opened, and he suddenly looked apologetic. “Shit, do you mind me calling you Kick? Would you prefer Ripple?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. My chest was splattered with blood as I did so. “Kick is fine.” He’d called me Kick every time he’d spoken to me save for one instance in Blank. It’d be weird for that to change.

“Anything else you want to tell me?”

I shrugged. “Meds keep him down. Shade does too.”

He nodded thoughtfully. He was probably remembering how I’d acted since Blank. I knew that he knew about the Med-X. How couldn’t he? He was the most perceptive creature I knew. “Yeah, that explains a lot. I thought you were just turning into a junkie, to be honest.”

“No... I was just doing what was needed. The deal with Shade... well, that’s just a nice side effect.” My tongue kept getting caught on something when I talk, and I stuck it out at Ash. “Is it bad?”

He grimaced a little, holding up a claw in defense from the sight. “Yeah. Shade might want to hurry.”

I slumped. “Don’t downplay it at all...”

Glancing towards where Shade had rushed, towards what was serving as the infirmary, I decided that now was the time. I had to take action. “Ash, you need to talk to Cutter.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but I cut him off. “I already softened him up a bit. You shouldn’t have too many problems. Say what you need to say, give him the sword, and be done with it.”

It would have had a much greater impact if I hadn’t been drooling blood and tripping over the shredded remains of my tongue as I spoke, but the message got through. Ash was looking at me evenly, searching for any insecurity in my decision. Finding none, he eventually nodded. “Sure, Kick. Might as well get this over with.”

“Go. I’ll be fine.” I had already spotted the blue mare running towards me with a bottle of healing liquid clenched in her teeth. I’d be fine. Ash needed to talk to his brother, and he needed to do it now.

Ash stood. Unslinging the sword from his back, he nodded down at me. “Wish me luck.” Turning, he made his way towards the infirmary. He passed Shade in the hall without even a glance, and turned out of sight.

Shade got to me, pulling the cork from the bottle and offering it to me. Taking it in my magic, I drank the potion. Swishing it around my mouth before I swallowed, I could feel my tongue knitting back together. I couldn’t taste the potion, just the blood, but I knew it was working immediately.

The look of concern on her face faded as I finished the bottle. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, enjoying the soothing feeling that the potion brought to my mouth, one of the few places that I still had full feeling, before opening them again and looking at the soft mare. My head was feeling better as well, which had me thinking that it wasn’t actually a concussion, and I’d just knocked myself silly for a few minutes.

I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue, fairly certain that I wasn’t about to flap a shredded hunk of flesh and blood at her. “See. Better.”

She smiled, and risked a kiss on my cheek, avoiding the blood that I had managed to smear across my face. She handed me a damp rag that she had slung over her withers. “You might want to wash up. You’ll scare ponies like that.”

Thanking her, I traded the empty bottle for the rag, and began wiping my face. As the rag blocked my vision, I felt the faint warmth of Shade pressing her body into my side, her favorite spot. Two Kick was the quietest murmur in my head, exactly where I preferred him.

“Where was Ash going?” Shade’s voice was soft, as though she didn’t want the griffin’s acute hearing to pick us up, even though he was now in a different part of the building.

I shrugged. "He needed to talk to his brother."

I felt Shade shudder, the vibration translating into my side. "I wouldn't want to be him. I've seen Cutter fight..." She glanced at me, probably noting that I was wearing no armor and was completely weaponless. "Is he going to be okay?"

I nodded. Ash could handle his own against a drugged and one armed griffin who was currently chained to a wall. Hopefully my threats against Cutter would also have assisted in mellowing the moody murderer.

"Are you going to be okay?" She burrowed further into my side as she asked, scared for my answer.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." I lied to her. Two Kick was getting worse and worse; hitting harder every time he came back. The thought of losing myself had been weighing heavily on me since the thought of Shade had knocked him out of control. I couldn't spend the rest of my life stapled to her side. If I didn't do something permanent about Two Kick, I didn't know how long I would be running the show.

"That's good... I don't want to lose you."

I kissed her on the tip of her muzzle. "I'll always be with you."

In one way or another, I would be. Even if it was in spirit.

I heard a soft rustle coming up behind me, followed by a light cough. I knew who was standing there before I even saw Fluster. I hadn't seen her around, not even near Ivory, but now she had found me. Which meant she wanted something.

"Sorry for intruding... but have you seen Ivory?" Fluster shifted her weight slightly and I spotted the head of Fern poking out from between her front legs. He was walking along beneath her, and had decided to find out why they had stopped. He glanced up at me, and gave a small growl.

Fluster immediately dipped her head, and whispered to the little timber wolf. "Shh... it's alright. It's just Ripple." He kept growling up at me, and I had to wonder if the little wolf knew what was going on in my head.

Right, Ivory had asked me a question. Looking up from the wolf, I caught her eye, glinting beneath her hood. "Yeah... yeah, Ivory is standing guard near the injured. I had her watch Cutter... Ash is talking to him right now."

Fluster nodded. "I hope Ash is alright. Cutter is... Cutter isn't a nice griffin."

I nodded. Fluster smiled, and thanked me. As she passed us by, she whispered up into my ear. "I'm happy for you two."

Once she was on her way, Shade and I were once again alone. She stepped away from me briefly, looking at our surroundings. My blood was still smeared across the ground, and the soaked rag lay where I had dropped it indifferently. She frowned, shaking her head, and gazed up at me. "Let's go somewhere more private... and less covered with blood."

I nodded at her, but as we turned towards the stairs, an avian shriek of rage filled the halls and a loud thump followed. That couldn't be good.

Quickly, I looked at Shade. "Get Broken."

She nodded rapidly, then turned and hurried up the stairs. I rushed in the direction that Fluster had just headed. I was unarmed, partially crippled, and still slightly concussed. I'd do what I could, but I really only had my hooves and my horn. Against a griffin, drugged or not, it wasn't much of a fair fight, but I had put the two predators in the same room.

A room with a bunch of injured ponies. Yeah...

I slid around the corner as I ran, my leg threatening to give out as I did so. Compensating, I only ran into the wall and bounced off, continuing on my course.

Ivory came into sight, trying to get a good shot into the room. With all the injured ponies and Ash, though, I

hoped that she wouldn't fire Sweeps' minigun, as the indiscriminate weapon would probably pulp anyone and everything in the room.

I had been so stupid.

"Rip! Do something!" Her eyes were filled with fear, and her voice was cracking frantically. I pushed my way past her, into the room.

All of the injured that were capable were as far away from the two griffins as possible. Cutter had Ash up against the wall, lifted from the ground by his throat. For being so filled with drugs he couldn't move, he had achieved quite a bit. The chain was still wrapped around his waist, blood seeping from where it had cut into him. At the end of the dangling chain was a metal loop and piece of the wall, where he had ripped it out.

"Cutter!" I yelled, moving towards him. His eyes found me quickly, a sharpness there that I hadn't seen when I'd talked to him just a short while before.

"Stay out of this. This is between me, and him." His voice was enough to trigger the survival instinct in my head. It always seemed to kick in with griffins, more than any other creature or machine I'd encountered in the wastes.

Ash was fighting for breath, kicking feebly at his much larger sibling. His claws were dug into Cutter's bulging arm, and it was obvious that Ash would likely pass out in a short while. His weapons were not on him, scattered around the room.

Even with the sheer predatory force behind Cutter's warning, I found that I was already launching myself into the air from a charge. Plowing into the griffin with my full weight, I took the three of us crashing into a table covered with medical equipment.

Cutter released Ash as we hit the edge of the table, breaking it in half and sending the sharp medical equipment slashing into the air. A scalpel missed my eye by a hair, slicing across my brow. Rolling away from the wreckage, I leapt to my hooves and readied for the griffin's attack.

Cutter sprang to his paws, again amazingly fast for the condition I had assumed he was in. His arm was to his side, braced to attack. He was growling death at me, while Ash fought for breath in the midst of the table ruins.

"I told you to stay out of this." His eyes were narrowed, his body tensed for me to make a move.

"...and I told you that if you so much as scratched my friends, I would fucking end you." I picked up the scalpel with my magic, drops of my blood spattering the clean floor. For the second time in such a short while, blood was again pouring down my face, but that was at the back of my mind.

Where Two Kick should have been. His voice soothed into my head, lacking the violence of before but filled with double the hatred.

You'll never be rid of me.

Fuck. Come on. I have more important matters to deal with. If you interrupt, I'm going to die.

Fine, you stupid fuck. Don't mess up my body any more, I'll be collecting soon. I'll be fucking watching.

Cutter glared at me, and I just glared back. I didn't show any sign of the internal battle, knowing that it would probably cause the griffin to attack. No fear.

No fear.

I took a step forward. Cutter twitched and slumped, the fire fading from his eyes as the drugs broke through the wall of adrenaline. Whooping for joy would have set him off again, so I remained stonefaced and still. The griffin sighed, dropping out of the attack pose.

"Fine. I'll just take my sword and go. I can tell when I'm not wanted." He turned, keeping an eye on me as he went, and crossed the room to his cot. I saw now that Whitecoats had mustered, armed with whatever they could find. If they'd gotten in on the battle, this room would have turned into a bloodbath. Cutter picked up Fraya's sword, which had been placed neatly next to the cot, most likely before the brothers had started

fighting again.

Vigil entered the room, armed with a long piece of rebar, sharpened to a point. He was blocking the path for Cutter, who walked up to the pony and growled. "Out of my way, Whitecoat."

Vigil glared up at Cutter for a few seconds, eventually giving in and stepping aside. Cutter stalked past without another word, brushing past Ivory in the doorway. Vigil looked at two of the tense Whitecoats. "Ticket, Parfait, please go with Mister Cutter. Ensure that no one causes him any problems while he is leaving."

I stumbled over to Ash, finding that there were several large splinters pierced into my flank. As I pulled them out, Ash was pulling himself shakily to his paws. He coughed, rubbing at his throat. "That... could have gone better..."

"What happened?" I had to ask. I had thought that it would have gone much better, or at least not end with one griffin leaving and the other nearly choked to death.

"I apologized... gave him the sword... then I mentioned Fraya." He rubbed at his neck, pulling his claws away covered with blood. "That didn't go over so well."

Pearl pushed her way through the crowd, joining in with one of the Whitecoats who was checking on the ponies that had been resting in the room. She made her way to the two of us, and immediately began cleaning my wounds.

"Pearl, handle Ash first. I'm good for now." She nodded rapidly, likely due to my use of the word "handle", and moved on to Ash's wounded neck. My mind was elsewhere. Shade wasn't there... it shouldn't have that long to get Broken and come back, especially in the hurry she had been in.

Maybe she's dead. Maybe your hope is gone. Your hope, your love, your future. All that, smashed like her pretty little head.

Shut the fuck up.

I tried to push my way past Vigil, who was already beginning to restore order to the aftermath of the griffin fight, but the Whitecoat blocked my path with a leg. "Might I ask where you are abandoning to with such haste?"

"Upstairs." I pushed past him, eager to get back to Shade. It was either I returned to her, or I took a heavy dose of painkillers right there in front of half the population of the building. I pushed past Ivory, who was staring after where Cutter had gone, and headed towards the stairs.

The whole day had been pretty much a long line of disappointments. I guess that the wasteland wouldn't allow me to have the happiness I'd had with Shade, and just let that stand. It was still the morning, and I was already done with the whole day.

Then I heard the muffled scream.

I ran. I ran as hard as I could. As far as I knew, no pony else was up here other than Shade.

The door was open, and I shouted her name as I ran. "Shade!"

As I came to the open door, I was struck full in the face by a pair of hooves. Blood exploded from my face as the hooked razors and barbs worn around those hooves caught flesh. The impact was great enough that I was thrown into the wall, landing in a bleeding heap.

I scrambled to my hooves, ready for a fight, but the figure that stood down the hall was just smiling at me. For a split second, I saw Fluster. Everything was wrong though. No robe, no scars, eyepatch over the wrong eye, and way too many blades.

Flurry.

Slung around her was the satchel that held the two Cubes I had planned on leaving with the Whitecoats for safe keeping when I headed up the mountain to kill Hate at my leisure.

“Two Kick, thanks for hanging onto these. Hate said you’d probably send them somewhere, but I see I was quick enough to catch you both.” She was smiling as she spoke, pointing out just how I’d shown her right where the cubes were hidden.

I jumped for the open door, looking for Broken. I couldn’t freeze when I saw Shade laying inside, bleeding heavily. I had to grasp for Broken where it lay next to her, splattered with blood. I spun back into the hallways, screaming in frustration.

Firing at where Flurry had been only a second before, I snarled as the buckshot ricocheted off of the floor. She laughed playfully at me from where she hovered near the ceiling. “You have a pretty mare there, but now she’s beautiful. I had fun last night... I know you did. These walls are pretty thin, you know.”

I fired again, but she spiralled to the side, unharmed and laughing. “I haven’t seen Fluster, did you keep her safe? I hope you did... since I couldn’t find my sister, I decided to play with your friend for a little bit.”

I screamed at her. “Bitch! I’ll fucking gut you!” I fired, hoping that she would die. That she would get ripped apart and suffer. I wanted her to live through the first hit, so that I could stomp her skull into ooze. So I could shred her bit by bit before she died.

So I could make her scream, and scream, and scream.

She pirouetted to the side playfully, clutching a bladed hoof to her chest. “Oh, you almost got me. Anyways, it’s been fun, but Hate’s waiting. I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

She flipped and kicked off of the ceiling, barely avoiding a fourth load of buckshot fired at her. She launched away from me, barrel rolling through the hallways, and was headed straight at a long shattered window. I fired again, my last shot, more out of hope than any real chance of scoring a hit.

I ran, ignoring my gimped leg, and ignoring how much blood I was losing from my face. I’d lost a ton of blood in short period, and I was starting to feel it, but I couldn’t give in. I had to get Flurry. I had to get the cubes back.

Hate couldn’t have them.

She pulled up short of the window, turning to give me a farewell wave. Her eyes went wide as she saw me within hoof distance of her, flying through the air after a jump that I’m pretty sure tore some muscles in my legs.

I slammed into her, and we both went out the window.

She started flapping hard, but my weight was dragging her down. I bit into the strap of the bag, knowing that it was my best chance of holding on, or at least retrieving the cubes. She let out a strangled cry as the strap wrapped around her tightened with my weight.

She kicked wildly at me, scoring a hit in my face, catching along my clenched teeth and shredding through my lips all the way back to my jaw. It had shredded everything below my scar. The pain was almost blinding, but I held on. I was still gripping Broken with my magic, and spun it so that the butt was facing outwards.

Swinging it hard, I cracked the weapon across her temple, bringing a shriek of pain. She rewarded me with another kick, this one into my muzzle.

The blow knocked teeth from my jaw, and I felt myself sliding. I bit as hard as I could, but with missing teeth I slid off of the strap.

Dropping, I slammed into the upper branches of a tree, snapping several with the impact. The long dead tree branches were brittle, and didn’t hurt too much, but I felt more pieces of wood pierce my hide.

I landed back down on a thick branch, bouncing off in a flash of pain. I hit the ground, and blackness snapped into my reality.

“Kick! Kick, wake up!” My eyes fluttered open as the world came back to me, and I saw the griffin looking down at me with what I could only describe as shock. It was still raining heavily, and his head was shielding

me from the heavy drops.

“Shade...” My voice was low, but I had priorities. “Shade’s hurt...”

He nodded, kneeling down over me. “I know, Pearl’s already helping her. Flesh wounds, nothing else.”

“That’s good...” My voice was coming back, but it sounded weird. It felt weird to talk, like half of my face wasn’t working.

“You probably shouldn’t talk until we get some more potion into you.” He sighed, looking up. I knew that he was looking towards the mountain. Towards Maremack. He knew where we’d be heading next.

“Maremack...” I slurred out.

He nodded his head. “Yeah. Yeah, but not right now. We need to get you inside...”

He reached down, and lifted me bodily. It hurt, but that could be said about all of the parts that I could feel. I could barely feel his talons catching on my unarmored hide.

I was hurt. I was really hurt... going out the window might not have been the best idea. I’d had worse, but this was still in my top four most painful moments of the last month.

“Flurry... cubes... gotta be quick...” He nodded at me as I rambled through my shredded mouth, weaving through the trees and back to the building.

We were in the halls now, headed towards the infirmary. Again. I’d spent a lot of time going to that room today, and now here I was being carried. I heard a cry of dismay, and Fluster’s hooded face filled my vision.

“Ripple... what happened? Who did this?” It was uncanny how much the two looked alike, but I don’t think I could ever see this expression on Flurry. Concern, fear, and sadness, blended together. Care.

“Sorry... I almost had her...”

Then everything went dark.

It had been a while.

This is all based on Kkat's brilliant Fallout Equestria. Thanks and love to her.

Much thanks to Wirepony, my editor.

[Ask Ripple](#) some questions, and he might get around to it, if he's not too busy getting hurt. Also, Snow's thoughts can occasionally be found [here](#).

Chapter 21: Maremack

“We... we need to go...” I tried getting up, but a strong hoof kept me down while Pearl was busy stitching my face back together. I didn’t have time to look presentable. I had to get after Flurry. She couldn’t be allowed to get the cubes to Hate. Hate couldn’t be allowed to make the deal with Pandemonium.

“He’s suffered some strain to his back. I don’t think he should be walking anytime soon.” I’d grown to dislike the Whitecoat medic, Sawbones, because he kept saying things that would stop me from going after hate. Massive blood loss, spinal damage, a broken leg. I’d had worse, and he just wouldn’t let me get up.

Ash was there, watching me as Sawbones and Pearl worked on keeping the rest of my blood in my body. Behind him, Shade was laying on a cot. She had several cuts on the left side of her face, and there was a deep slash along her ribs. Flurry hadn’t had much time to “play” with her. Shade had been lucky.

“Ash...”

He leaned forward, the bandages around his neck making his head look out of place on his shoulders.

“Kick?”

I glanced at Pearl, who was working on my face with a needle and thread. Looking at her gave me an idea. What would a handler give to a fighter that was too injured to move but had a fight in a few hours? It had to come up sometime. I knew what I’d do.

“Ash... I need...” I paused for a few seconds, thinking about the list. “Potions... Hydra... whatever will get me up. No Stampede... I need to be me...” I narrowed my eyes at that

Sawbones cut in right there. “No. Ash, those will do lasting damage to the patient.”

I coughed blood at him, earning a small jab from Pearl with the needle. If Ash got me the drugs, I could be up and about. Then we could leave. I didn’t have time to lay around.

Pearl made a satisfied sound as she finished what she could do to my face. I could feel air on my gums, and I was thinking that I had gained a wider smile. I wasn’t too keen to see a mirror, and when she brought out the bandages I sighed in relief. I really didn’t want Shade to see whatever had happened to my face... and the bandages were familiar enough to be a welcome sight.

The wrap job that Pearl gave my face was quite good, and left my mouth able to talk. I couldn’t open it too wide, but I could at least speak, which was an improvement over the last time my face had been bandaged.

Which had only been the previous day. I was a mess.

As soon as Pearl finished the last wrap of bandages, I pulled myself off of the table. Sawbones tried holding me down, but I wasn’t going to put up with that. I had things that needed to be done. It was only when I was on all four hooves that I remembered the blood loss, spinal damage, and broken leg. I crumpled.

Then I blacked out as I smacked my newly bandaged head on the hard floor.

I was still on the floor when I came to. It could only have been a few moments, because everypony was still there. I realized that I had been awoken by Ash, who was shaking me by the shoulder.

“Kick, get up.”

I groaned as my body continued wanting to be on the ground. There was an odd numbness stretching from the middle of my back to my legs, but I could still feel the weakness of the break in my leg. My spine wasn’t as damaged as Sawbones had made it sound.

My mouth was restricted by the bandages, and I mumbled through clenched teeth. “Meds...”

Ash crouched down next to me. “Yeah, I got ‘em. Grabbed anything that looked useful.” He placed one talon

on my side and lifted something in his other. I couldn't focus too well... my head had been through a lot. "This first." He slammed it into my side, the needle biting deep and depositing the medicine directly into my blood.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then it felt like my body was starting to shake... no, that wasn't the word. It was familiar. It was like what happened with the Mask, but much less painful.

It still hurt like a fucker though, as my flesh crawled and writhed under my hide.

I clenched my teeth as my leg set itself beneath my skin, the disturbingly familiar feeling of bone tearing through muscle bringing a yelp of pain. The flesh of my skin started pulling and tightening, as did my shredded ear.

Then the hydra got to my spine. The entire length let out a rapid series of cracks and pops, and it felt like I was being folded in half. A gurgle was all that managed to get through my throat as my spine was forced back into place by the powerful drug.

It was over much faster than with the mask, and I was sitting under my own power in no time. I couldn't help but breathe heavily, panting even... rapid regeneration really takes it out of a pony. Ash was looking at me with a discriminating eye, and shrugged.

"Sorry, thought that would have put your ear back together." With one of his claws, he flicked at the side of his head to indicate my own ear.

"My ear?" I was more concerned with the rest of me, but feeling around with a fetlock I found that my ear was still split in two.

He shook his head. "Don't worry, it's not important. Need anything else, or are you ready to go?"

Gesturing behind him, he drew my attention to Ivory and Fluster near a table. Fluster had her hooves up on the table and was busy sorting through a pile of hastily gathered supplies. From where I was, I could see mostly medicine, but a few errant bits of ammunition were jutting from the pile.

Good. I'd need ammo. I had ponies to kill.

I struggled to my hooves. I was glad to find that the weakness that had been there after the mask wasn't present with Hydra. I hadn't been rebuilt, just restored. I twisted my head to the side to ease a crick out of my neck as I got the feel of my body.

I was sore, but I was good. I was motivated. Hate was going to die. Epiphany was going to die. Flurry was going to die.

She'd hurt Shade.

I pushed up next to Sawbones, who gave me a snort of dismissal. I didn't care what he thought about me... he had wanted to keep me bedridden while Hate got what Hate wanted. If he thought he was going to keep me from Shade, I'd just add him to the list.

"Hey... Ripple..."

Shade's voice was low and pained. Her side was heavily bandaged, and one of her legs was covered in bloody rags. Half of her face was covered in blood-soaked bandages. There were empty potion bottles next to her, and I could see a dozen fading cuts on her neck and flank. The sight made me feel like I'd failed.

She'd been shot outside of Blank. I'd almost killed myself getting her to the help she had needed, and I'd done everything that I could to protect her from that point on. Seeing her here, bandaged up and pale from blood loss, was crushing. I should have taken those injuries... not her.

I nuzzled her neck softly. "I'm sorry..."

She smiled faintly at me. Blood loss was not something she was used to. One of her hooves reached up and stroked my cheek softly. "It wasn't your fault... she was just there... who was she?"

I sighed. Right, Flurry was the unknown Paragon. By her own admission, she wasn't a famous pony. Outside

of the Paragons, she wasn't just not well known, she was unknown. Her work as Hate's messenger kept her out of Neighwhere, and she wasn't a Stable pony. "That was Flurry."

Her eyes widened slightly. "That was Fluster's sister? That... Fluster..."

I hadn't been aware that the robed mare was standing next to me. Sawbones had left, and she'd just taken his place. It had been so subtle I had thought that the Whitecoat was still there, awkwardly standing in the middle of our conversation. I jumped slightly.

Fluster shook her head. "I apologize for my sister. She should have been killed a long time ago..."

I nudged Fluster with my shoulder, hoping that what I was about to say wasn't going to hit the wrong strings. "Don't worry... we'll kill her when we head up the mountain."

Fluster nodded. "I know. That's why Ivory and I are going with you."

I'd only really planned on Ash and I going up the mountain. Ivory would have been quite useful to the Whitecoats in protecting the escaped slaves, and Fluster had never really crossed my mind as being useful in combat... even if she was the only one of our little group with a Steel Ranger kill to her name. She was also the only one of us that could pick a lock.

I just nodded. Discounting Fluster had never proved wise, even if she didn't have her own reasons for going.

"I told you I'd help you see Hate dead anyways. You actually thought you'd be going without us?" Ivory trotted up, smiling. She'd received treatment for the wounds she'd gotten in Neighwhere, and looked as ready for action as ever. Even if she was still discoloured; Wires was apparently tricky to fully remove from hair.

"...Thanks girls. Now... I need to talk to Shade for a minute." I gave Ivory what I hoped was a meaningful glance, and she nodded.

"Sure Rip. Come on Flusterbutt, let's go finish scrounging." Nudging the cloaked mare, she headed back towards the table. Fluster looked up at me for a second before following back to the piled supplies.

I looked down at Shade, who had a little smile on her face. She spoke up before I had a chance. "You want me to stay behind."

I nodded. "I do. I'm sorry... but I can't risk you. I love you... and they know that. You'd be a target to get to me. Hate wouldn't let that go without acting on it."

A tear rolled from her eye, clearing a path through the blood on her face. "I understand. I love you too... just come back to me."

I kissed her, lingering for a while. Pulling back, I smiled. "I promise."

Then, I slowly turned away from her, keeping an eye on her for as long as I could. It hurt, knowing that it might be the last time I saw her, but I had to do it. I pushed past Sawbones, who immediately swept in to finish seeing to Shade, and headed into the hallways.

It took only a minute to find the pony I was looking for, because she was where no pony else was. Viola was reading an ancient magazine she found somewhere, sprawled out across an old mattress in a room at the back of the building. She looked up as I came in, her eyes twinkling from behind the mask.

"Hey Ripple. You all better? How's your girl?" She put down the magazine and folded her front legs in front of her.

"I'm fine. Shade's gonna be fine..."

She nodded. "...and you wanted to talk to me about something, right?"

I sat down in front of the mattress. "Yeah... I need you to watch after Shade. Get her to Underhoof, and keep her safe." I slouched my shoulders, saddened that I needed to do this. Shade couldn't come with. It was decided, we both knew it, but it wasn't enough. I had to take another step to make sure she was safe.

Glancing over my shoulder at the open door, I sighed. "I know the Whitecoats mean well... but if she stays with them, I'm not sure what will happen."

I was thinking of Rhapsody, the Whitecoat that had threatened me. With Willow gone, he might act against me. He could use Shade against me. She was safest with Viola. "So when it's safe, I want you to get her to safety. Take any pony that wants to go, but..."

Viola nodded, standing and approaching me. She put a weathered hoof on my shoulder, looking me in the eyes. "Ripple, I'm a guardspony. That's what I do. She's in safe hooves... you just go do what you do."

Then she pushed me with towards the door. "Now go. I'll talk to Vigil about getting the ponies home, you just go kill everypony that needs it."

I had to smile, which hurt my face. "Heh... yeah, I plan on it."

At her pushing, I gave in and trotted to the door. Right before I passed through, I looked back at her. "If I don't make it..."

She nodded. "I know. Come back, though. You owe that to her."

I nodded, and went through the door. The others were waiting for me.

Out in the open, it was cold and wet. The rain had stopped, and a low fog had swept into the forest. It was darker than I'd like, but we had to get to Maremack as soon as possible.

Ash led the way, guiding us to the road that was supposed to lead up the mountain. I soon realized that we were already walking on a roadway, but two hundred years of wear and the death of the forest had covered it with all manner of debris.

Fluster and Ivory were bringing up the rear, with Fern scampering around their hooves. The young wolf was clearly enjoying being able to be in a forest again, free from the pouches he had spent the last few weeks stuck in.

The armor that they'd scrounged up for me was rough. It itched where I could feel, and rubbed in the wrong places. I didn't know where they found it, but I was pretty sure that it was made for a pegasus of all things. One notably smaller than me, at that. The straps were as loose as they could get, and still the plates were tight on my frame. I wasn't putting much stock in this second-hoof gear, but at least I had my leg armor. Fluster had cleaned it and made some minor repairs. I had more confidence in that assemblage of straps and jagged metal that I did in what I wore on my body.

The girls both looked to be in good spirits, despite knowing what we were heading to. I knew very little about Maremack. The one definitive description I had ever gotten on it was that it was a "death trap". The only creature I knew that had even been near the base was Ash, and he'd only been to an outpost near the mountaintop base.

"Ash... what are we really walking into here?" I had picked up my speed to come up next to the griffin, who was walking with Sight clutched in his clawed grip. He was focused ahead, searching for threats in the thick fog.

Shrugging, he hefted the weapon up onto one shoulder, slapping his claws over the stock to keep it stable. "I really don't know Kick. I've heard everything from laser death walls to ghosts. That's the problem with anything above the clouds, especially if it's old military." Scratching his brow absent-mindedly, he shrugged again. "At least there won't be any 'Clavers."

Again, mentioning the Enclave. I was glad that they hadn't shown up to make my life harder, and that it was very unlikely that they would make the trip to Hornsmith specifically to do so. I really didn't need more enemies.

As we walked along, a thought occurred to me. "...and whatever Hate has up there."

The griffin nodded. "Yeah. So it could be anything."

"So...we have no plan. No idea what we'll be facing. And the pony we're after knows we're coming."

"Yeah."

“Well, at least we’re consistent.”

Consistently fucking up.

Ash had heard it first. A fairly rhythmic thumping sound. It wasn’t too loud, but it definitely wasn’t just another sound of the forest. As it got louder, the four of us began moving more carefully. We wanted to see whatever it was before it saw us.

Ducking underneath a tangle of vines and brambles, I found the road.

I also found the source of the noise.

I scrambled back under the growth, hoping that the robot hadn’t seen me. One of the bots that the Rangers had used to attack Neighwhere was leisurely strolling up the road, flanked by at least seven Rangers. They were headed to Maremack, same as we were.

“Rip, what...” Ivory started asking me before Ash clamped her mouth shut with a hand. He held a single talon to the end of his beak, shushing her.

I mouthed “Rangers” at her, and she nodded grimly. Glancing at Ash, I tapped seven times at the ground. He nodded, and slowly ejected the magazine from the hefty rifle. He began replacing the normal rounds with armor piercing, but he only had five. We couldn’t take the Rangers on as we were... especially not with the giant death machine lumbering over them.

We all knew as much, and began retreating from the road. We’d have to stick to the woods for the entire trip... risking a fight with the Rangers was just too much of a hazard. We didn’t have the firepower to take them on, and I doubted we’d be fully prepared for Hate after a fight with the heavily armored ponies. We’d probably die.

Cheating fucks. Takes a coward to hide behind that much armor.

Two Kick was back. The med-x wasn’t doing much of anything for me at that point. With Shade back with the Whitecloaks, I just had to do my best to ignore him. Thankfully, he wasn’t trying to take over. It must take a lot of willpower to do that; I was sure he’d be trying again at the worst possible moment.

Once we had pulled back, far enough away from the road, we continued our trek up the mountain. The sound of the robot continued as we walked. If it got to Maremack at the same time as us... then maybe we could use it as a distraction. As far as I could tell, the robot was made to break into reinforced areas. It was the perfect tool for taking on a heavily defended airbase.

We stayed silent as we slipped through the woods. It was too much of a risk to alert the Rangers to our presence.

All we had to do was make sure that we didn’t stray too close to the road.

The fog was constant and thick, and I found that I had to start relying on the display from my PipBuck that floated in my vision. I’d somehow trained myself to just never notice the little marker at the bottom of my sight, which was probably a bad thing. The EFS could tell me where enemies were, and maybe would have stopped me from being so easy to get the drop on.

Right now it was showing the way to Maremack. Or... the direction at least. I didn’t have a set location. As long as I kept all those little red dots on our left, we’d be fine.

Then it occurred to me. If I had Eyes Forward Sparkle... did the Rangers have it as well?

As the thought drifted through my mind, we wandered into a clearing in the trees. I paused at the edge, looking up through the break in the trees to see if I could catch a glimpse of our destination. Seeing nothing but fog, I shook my head and sighed, dropping my gaze nearer to the ground.

The tree next to my head was ripped in two, peppering my side with splinters. If I hadn’t ducked, my head would have been turned into blood mist. Across the clearing, a Steel Ranger was cycling the next round into the weapon strapped to his armor. It was more of a cannon than a rifle, and the shot had just torn a ragged

hole through the wounded forest. How none of us had seen him, I had no idea. I should have been paying attention to the EFS, instead of just keeping the red on the left.

“Fuck!” Ash was pulling himself off of the ground, a shard of wood sticking from his shoulder. He was looking around for Sight, and I saw that it was laying next to my hoof. Kicking it into the air with a shout to get his attention, I drew Broken for all that it would be worth. He snatched the rifle from the air and whipped around to aim it towards the Ranger.

He’d already put armor piercing rounds into the weapon, and the bullet tore easily into the Ranger’s armored helmet, dead center between the lifeless glass eyes. He’d finished cycling the next shot, but as the contents of the pony’s skull followed the bullet through the ragged hole in the back of his helmet, he was far too dead to shoot at us.

The Ranger dropped to his knees, dead, and the weapon discharged into the ground. It blew a crater into the moist dirt, spraying mud and debris everywhere. As he fell to the side, an augmented shout echoed through the forest.

“Hostiles engaged. Creme Fraiche is down!” It was a voice I recognized, and Ash’s growl said that he recognized it as well. Notches.

“Open fire!”

The four of us turned as one and began galloping hard. Slashes of energy tore through the trees, accompanied by the streams of lead from at least two miniguns. Long dead trees blew into shreds, pelting us with even more splinters and filling the air with smoke.

Amazingly, we didn’t take even a glancing hit. Sliding to a halt behind a large rock sitting next to a long dried creek, we took cover from the barrage.

“How!?” Fluster managed to choke out, coughing from the smoke.

I glanced down at my PipBuck, hating that I hadn’t thought of it. “They must have a way of seeing us... you know, without seeing us.”

“That was Notches.” Ash had an almost maniac grin on his face as he fumbled around in one of his pouches. He pulled out a bullet, and ran it through his fingers. “I’ve been saving this for him.”

He wasn’t even paying attention to us. I peered at the bullet the griffin was spinning, and he stoped it. It said ‘Notches’ on the side, in small square lettering. Fucking unbelievable. I thought that sort of thing was for bad stories.

So fucking cheesy.

Ivory set her minigun spinning, the barrels whirring rapidly. Like Ash, she had loaded armor piercing ammunition into her weapon. Unlike Ash, she had very few of the only rounds useful against Rangers. 5mm armor piercing wasn’t terribly common in the Wasteland.

I was shit out of luck when it came to ranged combat with the heavily armored ponies, and Fluster needed to be on top of them to put her scalpel to use.

“Ash, how many are there?” He looked at me sharply as I spoke at him, but then his features softened and he pocketed the bullet. Tilting his head towards the sky, he began visibly concentrating. After a few seconds, the shots stopped smacking off of the other side of the rock, and silence descended across the foggy forest.

Putting up a single claw for silence, he tilted his head to the side so that one ear was pointed at the sky. “Four. There are four. Two with miniguns, one that hasn’t fired, and I’m guessing Notches with the lasers.”

Hefting Sight to the Blind, he popped out the magazine to check how many shots he had left. He’d used one, and had four remaining in the mag. I didn’t know how many he was carrying in his pouches, but every shot had to count.

Reaching up with his free hand, he dug in with his talons and lifted himself up the rock. He risked a peek over the top, and ducked back rapidly as a rapid burst of red laser shaved off the top edges of both the rock

and his feathers.

“They’re right there!” He hissed through a clenched beak, looking at the three of us. Jerking his head towards the direction that would lead us up the mountain, he spoke softly. “I’m gonna head the other way. Provide a distraction. You three run... just wait until I’ve made my first shot.”

“No, you’ll get torn apart!” Ivory snapped at the griffin

He shrugged. “I’m the fastest one here. I can fly... why not me?”

Ivory closed her mouth, looking for an argument against what he had said. I had to agree with him... he did have the best chance of drawing them off.

I looked at Ivory and Fluster, nodding. “Okay... get ready to run.”

There was a soft thump from the other side of the rock, and an object came arcing over the rock. I hated that I could identify a grenade by the weight as it bounced off of my side, but I at least knew how to react.

“Run!” I pushed the girls with my magic, getting them a head start, and started after them. We had maybe a second before the explosive went off. From the other direction, I heard the thunderous boom of Sight firing, and an mechanically augmented scream from beyond the rock.

When the grenade went off, I was halfway through throwing myself so that a tree was between my hide and the blast. The girls had the tree, and my body protecting them. It blew the old wooden relic of a once healthy forest in half. It began falling, and I had splinters in my ass again, but we kept running.

I heard Ash fire again, this time from above, and knew that he must have taken flight. Fluster was leading the way, ducking under dead branches and easily maneuvering through small gaps between trees. Ivory was hampered by the heavy weapon she was carrying, but managed to keep pace with the smaller mare.

I had to admit that the blast had knocked me off balance. I was smashing through branches, and picking up even more slashes across my face, neck, and chest as I ran. I held Broken tight against my side with my magic, ready to put a load of buckshot into a Ranger’s visor. It might not kill him, but taking point-blank buckshot to the face had to at least be an inconvenience.

I don’t know how he caught up to us, but without thinking I slid to dodge the power hooves that came launching out of a bush, one of them clipping my shredded ear as I dropped to my belly. Springing up, I gave a shout of alarm to the girls, so that we didn’t get any more separated.

This was the first Ranger I’d seen without heavy weapons on his sides, but he was by no means unarmed. The four power hooves took my focus, as he spun to try and back-hoof me with one of them. He was surprisingly quick for a Ranger, and I found myself on the defensive.

“Rip! Get away from him, I don’t have a shot!” Ivory’s voice drifted into my concentration as the pony tried apple-bucking my face and then did a hop backwards to close the distance for a second attempt. I was backing away from him, ducking most of his kicks and deflecting the rest with Broken. I was relying on the weapons seemingly indestructible nature, but with each impact of the hoof weapons I felt my magic losing potency.

I heard a shriek of rage coming from the girls, and spared a quick glance. A second Ranger was charging them. Ivory, now sporting a long slash along her neck from a bullet, was bracing to fire at the attacker.

In the instant I looked away, the Ranger took advantage. Pressing his attack, he sent a full power kick into Broken. He drove the weapon into my side, and threw me against a tree with the force of the blow. I hit the ground hard, and had to roll underneath him to avoid him stomping down on me.

When I was underneath him, I kicked up as hard as I could into his armored belly, hoping that the ballistic hooves would hurt him, if even a little. The blasts were powerful enough to throw him off of me, a deeply dented and scored metal plate the reward for my attack.

He landed roughly, but sprang quickly back to the attack. I rolled and jumped to my hooves in time to duck. The powerhoof whistled past my head and hit a tree, blowing a hole in the bark. I knew that if I took any of

these hits, I'd be in no shape to keep going up the mountain.

I slammed Broken into the side of his helmet as hard as I could, and he stumbled off balance. Seeing my chance, I did a completely graceless half-backflip and kicked him in the neck, between his shoulder and helmet.

After Massacre, I knew how much damage a hit there could do, and I was really hoping that it would finish off the stubborn pony. I slammed into the ground, cutting my train of thought off, and got up quickly.

The Ranger was stumbling back to his hooves, wobbling. I'd done some damage, and there was now a gaping hole in the Ranger's armor. I could see his neck, which was bleeding heavily, but wasn't too seriously injured. I had a remedy for that.

Rushing him, I plowed him back over onto the ground with my front hooves. I jammed the barrel of Broken into the gap in his armor, aimed it up towards where his head was, and pulled the trigger.

The shot tore into his throat and neck, spraying me with blood. I worked the lever, which dug the barrel even deeper into the hole, and pulled the trigger again, just to make sure. His glass visor blew out in a spray of glass and pony bits. I pulled the weapon out dripping with gore, and levered another shell into the chamber. The Ranger was very dead, and I had other issues to handle.

I ran towards where I'd last seen Ivory and Fluster, following the shredded remains of trees. I didn't see any bodies, but the forest had not fared well in the face of aggressive heavy weapons users. I couldn't hear firing anymore either... silence had dropped back into the forest.

I was starting to get worried, until I rounded a large dead oak and found myself face to face with another Ranger.

"Shit!" I yelled in surprise, and pulled Broken up as fast as I could. I fired directly into the Ranger's face, and the armored pony rocked back on stiff rear legs before falling to the side. As he hit, I understood. The shredded remains of a rifle were there, perforated and broken. His side was blown open in some places, as if the weapon had exploded. He'd been dead when I'd found him... I guess that his armor had locked up and he'd just been left standing there.

I aimed Broken quickly as I heard another sound, but lowered the barrel as I saw the robed figure of Fluster peeking at me from over a fallen log. She waved me over frantically, and I hurried. As I hopped over the log, I almost landed on Ivory, who was laying there while Fluster was fussing with several grenades.

"Have you seen Ash? Is he okay?" Ivory was busy guessing how many shots she had left. The bundle of ammunition before her was all held together in one long belt, and it trailed up to Sweeps' minigun. She didn't have nearly enough to deal with the Rangers. I knew that one of her saddlebags was bulging with standard 5 mm, but the armor piercing was a slender hope by comparison. That stuff was just too hard to come by out here.

I shook my head, glancing up over the log. The fog was moving in, thicker than before, and I was slowly losing sight of the dead Ranger. The forest seemed almost peaceful, which was making me worry as well.

Then, I heard a loud shot echo through the woods. Ash was still fighting. He'd catch up, it was just up to us to put distance between us and him.

Using my magic, I picked up the pile of ammunition and helped Ivory put it back in the bag she was using to feed the minigun. "Come on, we gotta go. Ash will catch up... he can fly, after all."

Ivory closed the flap once the ammo belt was back into the pouch, then lifted her head to glance back the way we'd come. She was looking for any hint of the griffin in the fog. I knew she was, because I was doing the same thing. Fluster was already starting further up the mountain, clearing her throat as she got a short distance from us.

Ivory and I both started at the sudden noise, and looked at the hooded mare. Jerking her head in the direction she was heading, she whispered at us. "Come on. He's a big griffin."

Her voice rang loudly, even though she was speaking softly. Taking a step, I stepped on a branch that echoed

like a gunshot. It was like the fog was amplifying any sound... or maybe I was just being paranoid about being followed.

I thought to check my EFS, and forced myself to look for the red markers that would show any Rangers bearing down on us with explosive death. I saw markers for Fluster, Ivory, and what I could only assume was Fern... but nothing else.

We were alone.

I let out a sigh, one simultaneously of relief and distress. No Rangers meant we weren't in immediate danger, but no Ash meant that we had no idea what had happened to the griffin.

Ivory turned after Fluster, and after a few moments of waiting and hoping, I did as well.

The incline up the mountain had been getting steeper. The fog had gotten so thick that I was thinking that we were actually in the clouds. It was getting colder, and the trees were beginning to look... off. Warped in places, they looked mutated.

Then the clicking started.

I'd heard my PipBuck's radiation reader before. It went off anytime that it rained, but the levels were always fairly low. As we went up the mountain, however, the levels were slowly climbing.

When I pointed it out to the girls, I found that Fluster was ready with the little chewable tablets that would help us brave the radiation. Radiation was a constant in Hornsmith, but it just never seemed to hit dangerous levels. Up here though, I was beginning to feel my skin tingling. Fluster rubbed at her neck with the back of a fetlock, and I knew that she was feeling it as well.

We continued our blind journey up the mountain, listening to the ticking get steadily faster.

The trees just stopped being, and we stumbled out of them into a vast openness. The fog was also gone. The clouds were too.

I just froze, staring up. Ivory and Fluster walked forward a ways, before also glancing up. Fluster let out a little shriek and backed into the tree cover rapidly. Ivory just sat down, her mouth hanging open.

We could see the stars. The sun had gone down while we'd been climbing, but the stars above were bright and shiny. I was so used to the constant cloud ceiling and the rain... I sat down next to Ivory and just stared up.

The moon was beautiful. I knew that I'd heard stories as a foal of Princess Luna's beauty, and I could only imagine that it matched the glowing celestial body I couldn't take my eyes off of.

I heard a throat clear, and glanced down. Fluster was now standing between us, her eyes firmly rooted on the ground. Her hood was drawn so far down that I think the only way I could have seen her face was to be laying underneath her.

"Uh... we should get out of the open. That's a big wall, and we don't know what kind of defenses Maremack has." Her voice was low, even quieter than when she was whispering. Like she was trying to hide from the sky.

It was really hard to bring myself to look at the wall, with the sky and all of its complicated beauty as overpowering as it was, but eventually I forced myself to look down.

First the sky, and then Maremack. It was a night for firsts.

The wall looked like it had been carved out of the mountain itself, jutting straight up out of the bare rock that stood defiant above the trees. Lining the top were heavy barreled weapons pointed into the sky. They must have been there to defend the base from zebra attack, even this far from where the ancient front lines had been.

Actually... I looked around. I had thought that Maremack had been bombed. What I knew of Balefire wasn't much, just that it just destroyed anything it touched. Maremack looked completely intact. The radiation supported the balefire theory, but the fact that the whole base looked like it had just been built disproved it.

"How do we get in?" Fluster whispered, still hiding from the sky, this time tucked in under Ivory's minigun. The wall presented an issue. It was a wall. A big wall, and it looked like it was very good at its job.

I shrugged. "We go around until we find a way in." Glancing to the left, and then to the right, my shoulders slumped. The wall stretched off into the distance in either direction, and I knew that to the left was the road. The Rangers would be coming up that way... but that was also where the door probably was.

If we went right, we might walk around the entire thing and come to the door anyways.

I nodded to the left. "We go left. We stay quiet, and we stay down."

Ivory nodded absently, still staring up. Under her breath, she muttered, "I could paint this for days."

I hissed at her. I understood her fascination, I really did, but we had to move. "Ivory, come on."

Almost painfully, she tore her eyes from the open canvas of the heavens. Glancing at me, an almost sad look on her face, she nodded more forcefully. "...Right. Yeah, okay."

We began slowly began to work our way left along the wall, trusting the cover of night and the open area to protect us. I half expected lasers or something to shoot down at us, but as we walked the wall it just kept on standing there. The radiation had evened out, and was staying at an uncomfortable level.

"How much Radaway do we have?" Fluster was still huddled underneath the bulky weapon, but she had all of our meds. Her eyes connected with mine for a second, and I was taken back by how scared she actually looked. I was beginning to think that she was afraid of big spaces, which made a lot of sense for a pegasus that chose to live in tunnels.

She took mental stock quickly and whispered up at me, "Six doses."

I nodded. Even with Ash not around, that wasn't enough. If we didn't get out of this radiation quickly, we were going to have a problem.

I began trotting faster. We had to find a way inside, and a way inside that wasn't covered with Rangers. If we could beat them to the main gate, wherever that was, then maybe we could get in before they did.

As we came around the curve of the wall, I spotted something further ahead. I broke into a slow gallop, closing the distance quickly, and came to what I had seen. There was a hole in the wall. It was a big hole.

An entire section of the wall had been plowed into by some sort of flying machine, which lay in the rubble like a broken dragon. As I picked my way towards it through the field of rubble that had once been the wall, my hoof kicked something on the ground.

Glancing down, I saw a strange sight. I was pretty sure that it had been a pegasus once, encased in threatening black armor. It was long dead, just a skeleton, but the armor and sophistication of the weaponry attached to its sides gave me pause. It was like a sleek, flying Steel Ranger, and I knew I never wanted to fight one. I wasn't a fan of any enemy that could fly.

I turned back, looking along the wall to where I saw Ivory was approaching cautiously, her minigun's barrels spinning in anticipation. Fluster was hanging back, pressed up against the wall to make herself look even smaller. I waved the two of them over with a hoof, and they picked up their speed.

Fluster's eyes went wide as she rounded the bend, taking a few tentative steps towards the downed craft. "That's a Raptor... I haven't seen one since..." She went quiet, just staring at the crashed craft. Her eye darted to where several more winged skeletons in black armor were dashed upon the ground.

"Who are they?" Ivory was nudging one of the corpses with a hoof, as though she expected it to stand up.

"They're Enclave. Pegasi... like me..." She turned away from the corpses, muttering low but loud enough that I heard. "Not since I was a filly..."

“Well, it looks like they’ve been here since you were a filly. I don’t think we have to worry about any more showing up.” I tried to sound warm. Fluster was on edge, we all were, and I really didn’t want her to freak out... I was barely holding on myself, and I hoped I seemed more focused than I felt.

Crazy little shit... I like her sister though. Wish I’d met her in better times, she doesn’t seem shy at all. Probably a crazy fuck, too.

Shut the fuck up, Two Kick.

Ivory approached Fluster and helped the smaller mare get over the wreckage and bodies. She was twitching a little as she walked, making small whimpering noises. I realized that the noises were coming from Fern, who was once again hidden somewhere in the pegasus’ gear.

I followed her, making my way through the smashed wall and under one of the Raptor’s shattered wings. Once past, I found myself in Maremack proper.

Immediately, I could feel a small tingle at the back of my mind, and a hint of that terrible whiteness at the edge of my vision. Two Kick immediately began growling and muttering threats to me if I didn’t turn around and walk away. I ignored him.

I could feel Pandemonium. He was near.

Even if it weren’t for the mental clues, I had the feeling that something magically substantial had been here for some time. The inside of the base was completely overgrown with plants, very similar to how the regional headquarters had been. It was the same type of plant, a vine that was covering most of the surfaces.

I knew those vines so much more intimately than I wanted, and my ribs hurt from the memory. I groaned and recoiled slightly as the memory surged back, vivid and painful.

The base appeared to be shaped like a big hoop, wrapped around the peak of the mountain that kept going up and disappeared into another layer of clouds that clung to its top like a big hat. In either direction ran assorted buildings and warehouses, presumably wrapping around the entirety of the mountain in a continuous loop. A continuous loop of shadows, vines, and mystery.

“Rip? You okay?” Ivory’s face suddenly dominated my vision, and I took a step back. I hadn’t even met her when I’d been to the headquarters; she had no idea of what had happened there. The vines killing everyone, and the memory orb I had used.

I just nodded. “Uh... yeah, I’m fine...” I looked around, and realized that the vines weren’t as thick as I’d first thought. It wasn’t quite as thick as where the Greenthumb Cube had been. Maybe it was just natural...

I didn’t know what was happening, but the world just seemed off. One second, everything was covered with vines, and the next the base was bare and windswept. It slowly faded from one to the other, and I had to rub my eyes.

Glancing at the girls, I noticed that they didn’t seem surprised or astonished. Fluster still looked terrified, but not because of what I was seeing.

I see it too. So why the fuck aren’t we leaving?

I shook my head, trying to clear the voice and the images, but neither went away. I hadn’t really expected them to, but there was no harm in trying. The vines and the light were all pulling in one direction... and I just knew that my goal was at the source.

I nodded my head towards it. “This way. Let’s hurry.”

I began trotting rapidly, stepping over the vines that I was now sure weren’t actually there as I watched Ivory pass clean through a large cluster unhindered. My mind was just finally breaking down, or I was being influenced by Pandemonium, or Two Kick was messing with me, or I was having some new withdrawal symptom, or... there were a lot of ors. I wasn’t sure which one, but it didn’t matter.

I had a job to do.

The buildings, when I could see them unhindered, were definitely built for military use. I was reminded of

the Orchard, but the streets were wider. Scattered around were several large vehicles that looked like they were made to move... well, I couldn't really guess what they were made to move, but it was something sizable.

What really surprised me was that the lights were on. This place had been abandoned, as far as I knew, for two centuries. Somepony had left the lights on, or Hate had figured out how to turn them back on. It made our way through the base much easier than it would have been in the dark, but I was very aware that with the lights on we couldn't hide very well.

I kept seeing things, shapes and forms down alleys. They were mixed in with the vines that weren't there, and I just couldn't escape the deepening sense of paranoia I was getting. Fluster and Ivory were getting it as well. They would glance at some moments, and then completely ignore others. This place was really messing with my head.

After we had walked for a short distance, the sheer size of Maremack surprising me, Ivory fell in step with me. Fluster was still under the weapon, which basically sandwiched the smaller pegasus between us.

"Why this way? Shouldn't we be getting inside?" She was nervously looking over her shoulder, probably trying to figure out if a shadow was moving or not. That's what I was doing, at least.

Turning my head to her, I nodded. "Yeah, we should, but I'm pretty sure what we're looking for is over this way." I didn't know for sure, I was still just following the hallucinations. They were definitely coming from that direction.

She was about to respond, when I saw something that made me give a whispered, triumphant whoop. A large clear area, ringed with official looking buildings, was up ahead. It would get us out of the dark, paranoia inducing street we'd been following since coming through the hole in the wall.

Once I got a full view, I saw the massive gates along the monolithic wall. The Rangers hadn't reached the top yet, or I'm sure that the courtyard would have been filled with armored ponies and their stupid giant robots.

There was nothing. A few pools of light from overhead lamps illuminated the emblem that took up most of the ground. It was a combination of three butterflies over an apple with wings along the sides. The wings were new, but I knew the butterfly and the apple. This was a joint project between the Ministries of Technology and Peace. The wings probably denoted the airbase part.

We trotted into the circle, sticking to the edge and out of the spotlights. The vines were everywhere. I stepped over one, even though I knew they weren't real, and looked around. Each building looked the same. Official, but more like office and administration than research.

If I was a researcher two hundred years ago, where would I keep a god that I'd cut into pieces? Knowing the rest of Hornsmith, probably underground, beneath a completely separate building. That's how it had been so far, and I doubted that it would change now.

The front gate shook suddenly, as a tremendous force slammed into it. The three of us froze, and looked across the wide empty area.

A second hit and the doors began buckling. Red dots began popping up in the edge of my vision, showing me that there were at least a dozen hostiles on the other side. A dozen Rangers, and at least one of the robots. Fuck. I'd been hoping we'd made better time than them; put more of a gap between us.

The third hit knocked the gate open just enough that I could see the robot on the other side as it reared back for another hit.

"Run." I spoke with an urgency that the girls picked up on immediately, and we started running. We had to get a few buildings between us and the robot, though I knew that wouldn't stop it. One had walked through Neighwhere like it was a field with a few stumps in it.

I didn't know where we were going to run to, and I was sorely missing Ash's sense of direction right about then. I really wanted to know if the griffin was still even alive. As far as I could tell, he wasn't on the other side of the fence. Just red contacts on the EFS, nothing friendly.

We were just out of sight down a narrow gap between two buildings when the front gate burst inwards. The robot slammed both doors off of their hinges, crushing them into the ground with enough force to crack the two hundred year old decoration.

They knew exactly where we were as they entered, a flash of murderous green streaming from the lead robot. The shot was a little off, tearing along the wall above my head and raining debris down on us.

Something hit me from the side right then, driving me behind the building. For a brief, happy second, I thought that it was Ash arrived to save the day. The face, if I could call it that, that greeted me was beyond my worst nightmares.

The mouth was way too big, running back to about halfway down the pony's neck and brimming with razor sharp teeth. Three bloodshot eyes, crusted and dripping, stared down at me from one side of its head. A tentacle jutting from where its tail should have been was busy wrapping itself around my midsection, needle like barbs digging into me as it did so.

As it lunged to take a bite out of me, I snapped out of the shock I had fallen into. Its mouth opened impossibly wide, wide enough to decapitate me with its wicked and multiple layered teeth. It lunged forward, holding me down with the tentacle. I slammed Broken forward faster than I thought possible, jamming it into the things maw. Wedged open, the abomination gurgled and coughed vile smelling spittle at me.

With a pull of the trigger, Broken tore the things upper jaw and face clean off in a spray of blood and bone. Now that it was missing most of its skull and those horrible eyes, it collapsed onto me. I fought to get its dead weight off of me and ripped the barbed tentacle from around, and that's when I heard the noise.

It wasn't just me that had been attacked, Ivory and Fluster had also been jumped. Whatever these things were, they weren't a hallucination. Ivory's minigun pulped the chest of one that was backing the two of them into a corner, its face a mass of whipping, tooth studded tentacles. It practically turned inside out as the minigun fired a burst directly into it, and fell over twitching. Ivory screamed at it, and Fluster's eye was impossibly wide and bright beneath her hood.

The noise continued, and I realized that it was coming from the courtyard. I glanced over, and saw a swarm of the pony things streaming out of alleys and windows. They were attacking the rangers. If this was a nest of some kind, then knocking down the door had been like poking a beehive with a really big stick.

I was about to turn and run when I saw a pony I was looking for. His armor was more decorative than the others, and he was walking behind the rest of them barking orders as they fired heavy ordinance into the onslaught of monsters.

Broken Arrow. He was on my list.

The Ranger next to him was impaled on the end of a horn jutting from a monster pony's face, twice the length of its body and almost impossibly thin. The Ranger twitched, firing a grenade from a launcher in a high arc that hit the building next to me somewhere in the second floor. The Ranger died, and the creature pulled the horn out, flexing it like a whip as it did so. Broken Arrow aimed the huge barreled weapon I'd seen him with in Orchard and fired. It was a shotgun or something, as the blast shredded the creature back to its skeleton in some places and threw it skidding across the courtyard in a spray of blood.

"Rip! Let's go! Now, please!" Ivory yelled in my ear, and when I didn't turn she bit down hard and dragged me. Around the pain, I was just glad that she hadn't bit into my shredded ear. I couldn't help but follow though, and as soon as I started moving under my own power she let go.

We ran. I put another shell into Broken, hoping that I wouldn't need to use it, but glad that whatever these things were they weren't terribly hard to kill. I had to stop thinking as I ran into Ivory's armored rear, coming to a dead stop. She was backing up, and I saw why. At the end of the alley we were retreating down there were at least six more of the things, slinking towards us in the darkness. They were all dark colors, and if she hadn't seen them we would have run straight into their midst.

"Here. Here!" Fluster's voice came from behind us, and we turned to see that she was holding a door open into one of the buildings we were alongside. Glancing the way we had just come, I saw several more of the

creatures approaching us slowly. Ivory started towards the open door first, and I was close behind her. I slammed it shut behind me, only for it to be dented inwards by an impact from outside. They'd closed the gap a lot faster than I'd thought possible, and with a second impact I realized that they'd be inside in moments.

We ran.

Fluster led the way, running through the dark building as fast as her shorter legs could carry her. It was dark in there, occasionally lit up by gunfire from the windows outside. Every few seconds, a heavy thud would shake the building as the robot slammed its giant metal hoof down on one of the creatures.

The inside of the building was filthy. Litter and animal leavings were everywhere, and I knew where the creatures lived. I spotted several skeletons, deformed and still wet with blood, which told me what I needed to know about what the things ate, and where they lived. It had been clean outside, but inside was more of the bloodsoaked hellhole I had been expecting to encounter in Maremack.

Fluster, somehow, managed to find a staircase down. Her affinity for the underground was amazing, and she was already heading down the stairs as Ivory and I caught up. We looked down into the gloom. Ivory wondered aloud, looking at the claw marks covering the stairs themselves and the walls coming up. "Are... you sure we want to go down there?"

Fluster nodded her head. I agreed with her before she could explain. "She has the right idea." The Projects with Pandemonium had all been underground. Hornsmith construction was fond of tunnels. The hallucinations were still fading in, vines flowing on the stairs and along the walls. Down was where we wanted to be. "Hate will be underground. I know he will."

Ivory looked at me for a few seconds, but a slithering sound from the darkness behind us got her moving. "Okay, but if you get me killed I'm haunting you. Haunting you so hard."

We went down the stairs, into the home of monsters.

If there was one comfort in the hell we had walked into, it was that the inhabitants appeared content with being outside. The tunnels were abandoned. Signs of the creatures were everywhere: smeared on the walls, piled in the corners, clawed into the floors. I even spotted what looked a lot like a clutch of eggs, but I wasn't curious enough to inspect the horrific looking bundle of lumps.

Despite all of that, there was no sign that any of the creatures were still around. Luckily, there was a thick metal door at the bottom of the stairs. It was badly rusted, but the hinges were in good enough order that I got it shut with a small effort on my part. Slamming it closed, I twisted the handle with my magic and smiled as metal bars in the door slid into the floor and ceiling. Then, I turned and made my way past the two mares who were giving me concerned looks.

I had taken the lead again, delving further and further into the tunnels beneath Maremack. I was following the vines still, even though they weren't real. I could very well have been walking into death, but something about Pandemonium's deal drove me forward.

The vines knew where he was. They knew where Hate was.

You're fucking insane, you know that? Look at where you are. Go back to your mare, spend some time with her; I'll give you that if you turn around. You're going to get us killed. Get me killed. Turn around you stupid fuck! TURN AROUND!

I pressed on, stepping over a rotting monstrosity, taking care to avoid the razor sharp mandibles where its mouth should have been.

As we hurried through the dark tunnels, we began hearing sounds behind us. Clawing, scraping, grunting. They were getting close. We started running, full out, and the noise increased. We were now being hunted noisily and actively, the creatures still out of sight but tearing towards us in the darkness.

Then, the tunnel ended. The scant lights in the underground continued, but I could tell that we were now in a

much larger room. A room, that as far as I could see, had only one exit. A massive metal door, like a safe. Or a Stable.

“Huh...” Ivory was staring up at the metal door, as confused as I was. Even Fluster was stepping forward, her eye wide in fascination instead of terror.

A clicking hiss behind us drew my attention, and I spun around. The door was now brimming with dark furred, heavily deformed not-ponies. They were slipping into the room, spreading out to try and surround us. We were backed into a corner.

Ivory’s weapon began spinning up to speed as she gripped the yoke in her teeth. I aimed Broken, mentally keeping track of my ammo. Five in Broken. Four kicks. Nine shots total, then I’d have to reload, or just start kicking without the ballistic help.

A quick glance at Fluster showed that the small mare was crouched low, the scalpel she’d taken from Doc Care gripped in her teeth. If it could kill a Ranger, I had no doubt it could kill one of the wretches facing us, but I couldn’t help but worry about the range on it.

I counted about two dozen. Hissing, snarling, gurgling, the beasts were squaring off against us. I saw tentacles, stingers, claws, teeth, and a whole assortment of other parts that had no right being on a pony. Each one of them was too horrific to exist, but they were slowly stalking forward all the same.

“Come on, you monsters...” Ivory’s voice was low, almost inaudible over the whine of her weapon, but filled with menace. She opened fire a split second later.

The shots tore into the creatures as they burst into action, the armor piercing bullets she still had loaded punching clean through the creatures as she swept the weapon left. We didn’t have very much armor piercing ammunition, but she didn’t exactly have time to switch it out for something more appropriate.

Bullets were still bullets, and several of the creatures died as they were struck in what resembled faces, their throats torn out, torsos blown through. She let out a frantic laugh as she saw them die, emboldened by the sight.

I had my own problems, as half of the room of nightmares rushed me.

I shot the first in the eye, blowing the side of its head off along with half of the spikes that covered it like a screaming cactus. It hit the ground, keeping up its momentum and sliding. A second beast jumped it and closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye.

I’d only just levered a new shell in, and didn’t have time to aim, so I just rammed it as hard as I could into the side of the things face. It had a circular mouth, like a leech, but the teeth inside looked like they could shred a pony to bone in seconds. The mouth missed my face by inches as I changed its direction, slamming it into the ground next to me.

It hit, slid, and sprang back up. Spinning to face me, it met something that it couldn’t digest as the firing plate on my hoof guns hit it right in the nose. It’s razor lined maw blew out like a cake made of flesh and blood with fireworks in it. It wobbled lazily without the top of its head, but I was already busy with the next one.

I was too slow, and the pony things jaws clamped down on my front leg, hard. The razor on my raider armor cut into its mouth, but did little to deter it. It pulled, yanking me off of my hooves. Its neck was long, way too long, and muscled like a serpent. Its body was in the middle of the room, and it hauled me into the air with unnatural strength.

I kept my grip on Broken, though, and aimed at the long, sinewy neck as I dangled. Before I could squeeze off a shot, it whipped me up, and then slammed me into the ground. I hit like a sack of bricks, and my poor, frequently abused ribs groaned in protest. I tasted blood. As I coughed, it yanked me back into the air for another hit, sending my blood spraying from my mouth as I went.

I could still hear Ivory firing, filling the entryway with lead, which told me that she was still okay at least. I didn’t have time to check, on the upswing of the creature’s next attempt to break me on the hard ground. I took my chance then, aiming quickly and snapping off a shot.

The buckshot tore into the neck. Strong as it was, it didn't hold up to the lead tearing through it and my weight. It tore, spraying blood as the muscles ripped and the long spine snapped. I slammed into the roof of the chamber, and then braced myself for the plummet back into the mob of creatures.

I bounced off of the back of one, dozens of tiny barbs catching in my neck and ill-fitting armor and tearing me where they touched. Lucky for me, I was much bigger than the one I landed on, and I felt its spine and legs snap under my weight. I rolled off, bleeding heavily from the dozens of superficial cuts I'd gotten in my landing. I didn't have time to pry the still clamped jaws off of my leg, as another creature leapt at me, screeching through its regular looking mouth. The dozen eyes set into its face glared death at me as it came.

Before it could get to me, it was ripped out of the air by a stream of bullets as Ivory turned her fire on it. I was sprayed with the creatures blood, and started looking for the next target. Heaps of them lay where they had been cut down by Ivory's scything spray.

It hit the ground with a wet splat, splashing blood on me as it sprayed from the holes that had been punched into it. I was now soaked in blood, both my own and the stinking black filth that ran through the creatures. I stood, using Broken to pry the clamped jaws from my leg. Shreds of the creature remained behind, hanging from the metal, and several long teeth were puncturing the armor and sticking into my leg. I pulled them out, and the wounds began oozing blood into the already gore soaked fabric.

A whimper from behind me made me look for Fluster, and I found her in a heartbeat. She was huddled in the corner, beneath the corpse of one of the creatures. "Fluster! Ivory, help her." The pale mare was standing with a hoof in the head of one of the abominations, having just stomped the life out of it. Blood ran freely from a series of long slashes on her face, and I saw what appeared to be teeth marks scoring the entire front of her armor.

Ivory spotted the cloaked mare quickly, and ignored her own condition to run to her friend. Her path took her through the pile of shells at her hooves, sending them skittering around the corpse filled room. I reloaded while I had a chance, turning back to the door where we had come from. I could see movement in the gloom, and pumped a shot into it. A inequine shriek of pain replied, and the movement faded back into the darkness. They were probably regrouping, so we had only a brief moment to catch our breaths.

Fluster was fine, but she had gutted the thing on top of her groin to throat with her scalpel. She scrambled to her hooves, frantically wiping at the gore that spilled out as Ivory lifted it off of her.

She whispered a "Thank you" at Ivory, which I could hear through the now complete silence that filled the room. She began bandaging Ivory's face, while I stood vigil over the door. I was watching the darkness, unsure of what we could do. Back into the tunnels were the creatures, and up above I was sure the Rangers were still around.

"Fuck."

It was all I could really think to say. Fluster had finished with Ivory, and was now fussing with my wounded but razor edged leg. I helped her, stripping the shredded garment from my leg as I undid the belts holding it in place. My leg underneath was pierced in a dozen places and bleeding heavily. It was a little hard to tell if all of the blood was from my leg or neck, but my leg was soaked. Splashes of black blood were mixing in as well.

"What the fuck are these?" Ivory was busy changing out what little armor piercing she had left for regular ammunition, in light of our current foes. Her barrels were aimed ever at the door, even as she struggled to place a different belt into the feed.

I replaced the spent shell in Broken, sighing. I'd really fucked us this time by running down here. The vines were pulsing. "I don't know."

Lights snapped on, giant flood lights built into the ceiling. One was cracked, flickering, and I spotted blood on it. It threw a red hue over everything, a making the room looked bathed in blood in flashes.

A voice flowed into the room from a speaker up on a wall. "Oh... I thought one of the armored interlopers had stumbled in, but look at whom we have here. Fascinating."

I could picture him grinning as he continued. “How do you like my little pets? Hate asked for a defense system for Maremack, and who I was I to deny using the resources given to me. Do you know what you can do with the ability to create life? To manipulate time? Well... I know you do. You’ve seen the fruits of my labor firsthand, though it appears they aren’t as effective as I had hoped. Bravo, by the way. You did well, ever the perfect specimen.”

The slithering and clawing in the hall was getting louder. More and more creatures were waiting for us in the dark, not daring to come into the light. The vines in the room were growing in intensity, becoming more solid and real with each pulse.

“I do have to thank you. The remaining cubes make so much more possible. Hate can reshape the wasteland. Boundless things... there’s no other way to put it. Endless possibilities. The research they were doing here... I could spend a lifetime studying it. Perfecting it.”

Epiphany let out a long, thoughtful sigh. The speakers gave his every word a filthy, tinney quality. His normal buttery words were distorted to be as ugly as the mind behind them.

“For now, my friends, I invite you in. Do not fight, or I will have you torn apart. My children are at the door, and they follow my every whim with absolute dedication.”

The massive door clicked, and a tremor shook the room. The doorway was now filled with black shapes, teeth and tentacles wanting for our blood. As the Stable door began swinging open, I found that the light within was absolutely coated in vines that weren’t. As they faded out, I spotted two large turrets in the ceiling, already tracking us with lethal intent. The huge barrels had muzzles the size of my hoof, and I really doubted we had the room to get away.

We lingered, the girls looking at me for guidance. I took a step towards the open door, and the speakers gave a contented sigh from the deranged Pony holding our lives in the balance.

“Welcome to Maremack, my friend.”

Chapter 22: Pain

As the heavy metal door slammed shut behind us, I was intently staring down the barrels of the huge guns set into the ceiling. If they fired, at least I wouldn't feel it. It was preferable to being eaten, in any case.

"If you ponies would be so kind as to put away your weapons, that would be lovely. I would rather not have to kill you right now." The voice came from the ceiling. There must have been a speaker up there, amidst the lights and weapons.

Slowly, I sheathed Broken. Glancing at Ivory, I gave her an apologetic look and nodded towards the bit she still held tightly in her mouth. Slowly, as though it pained her, she let the trigger mechanism drop out of her mouth to fall into place near her chest. Fluster, coated in black gore, had already disappeared her scalpel into the folds of her robe.

"Thank you. I do appreciate the cooperation."

Then, the room went silent aside from the small whine that the guns made whenever they moved to track between us. I look down for the first time, and found that we were standing in gore. The smell hit me, and I noticed it was much worse than in the tunnels. The black fur and rotted goo told me that we were fetlock deep in tunnel dwelling mutant.

"Oh... oh!" Ivory had also realized what we were standing in, and started trying to get her hooves out of the muck all at once. One of the guns tracked her as she frantically moved for higher ground, but fortunately it didn't fire. Unfortunately, that meant that Epiphany wanted us alive. Fluster just stood there, the color of her robes matching the color of the floor, looking for all intents and purposes like something rising from the gore.

Ivory clattered up onto a raised part of the floor, mostly devoid of rotting monster, where she began trying to shake it off of her hooves. I walked more calmly, not too keen to make quick movements under the guns, getting up next to her. When I was near enough to her, I leaned in to her and whispered, unsure if Epiphany could even hear us but not willing to risk it.

"This pony is not right in the head. I don't know what he's planning, but it can't be good." I couldn't remember anything about him from my time as a Paragon, and Two Kick hadn't been very forward with information on him other than that he was a "fucked up egghead". Judging from Massacre and the creatures we had almost been dinner for, it was safe to say that he was Cinder level crazy, but with more intelligence thrown in. A lethal combination.

A loud click rang through the space as a door along the wall opposite the Stable door swung open. The loudspeakers crackled again, and Epiphany's voice oozed out. "Now, come this way. I wish to talk. Hate doesn't know you're here, so this is just you and me. Unless you make it absolutely necessary, my friend, I don't intend to kill you."

I was just thinking about all of the other things he might do to us. I'd prefer death to a lot of them.

Good call.

I stood there, staring at the door, weighing our options. Fluster had made her way out of the filth, and now we all stood looking down the blank hall past the open passage. "We're not going down there, are we?" Ivory's voice rang loudly in the lack of noise, making me flinch. I kept expecting something horrible to happen, but the hallway appeared more or less safe.

"Please? Either proceed down the hall, or I open the big door and let my pets in. It's entirely up to you, my friends." Epiphany's voice yet again, the calm and courteous tone unwelcome and unwanted.

I took the first step, and I heard him chuckle over the intercom. "Bravo, Ripple. Always the first to throw yourself into the unknown. I've always admired that, you know?"

I gestured with a flick of my head that the girls should follow me, and took my first steps through the door. Inside, the hallway was reminiscent of a Stable. It was very similar, but just a little off, like an imitation painted on the back of another card. The floor was grating instead of the flat sheets of the Stable. It rang strangely under each heavy, slow step.

“We were so fortunate to find this place intact. Everypony was in such a rush to leave when the end of the world came, they just ran. They neglected to note that the base never took a direct hit. They left the security on, but that was easy enough to deal with. I do believe I’ve done a decent job putting it back in service, and giving it my own little ‘flair’, wouldn’t you say?”

He kept talking, even though we hadn’t responded once, or even asked a single question of him. The feeling I was getting from Two Kick was that Epiphany liked to talk. I was finding that out myself; the egghead was talking nonstop now that we were in his domain.

“Of course, it’s not an us right now. Hate doesn’t know you’re here, in fact I’m sure he’s too busy with the armored interlopers to even bother with you right now. Your part was over when our little errand pony retrieved these lovely Cubes from you.”

A high pitched whine filled the air and I froze. I glanced at the girls, who were both bracing themselves for a fight. Either that, or a quick death, I wasn’t quite sure.

“But, I am not one to deprive myself of a chance to learn. I have so much that I can learn from you three, and I think I’ll take the chance that has so readily given itself to me. Sweet dreams.”

I noticed that Ivory’s mane was standing on end a split second before the floor was filled with electricity. It arced off of the metal walls, and ran up my legs. Twin detonations threw me into a front flip, and I slammed into the electrified floor on my back. From where I was spasming and twitching I saw the girls similarly incapacitated. Ivory was still twitching on her hooves, but Fluster had flopped over and was jerking like a fish out of water.

Then everything went dark as it just became too much.

I was under an amazingly bright light. For a few seconds, I felt panic rising. The only thing that told me I wasn’t dead was the pain. Death wouldn’t hurt that much. I turned my gaze to the side, and found that there was a surgical lamp near my face. I was in what had once been a sterile white surgical suite. We all were.

The pulsing was much slower now, and I could only see the edges of vines creeping into the room. Maybe the electrocution had helped out my crazy a little, or whatever it was that was causing me to hallucinate. I was sure that it was Pandemonium, or at least the cubes, but there was always just the chance I was breaking from all that I’d been through.

Across the room I spotted the girls, strapped down on separate tables and unconscious. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t even speak. I could just stare. There were straps on each of my legs, as well as my head and neck. I could feel a tight muzzle around my mouth, keeping me from talking or biting.

I now saw that the vile stallion was standing on his rear hooves, front hooves supporting himself next to Ivory. He was inspecting her rather intimately, prodding with medical tools where he should not have been prodding. If I could have moved, I would have torn across the room and kicked his fucking face in.

Ah... I wanted to check out that part of her first. Fucking egghead’s doing it wrong, they can’t make noise if they’re passed out. Gotta smack ‘em awake first. What’s that duckbilled thing even for, anyway?

I really didn’t need Two Kick right now. I needed the use of my limbs. I grunted as I strained against the straps, but I had no leverage against the thick leather. I could do little but watch him molest my friend; I couldn’t even turn my head away.

When he was finished inspecting Ivory, he approached me. As he trotted past Fluster, I noticed that the mare was without her robe and pouches, her wings and scars in full view. A smile came across his face as he saw my eyes open, and he hurried over. “Oh, I see you’re the first awake. Your constitution always amazed me,

and I really shouldn't be surprised. Your friends are rather interesting specimens in their own right, I must say."

He pulled out a scalpel and dug it into my neck. I knew he was going after the black veins, as he had before. His eyes were filled with curiosity, and I wanted to cut them out with a rusty knife.

"I'll bet you're wondering why I was snooping around your friend's reproductive organs." I felt the pain as the blade sliced into my neck. "Ah... I do love phlebotomy... anyways, the mare. She's good breeding stock, you see. My friends outside, they seem to rely on the mother's fortitude to reproduce. The stronger she is, the more she can bear. The mother never survives, but the tradeoff is more of my wonderful little creations."

He pulled the blade out of my neck and gestured at the prone form of Ivory. "She'll be a fine mother. She'll die, but really I'm sure that's what Hate wants. You and your friends are supposed to be dead. So that's what I'll be doing... I just don't want to waste the opportunity you present."

Tapping the blood-stained scalpel on his chin absent-mindedly, staining his fur with my blood, he pondered a question out loud. "The other mare though... she's infertile. I wonder how that would work... they might just eat her. Hmmm... Whoever carved her up like that, they were thorough. Almost loving, as far as knife work goes."

"...kill... you..." I managed to gather enough strength to push the words through my teeth, mumbled and quiet. His eyes lit up and he grinned wider.

"Oh, I knew keeping you alive was the right idea. Such energy and drive. Bravo." He dropped the bloody scalpel next to me and turned away from me, walking over to a table in the middle of the room. Picking a syringe up with his magic, he turned back to me. As he pushed the air bubbles from the syringe, a drop of pearly venom formed on the needle.

"There were always a few experiments I couldn't run on our friend Messy. Hate wanted him able. I have such things planned for you. You may not have his raw durability, but I know that your burning drive will keep you going until the very end. I am so looking forward to that." As he approached me, he readied the needle. That jab would certainly paralyze me for several hours. If he stuck me, it was over. I would become some drooling mess, pumped full of chemicals and experimented on until I was literally dead meat.

The needle popped through the skin on my neck, and he began depressing the plunger on it. I immediately felt what little feeling there was in my neck slip away, a tingling coolness filling my veins.

"Epiphany." Hate's voice suddenly crashed through the room, causing the pony to falter in his administration of the drug. He had only injected a small bit of it, taking his sweet time in the act. Looking up, he slumped his shoulders as the voice came through the speaker set into the ceiling again. "Epiphany, come here."

Placing the needle next to me, he walked to the wall and pressed a button set into the wall with a hoof. "I'm securing the next generation. The Rangers are putting too much of a dent in my family."

I heard Hate sigh deeply before continuing. "Drop whatever poor wretch you're prepping, and get up here. I've run into a snag."

Epiphany walked back to me, picking up the needle. As it hovered towards me, the voice boomed through the room, making Epiphany flinch. "NOW!"

The mad stallion sighed, placing the needle back down. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere." He laughed at that, knowing full well that even without his cocktail of fail, I wasn't going anywhere under my own power. The drug was spreading, and while it wasn't as strong as a full dose, I was losing the feeling in my legs. Hurrying from the room, he paused only to look back at me like he wanted to spend hours cutting me open.

He probably does. Sick fuck cut Messy up so many times I'm surprised he didn't just fall apart.

It was just me and Two Kick, alone in the room with the two unconscious mares.

Well, at least the fucking view is pleasant.

I sighed.

Mere moments after the door closed behind Epiphany, Fluster pushed herself up into a sitting position. She was fully awake, and had apparently gotten out of the straps holding her front legs. Leaning down, she used her teeth to remove the straps from her back legs, and freed herself. Pulling herself down from the table, she looked around before heading straight towards Ivory.

I would have called her, but I still couldn't. The muzzle on my face and straps on my head kept me from even turning my head to follow Fluster as she moved to Ivory.

Ivory was much slower to wake up, the shock having taken a greater toll on her. As Fluster loosened the pale mare's straps, she whispered into Ivory's ear. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I was hoping it didn't involve what Epiphany had been doing. I didn't know how long Fluster had been awake, but I was pretty sure she'd been listening to the maniac's one-sided conversation.

Slowly, Ivory got up off of her table. Pausing to stretch, she groggily made her way to the table where Epiphany had stashed our gear and started putting it on as quickly as she could by herself. Fluster approached me, scars shining in the harsh white light of the room, and started undoing my straps.

Whispering, she leaned near to secured head. "Don't tell Ivory. She doesn't need that pain."

I couldn't do anything but try to nod in my strap prison. She began undoing the straps holding me down, and as she finished she beckoned Ivory over. The pale mare was still tightening her heavy armor, but she hopped over to us as she was working a strap on her leg.

Ivory hissed at us as she got close. "What's going on? We need to get out of here, now."

The straps were off of me, but as I tried to get off of the table I felt the drug coursing in my veins. For the third time in a day, I slammed into the ground as my legs failed me. I had lost most of their use, but I found that I could at least force myself to my hooves. I felt like a foal, standing for the first time. Not my best moment, especially not when we were in such dire need to hurry.

"Here." Ivory ducked her head under one of my front legs, standing and propping me up on her withers with my rear legs standing alongside her. She gave a short laugh, then turned her head so she could see me. "See, we can do this."

I glanced across the room at the table where our stuff was. She followed my gaze, and spotted the heavy minigun resting there. Her grin drooped, and she sighed. "Right. That. Well, lets get you suited up."

She started lugging me across the room as quickly as she could, my hooves dragging a bit as I did my best to trot with her. I was glad that he hadn't gotten the whole dose in before he was distracted, or I'd be completely useless. Like this, I could at least use my magic.

When we reached the gear, the girls helped me put it on. If I was going to be helped along by Ivory, I couldn't wear my raider armor without shredding her back, so I just abandoned the gore soaked and razor edged gear, shrugging instead only into the ill-fitting pegasus vest. With my saddlebags and Broken once again at my sides, I was as good to go as I could have been without the full use of my legs.

Fern made a short appearance as Fluster opened one of the bags in the pile of her belongings. His small head stuck out, and nuzzled her as she checked on him. Contented with the pup's well being, she slid on all of her bags and straps, before donning her filthy robe. Black gore still coated most of it, but she wore it like nothing was different.

Ivory was once again armed with Sweeps' former weapon, and as she took my weight against her withers again I could feel her sag a little. This wasn't going to last.

As we began our escape, we immediately ran into another problem. Epiphany had locked the door behind him. A big stainless steel monster, it looked strong enough to take any attempts we would make on it, and I couldn't see any handle.

Fluster stood before the door, looking up at it intently. Leaning her head against it, she tapped it with a hoof in a few places. Then, she turned to me. "Ripple, can you use your magic right now?"

I nodded, flaring my horn a bit as I pulled Broken from its holster, spun it once, and slid it back in. She smiled, and nodded at the door. “On the other side of the door is a handle. If you can turn it, we can get out of here. You’re going to have to focus, it might not turn easily.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Ivory helped me get my head near the door, and I concentrated. With Broken, I knew where it was. Anything I could see, I could grab. I may not have range or power, but I had speed. Grabbing something on the other side of a slab of metal and turning it in the right direction, when I couldn’t see the object or tell how hard to push...

If I could have felt what I was doing, it would have been so much easier. The major issue with telekinesis is that there is no feedback. No feel. Just grab and twist.

My first few tries produced zero results, and I was beginning to get frustrated. Just then, the door let out a loud clunk as I got lucky and twisted hard in the right spot. Bolts slid back from the wall, and the door swung free.

I immediately wished that I hadn’t opened the door.

The hall was filled with the exploded corpses of mares, burst open like overripe fruit. Some had been there for weeks, at least. What Epiphany was saying about mothers... this is what happened to the mothers. Left to rot. Thrown here after bursting forth a litter of monsters.

Ivory was not going to end up in this hallway, just another husk discarded like so much trash. I would not let that happen while there was breath left in my body and ammo in my gun.

We made our way through the corpses, following a cleared path through the middle. Before long, the hallway came to a t-junction. The two directions were more or less identical, corpses laid out along the edges of each.

“This way.” Fluster nodded off to the right. She was right. It looked like the path less traveled, which meant that we probably wouldn’t run into Epiphany coming back the other way. Not that I was opposed to running into the freak with a loaded gun and surprise on my side, but who knew what else he had up his sleeves.

Fluster led the way without another word, and Ivory was dragging me right along behind her. The vines were pointing the other direction, but I could live with that. The corpses were more plentiful in this direction, and I was really hoping that these things didn’t have a queen or something. If we were walking into a hive, I was really going to get mad.

We kept going straight, ignoring side paths. We wanted distance between us and Epiphany, and a straight line was the best way to go about that. Once we were far enough away, once the corpses had thinned and then disappeared entirely, we took a breather. We had come to a big room, probably used for storage when Maremack was a wartime base. The door was ajar, but the dust on the floor showed it hadn’t been opened recently. Huge shipping containers ran the length of it, making false hallways and deep shadows. There were a few lights in the ceiling, most of them either out or flickering. It was gloomy and mazelike, but at least it wasn’t filled with exploded corpses.

“So... what do we do now?” Ivory was stretching, having put me down for a little bit. The breather was more for her benefit than for myself or Fluster.

“Lost. Probably surrounded by monsters. Probably hunted by Rangers. Down one of our most capable friends. Slightly paralyzed...” I listed off our current predicament. It wasn’t looking good.

Fluster was looking at me sadly from within her robe. Her eye kept flicking over to Ivory, and I knew she was still worried about Epiphany’s fascination with the larger mare. I was too. After seeing those corpses, I knew that Epiphany had to suffer before he died.

Oh yes. I’ve always felt that way. I have my moments, but that sick fuck needs to be skinned with a fucking cheese grater. You can use that idea. Go ahead.

As Ivory approached us, Fluster trotted towards her and pulled her into a hug as best she could. Ivory looked a little taken back, normally the one to initiate any contact. “Fluster? What...”

Fluster stepped back, shaking her head. "It's nothing. Okay, help me get Ripple back up, we need to get going again."

I saw something glint in the light for a split second as Ivory stepped towards me.

"Ivory!" I yelled, but it was too late. A metal wire cinched tight around her neck and snatched her off of her hooves into the darkness above us. I tried forcing myself to stand as I drew Broken, but I only succeeded at falling over.

Drops of blood splattered on my face from above, one hitting me in the eye. I flinched as the crimson liquid stung, but forced my eye open. I had to control what I was shooting at, or I'd hit Ivory wherever she was. The haze of red made it really hard to see anything in the darkness.

Fluster was screaming, frantically working to strip her robe off. She threw it to the side in a pile, tearing off belts and pouches. Before I could wonder what she was doing, she unfurled her wings.

With a frantic flap, she launched into the air. It was clear she hadn't flown in a very long time, and she bounced off a wall once before disappearing into the blackness in pursuit of her friend. I could hear her frantic cries, up where I couldn't see, and I couldn't do anything to help.

A figure dropped from above, landing on Broken and forcing it from my magical grip. For a split second, I thought it was Fluster. Then I saw the lack of scars, the grin, the blades, and the eyepatch on the wrong side.

"Flurry." I growled, and tried to pry Broken from beneath her.

She leaned in, pressing a bladed hoof against my throat. "I see you brought my sister with you... this place is dangerous. Somepony could have set a trap. She could get hurt."

"Fuck you!" I yelled at her, the blade cutting my neck slightly.

She shook her head. "That's not very nice. I'm just doing what a loving sister should, keeping her sibling out of trouble. That big mare, she's a bad influence. I've been following you, just to make sure. You're so easy to ambush, you know that?"

I managed to pull the trigger, firing Broken beneath her hoof. I saw chips of hoof and blood fly with the shot, and she screamed in pain. She smacked me with the back of her bladed hoof, cutting deep and knocking me to the ground.

From behind her, the sound of a body hitting the ground came. She looked behind her, and I glanced past her bladed hooves. Ivory's body was unmoving where she had hit the ground. Fluster was holding onto her armor with her teeth, having helped the wounded earth pony down from wherever she was hanged.

Fluster's eyes were filled with tears as she looked at Ivory. A deep cut went into her neck from where the wire had sliced. She wasn't moving, and blood was already pooling beneath her.

"Fluster!" Flurry called out, a disturbing softness to her voice. Fluster snapped her head up, her one eye locking onto her twin sister. Flurry kicked Broken away into the shadows, and stood on her rear legs to face her sister. Spreading her hooves wide, she smiled. "Give you sister a hug?"

Fluster screamed, a mix of rage and anguish, and launched herself at us. I saw immediately that Flurry's speed ran in the family, as Fluster was on us in a flash. Spinning in the air, modifying a move that I had used so often, she planted both rear hooves into her sister's face. Flurry was thrown away from me, but landed on all fours after a graceful twist in the air.

Fluster suddenly had her scalpel back in her mouth, standing like she was ready to pounce. I didn't know where she was keeping it, but she still had a few pouches on. One of them must have been holding the weapon. Tears were streaming from her eye, which was filled with more rage than I thought was possible from the pegasus.

Flurry was rubbing at her face with a wing. "What happened to my lovely little sister's fear of flying?"

Fluster threw herself at her sister, screaming around the scalpel in her teeth. "I'm five minutes older than you!"

Flurry took flight, barely dodging her sister's frenzied attack. Kicking down, she landed a bladed blow right between Fluster's wings, slamming her into the ground with a shriek of pain. Fluster didn't delay, and launched off of the ground, blood spraying from her wings as she flapped frantically.

Fluster was losing blood, and Flurry was a much better flier. I was beginning to dread that I would watch two of my friends die before I was dragged to Hate, or worse, to Epiphany.

Fucking useless. Laying there, watching them die.

Fuck you, Two Kick. Useless mad dog in my head. You want to help? Help me get control of my legs!

If I could, you'd be fucking moving already. I want to live as bad as you do. I'm not ready to stop just yet! There's still so much fun to be had.

The two pegasi were wheeling through the air, dodging and slashing at each other with their blades. If it weren't for the blades festooning Flurry's hooves, I don't think I'd have been able to tell the two apart. Fluster's flight was a lot rougher than Flurry's, though, who was moving with a speed and grace that reminded me of a snake.

Fluster landed a glancing blow along Flurry's side, but the younger sister retaliated with a bladed hoof into my friend's ribs. Fluster hit the ground with a scream of anger and pain, bleeding heavily from her wounds.

My leg twitched. Not a lot, but it was something. I kept trying to force myself to move through the inhibiting chemical in my blood. I had just spotted Broken in the gloom, and was trying my damndest to get to the weapon. I had to do something. I began dragging myself across the floor as quickly as I could. It wasn't nearly as fast as I wanted.

Apparently I was moving around too much, as I was blindsided by a bladed hoof across my muzzle. Flurry landed next to me, but still far enough away that I couldn't try biting her.

Fluster landed between us and Ivory, breathing heavily around the blood soaked scalpel gripped in her mouth. Her wings were drooping, and she looked exhausted. The fury was still bright in her eye though, and she was growling through a foam of blood at the razor bound pegasus.

"Fluster... little sister... if we keep this up, you're going to die. I don't want to kill my little sister." She jerked her head towards the prone shape of Ivory. "You tried to replace me, but I'm not going to hold that against you. I love you."

Fluster yelled around the blade in her mouth, spattering bloody foam across the floor as she did so. "You killed my best friend! You sadistic cunt! I don't need you; I hate you!"

The playfully cruel grin that Flurry had held until now dropped into a scowl, and she shot a venomous glance at me before focussing her attention fully on her sister. "I'll show you how much you need me. I'll take everyone away from you, and then who will you have? Other ponies? Pegasi will brand you, everyone else will treat you like the pariah you are! You only blended in by hiding yourself!"

Bracing herself for flight, Flurry looked like a cat ready to pounce. "Once I finish this, I'll have to remind you how beautiful you are." Another quick nod to me. "Hate doesn't want this one dead... but family comes first!"

She launched herself into the air, flying straight at Fluster at high speed. Fluster responded in kind, throwing herself clumsily at her sister. Flurry glittered as she passed under one of the lights set in the ceiling, her many wickedly sharp implements gleaming. As Fluster entered the same pool of light, the scalpel shone a brilliant red.

At the last second, Fluster dropped just slightly, slamming into her sister and receiving several new deep cuts along her neck and side. She hit the ground hard, sliding in a streak of blood. She tried to stand, but failed as one of her legs gave out. One of her wings looked broken from the impact, twisted and dripping blood. Despite that, I could see a small smile on her face.

Flurry landed, facing away from us. She turned, very slowly, and looked at her sister with a shockingly sad eye. Then I saw the cut.

Fluster had sliced in from right under Flurry's jaw and dragged the blade down to between her rear legs, where it still protruded. Her body seemed to notice the injury at the same time that I saw it, and a torrent of blood began pumping from her body. I saw slippery loops of intestine flop out of the wound right before Flurry collapsed in a growing pool of her own blood.

Her voice was ragged, and I was surprised that the cut hadn't gone clean through the pegasi's windpipe. Still, she spoke, her voice sad and accompanied by tears from her remaining eye.

"I... I only wanted to keep you safe..."

Fluster coughed, forcing herself to her hooves. "Just... die. Please."

Flurry stared at her sister, her mouth slack and her eyes losing focus. With a last, shuddering breath, she died. Fluster stared at the body for a few seconds before letting out a relieved sob.

With a grunt of exertion, she dragged herself back to her hooves and began limping towards the prone form of Ivory. The pale mare hadn't moved since she'd hit the ground. Fluster reached her, nudging her with a hoof.

"Ivory?"

She didn't move.

Fluster turned, limping quickly to where she had dumped her equipment. As she got near, I could hear that she was rapidly talking under her breath. "No... no... no... no... no... no... no..."

She snatched up one of her bags in her teeth, and ran back to Ivory. She kept tripping on her hurt leg, her wing dragging a shaky line of blood on the ground as she went. I tried standing again, but just couldn't muster the control needed.

Fluster reached the body of our friend, sliding to a halt and pulling her prone and bloodied form up into an embrace. With her teeth, she tore open the pouch, a button spiraling off into the darkness. Pulling out a healing potion, she popped the top with deft motions and poured it into Ivory's lolling mouth. "Come on... drink... please..."

The fluid ran from the corners of her Ivory's mouth, her still form not taking in the potion. The trickle of blood from her sliced neck was beginning to slow, and my eyes widened as I realized that it was too late. "No..." I whispered, not sure what else to say.

Fluster dropped the bottle, pulling Ivory closer. "Come on... you can't leave me... not like this..." She spoke into Ivory's mane, the volume slowly dropping to a whisper.

My mouth was hanging open. Ivory hadn't been able to fight back at all. Just a flash of light in an ambush, and she was dead. None of us had seen it coming, and I was having a hard time believing it. My friends didn't get seriously injured... I did. Me. I took it for them, because I could take it.

I couldn't do anything to help her.

Ivory was sobbing into her friend's mane, holding her body close. Nothing I could have said would have helped, so I stayed quiet.

Fern, as if sensing Fluster's distress, pushed his way out of the bundle of robes and pouches and made his way to her. He curled up next to her, licking comfortingly at her.

I tried to give her a moment alone as best I could, so I turned my head. Her quiet sobbing filled the room.

Music to my ears. Fucking beautiful.

I growled inwardly at Two Kick, willing him to shut up. His relative silence had been a welcome change, but his comment made me feel dirty. That thought was in my head, and it just felt wrong.

My fetlock bent, and I would have grinned if not for the sobbing pegasus holding the corpse of our friend. Little more like that, and I could walk. Or drag myself anyways, which was better than nothing.

Fluster put her best friend's body down gently, and stood over her. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

That. That, I felt that I could weigh in on in a manner that wasn't poorly timed. "This isn't your fault."

She turned her eye on me, the expression not one I was familiar with. It wasn't friendly... but it wasn't angry. Her lip was quivering, and tears still stained her face. "If she wasn't... if I wasn't..."

I cut her off before she could blame this on herself. "No. Ivory followed me up here. She didn't need to. She came of her own choice, and I am a target. Flurry wouldn't have even known you were alive if it weren't for me." I sighed, realizing that it really was me that had gotten her killed. "Don't blame yourself."

I was at least partially responsible for most of the bad in Hornsmith. I could try to take this burden from Fluster as well.

"...And I'm sorry to say this, but we need to move. Epiphany is probably going to be after us any minute, if he isn't already." My gaze drifted to Ivory. I wondered why ponies always looked smaller when they were dead. It was like life gave more substance to their form, and when it was taken away even a bigger mare like Ivory seemed... less. Less important, less substantial, less *there*.

Then I voiced the reality of the situation, one that was unpleasant. "We have to leave her here."

Fluster dropped her gaze to the floor. She began scooping up her equipment, pulling pouches onto her legs and strapping the larger bags to her self. She downed a healing potion to deal with some of the bigger wounds she had received in the fight, almost as if to delay as she thought about it, and then she answered me. "I know... can you walk yet?"

Straining, forcing all of my muscles to follow my directions, I managed to push myself up to a near sitting position. It was exhausting. "Almost." It was going to be a while, a good while before I could walk on my own at this rate.

Fluster lifted her filthy robe carefully in her mouth, gripping by the cleanest edge.. She paused as she went to pull it on, glancing back at Ivory's body. With a shuddering sigh, she walked slowly towards her friend and draped the robe over the lifeless pony. I nodded to Fluster, though she didn't see it. Ivory deserved a little modesty in death.

Fluster turned back to me, slowly, and each step she took was heavy. When she got near me, she did what she could to help, trying to support my weight on her. My legs weren't working, and all I managed to do was partially crush the mare as the two of us fell over.

Fine. Dash and Buck. Mix them. Best thing for getting a lazy fuck up and about.

What?

You have a bag of drugs. Dash. Buck. Used it on slaves. Might push the poison out, get you fucking moving.

"Fluster?" She had wormed her way out from beneath me, and was recoiling a bit at being touched. Not being in her robe was clearly bothering her. She pulled it together, brushed down her sides with her wings, and looked at me.

"Do you have... any Buck or Dash in those bags?"

Drugs. I had a complicated relationship with them. The nervous twitch from not getting any med-x, the burning in my muscles and head from not having any Stampede. The hydra which was still making me feel a little off. The Mask.

Her eye opened wide in surprise at the question, clearly not expecting me to ask for drugs while I was still incapacitated. She nodded, stuttering in the movement. "Uh... yeah. Why?"

I shrugged. I wasn't going to tell her where I got the idea. "Folk remedy for laziness. Might work... It's worth a shot." I was trying to convince myself more than her. Listening to Two Kick... it always led to bad things, but apart from waiting for the shot to wear off I had no other option.

From one of her pouches, she produced two things. A bottle of little yellow pills, and an inhaler. She placed them on the ground in front of me, but put a hoof on top of them as I grasped at them with my magic. I looked up, and found that her eye was showing concern for me.

“You sure? I’ve... heard about you and drugs.”

I nodded. “Fluster, I know. Trust me.” I didn’t trust me.

As she lifted the hoof, I floated the medication towards me. I didn’t know how much, but that Two Kick part of me knew the exact dosage. I popped a few of the pills into my mouth, chewing it into powder. Taking the inhaler in my mouth, I took a long puff, pulling some of the Buck into my lungs with the aerosol Dash. A second hit, and then I swallowed the rest of the Buck.

Then, I waited for it to kick in.

The Dash hit first. Everything slowed down a bit, and I got some time to think about our predicament. We were in unknown territory, down two members of our group, and not fully functional. The one thing we had on our side was the Rangers. Their assault, which I could only assume was still happening, was drawing Hate’s attention so much that he didn’t even know we were here. Epiphany’s interest in me kept him from giving us to Hate, and that was helping. Epiphany was the only one who knew we were here.

“We need to kill Epiphany. Soon.” I muttered, and Fluster nodded grimly.

The Buck hit like one of Massacre’s kicks, as all of my muscles flared into life. It was like Stampede... but not quite as intense on the mental level. I was on my hooves before I even realized it. My legs hurt suddenly. They hurt a lot.

“Ooowwww....” I’d had worse, but I wasn’t expecting that pain. My legs had fallen asleep, and it felt like somepony was jamming thousands of needles into them. Once I was up, I found that I still couldn’t move too well. I was hobbling around like a rocking chair without the roly part. Fluster, for all of the shit that had happened to her in the last half-hour, actually stifled a little giggle. I got my knees to bend, and quickly found that I was able to take a few steps. Through the haze of drugs, I could walk.

Then, that reason to smile was snatched away.

A figure shambled into the doorway we’d come from, pushing it open with a rusted creak. Hulking, covered in metal, I thought it was a Ranger for all of one second. Too much blood, too many sharpened edges, patches of black fur on dark skin. Eyes that lacked intelligence locked on to me, and I had a flashback. Shapeless meat that was once a hulking berzerker. A cult leader that let us slip through his hooves. Endless.

A mask of metal lashed to his face had an infinity sign carved into it. Epiphany had a pet Endless, and he had sent it after us.

It let out a low, bass growl that reverberated through my chest. No pony, not even an Endless, should have been able to make that noise. What I had first thought were ribs exposed around its sides stretched and unfolded, revealing that this particular monster was extra monstrosity. Eight hard chitin insect legs, barbed and hooked, flailed at the air like an upside-down spider. Somewhere past its mask, its jaw dropped open, then open again sideways. The creature roared hatred and foul spittle at us.

Epiphany had turned an unkillable force into a tunnel dwelling monstrosity. He had tamed it, from the look of the straps around its neck and legs. Then he sent it after us. Fantastic.

“Run.” One word. Whether it was for my own benefit or for Fluster’s, it got the message across. After taking one last look at the covered form of Ivory, she took off, her wings tucked to her sides like they were still strapped down. She had neglected the belt she used to tie her wings down, the strip of leather laying discarded where she hadn’t put it back on.

I turned, racing towards where Broken lurked, misplaced but unforgotten. Over the shaky, unsure clamor of my own hooves on metal, I began hearing much heavier steps. The creature was coming after us. That really wasn’t surprising.

Snatching up Broken, I ran as fast and as hard as my legs allowed. That is to say, like a newborn foal. I hit the wall of a container, dragging my side along it and leaving a smear of blood. I was covered in it, both mine and that of dead dwellers. When I got clear, I listened as I ran. As far as I could tell, the thing was right on my tail, so I held Broken above my head and fired directly behind me.

The creature roared and I heard a few balls of buckshot ricochet away, but nowhere near enough to account for a shell's worth. I'd at least hit the thing, but now I was pretty sure I'd just made it angry.

Ahead, I spotted Ivory stalled at the doorway opposite of where we'd come in. She was putting all of what little weight she had into turning the hatch. It looked rusted, and was apparently much harder to turn than the one I had dealt with to escape from Epiphany's lab.

Her eye met mine, and she yelled at me. "Stall for time! I can get this..."

Great. I reached in deep, grabbing at memories of fighting that were only partially mine. Finding the exact move I wanted, I skidded to a halt, trying to throw myself sideways. One of my legs, still weary from the chemical war being fought inside of it, gave up and I hit the ground in a roll.

I rolled twice before scrambling to my hooves. Glancing up, I found that I was practically face to face with the charging beast. I let out a short yelp and threw myself sideways, firing Broken into the side of its armor-fronted head. Black blood sprayed and I saw an eye blow out, and the thing slammed into a wall I hadn't realized I was so close to. If he'd hit me, I'd be pony paste ground into the now dented wall he was in.

The legs on his back were flailing as the creature pried itself loose from the dented and warped metal, and I thought I had a second to rack the action on Broken. I was wrong. One of those legs, too spindly for me to have given much thought to, hooked into my armor. With power that I shouldn't have underestimated, it hauled me up and threw me hard.

I slammed into the side of a container hard enough for it to slide across the floor with a tortured shriek of metal. I tasted blood as something inside of me squished in a way that it shouldn't have, and then I hit the ground hard. Broken clattered next to me, so I snatched it up as I dragged myself back to my hooves. I'd laid down enough today, and I wasn't going to take the rest of this day off of my hooves.

Luckily, the thing only had eyes for me. It was standing within spitting distance of Fluster, who was still trying to lever the door open, but it paid her no attention. Its dead eyes were locked on my battered mug.

Good.

It started charging again, rushing me with its horrible limbs flailing. I used the extra time granted by the distance and replicated the trick. At least this thing was more like the angry mass of organs than it was like The End. It didn't display much more intelligence than the dwellers had.

This time, I went for a leg. As nimbly as my malfunctioning limbs allowed, I ducked down and to the side as it reached me, avoiding the grasping legs sprouting from its back. I fired Broken, taking mental note that I had two shots left, aimed straight at the thing's front left knee. The joint shredded and splintered under the shot, but didn't break. It was enough, and the creature stumbled at the speed it was moving. It slammed into the same cargo container that had a bloody imprint of myself further up, hitting it with enough force to drive it across the floor and dent in the side. This thing hit like a fucking train.

I was wondering if every Endless was different. The first had been fast. Unbelievably fast. The End had been smart, but foolish. This thing was strong. A little harder to take advantage of, but I could at least reliably dodge it. Even if my legs were still numb.

The Dash was certainly helping though. Without the chem this thing would have been faster than me, with my limbs crippled like they were. With it, the world was slowed down enough that I could take the time to appreciate the monstrous parts in vivid detail as it backed and turned to face me.

The matador routine was not going to kill it, but all I had to do was buy Fluster some time.

I remembered the first Endless, and that reminded me that I had access to SATS on my PipBuck. If I could always have remembered the tool strapped to my leg, I would have had a much easier time in the wasteland, but for some reason I was constantly spacing on its existence. I relied on instinct too much.

As it charged me again, bearing down on me like a trainload of spiders and pain, I triggered my SATS. Time all but froze, the thing stuck in a rabid charge. I queued a couple hits, and activated the built in spell.

Broken fired, hitting the thing right below the steel mask. I tore out its throat in a spray of blood and flesh,

causing it to rear up a bit in pain. I darted in, using Two Kick like speed that I could only really attribute to the Dash, and put both my hooves into the thing's wounded throat. My ballistic hooves were sure to decapitate the creature..

Nothing happened.

It bowled over, tripping on my form as I was drawn beneath its stampeding hooves. I was surprised, totally having expected my kicks to blow the thing's head clean off its neck, or at least slow it down.

The electric floor, you fucking dipshit. The shells went off, and you never fucking reloaded.

Well, Luna fuck me.

The giant dweller hurt, but it could have done so much more damage to me if I hadn't hit it with Broken. It was still reeling from the shot as it ran me over, and I was out of harm in no time. I was pretty sure my ribs were cracked from the thing stepping on my side, but it fared much worse.

Without bracing, it plowed into the wall at full speed and with its neck at a weird angle. I heard a loud snap echo through the room, and it slumped over. Its black insect legs were twitching and slashing at the air, and I couldn't help but smile as I got up painfully.

It had broken its neck.

I didn't know how long that would keep it down, but I had bought the time that we needed. Glancing over, I spied Fluster pushing open the heavy door. "Ripple, lets go! Hurry!"

I limped as quickly as I could, trying to ignore the sounds of bone grinding and snapping back into place from the form of the still twitching beast. It was regenerating faster than I had hoped, and would probably be on our trail in no time.

As I reached the door, I ushered Fluster through and pulled it shut behind me. Unlike the door I had gotten open in Epiphany's lab, this one had the twisty lock on both sides. It was a simple matter to put my Buck augmented muscles behind closing it, securing it as firmly as I could. I had no doubt that the thing would get through the door, but it was all about how much time I could buy us.

The hall we were in was brightly lit, and clean. I had to assume that we were out of Epiphany's lair, but that just meant we were in even more unfamiliar territory. At least the vines were still there, blurring in and out of my vision. I knew the way. The vines would lead me.

I started limping after them, but Fluster held a bottle out to me. "Ripple, drink. You're hurt."

I didn't argue, taking the potion in my magic and downing the contents hastily. I was coated in blood, my ribs were injured, and my face hurt. Really, I was par for the course, but I wasn't going to argue with trying to get back into as close as top shape as I could for when we finally found Hate. The potion did its thing, and I was feeling better already. The persistent, buzzing numbness in my legs remained, but I could walk. That was good enough.

"Thanks, Fluster..." I drifted off at the look in her eye. Sadness, and deep concern. She was looking at all of my wounds carefully, watching them heal and close as the healing properties of the potion went to work. She was making sure I was okay.

She didn't want to lose me.

Like she had Ivory.

"Fluster, I'm fine. Look... if you want to talk..." I was bad at talking. I didn't want to talk about Ivory.

"Well... we'll have to put it off. At least until we're out of Maremack."

She nodded, her mane bouncing slightly as she did so. It was so weird to see her without her robe. "Yeah... I know. I'm just... this is hard."

I nodded, doing as best I could to show empathy. Ivory had been my friend as well. I wasn't as close to her as Fluster had been, but the death was gnawing at my thoughts as well. I just had to buck up and keep on course. "Let's go kill this fucker."

I wasn't even sure which fucker I was talking about, but the list was all here. Everypony I needed to kill had conveniently gathered in this one location.

We started trotting, quickly enough to put distance between us and the thing, but not quickly enough to blunder around a corner into a killer robot, or another horrible mutant, or whatever else lurked these halls.

The halls we had been in before were conduits for freight. Wide and tall, they were clearly not designed with the comfort of the scientists that had once worked here in mind. The halls we now walked through were. Softer lighting, thinner corridors, and less secure doors were what greeted us. I started seeing faded names along doors, and realized we were in the housing section of Maremack.

I knew that if I had cared to, I could have found plenty out about the past in each room. The cubes, the experiments that had gone on, what had happened with Pandemonium. What I knew about those topics I had gotten from Budding Leaf, and from occasional terminals. Each of the scientists that had lived here had been like her, and probably had their own memory orbs to watch through.

Plants. Violating and tearing.

Yeah, I wasn't going to look through any memory orbs. We walked past each room, not giving them much more than a passing glance. The names were too faded to even tell easily who had once lived there, and when Fluster was curious enough to try a door we found that every one was locked. We were still running from the creature, technically, and didn't have time to pick the locks on upwards of thirty doors.

I stopped at an intersection as I realized the vines were running a different direction. They were coming from the side, pointing me to the left. I turned, whistling shortly to get Fluster's attention, and began climbing the stairs that led up.

Fluster hurried after me, falling in at my side as we climbed. The staircase was long, but at the end I could see a landing with a large door. The vines came from the door. I picked up my pace a bit, and Fluster matched it. My legs were feeling better and better as I went, and I could tell that the Dash/Buck combination had won out over the paralyzing toxin.

The door was big, but slid open easily as we approached it. Beyond was a large room, brightly lit by starlight shining through a glass dome that served as the ceiling. It was beautiful, and I thought of Ivory's comment. It was definitely a paintable scene, one that I knew she would have liked.

A thump from the bottom of the stairs made me freeze, hair standing up on my withers. I glanced cautiously back, and saw exactly what I had expected. The thing, the Endless dweller, was at the bottom of the long flight of stairs, staring up at us.

Fluster saw it too, and backed through the door. I followed her quickly, but she didn't go further into the room. Pulling open a panel at the side of the door, she jammed her screwdriver into a metal seam and began prying.

The thing's first steps were tentative, as though it were testing the staircase for something. It had probably never been up stairs, at least not recently enough that it remembered. Quickly though, it deemed them safe enough to get it to us so it could rip us apart.

It started picking up speed as it climbed, eventually reaching a full gallop.

"Fluster... we should run. Right now." I didn't take my eyes off the thing as I spoke through the side of my mouth at the pegasus.

"Hold... on... almost..." Fluster's face was jammed into the panel, and I couldn't see what she was doing. A pop issued from beyond her face, and she pulled back slightly. Then, she jammed the screwdriver in as hard as she could. Another pop followed, electrical instead of metallic. A puff of smoke drifted out of the hole, and the door slammed shut.

Just in time, as the whole assembly shook with an impact. The door was thick and unmoving, but so had the other door been. Just another delaying tactic.

"Well, well. Rip. I should have known I would run into you." I knew that voice. I really hated knowing

voices that came from behind me. It never led to anything good.

Turning, I found that we had stumbled right into a group of Rangers. Coated with blood, their armor dented and torn, they had been through a hell of a fight cutting through the dwellers. I had hoped that none of them would survive, but of course at least three had made it through.

I knew the armor of the pony that was speaking. Broken Arrow stood there, miraculously unscathed. The pony next to him was Notches, and I couldn't identify the third.

"With your friend the griffin attacking us, I should have known you'd be here." My eyes widened at the mention of Ash. I didn't know where my friend was, or if he was even alive, but it was good to know he'd been impeding the Rangers' progress.

Arrow gestured at me with the weapon I'd seen liquefy a dweller, and his voice flowed from the speakers in his helmet. "Holster your weapon." I glared as I slipped Broken back into its holster, well aware that I still only had two shots in it. I hadn't had time to reload. My ballistic hooves were empty as well.

Fluster made herself as small as she could under their prying eyes, and I stepped forward to be between her and them. Broken Arrow tilted his head to the side at the movement. "My, you sure seem to have been through quite the ordeal. Weren't there more of you?"

I growled a warning at him, but he just laughed it off. The door behind us shook again as the thing threw itself into the barrier. "You also seem to have a fan. This has been a tough nut to crack, Maremack. Things like that were certainly not expected, but have proven easy enough to get through."

He stepped forward a bit, bringing me into even closer range for the murderous weapons festooning his sides. "I've lost good mares and stallions today. It will all be worth it in the end, though. You know what I'm talking about."

The cubes. He'd seen them, and let me leave with them. He must not have known what they were worth then, but it was certain he knew now. Why else would he stage a full assault on a fortress with no intel?

"So you came to stop Hate?"

The door shook again, and I heard creaking and groaning as the metal began giving way. It couldn't handle too many more hits like that. I just had to keep him talking long enough to have my chance. They didn't know what was on the other side of the door. Broken Arrow clearly thought it was normal dwellers.

Broken Arrow shook his head, chuckling. "Oh, you know probably better than I do what Hate could do with this power. Now me... I could do great things with it. World changing things."

I narrowed my eyes. I mean, sure I was planning to do the same thing. Or I had been. I wasn't sure if that's what I really wanted.

"I can't let you get to the cubes. If they are unlocked, and not controlled... it'll be chaos. Destruction. Death on a scale that hasn't been seen since the war." I tried for the doomsayer approach, hoping that I could convince the three Rangers to just turn around and walk away. Of course, it didn't work.

"Yeah, I don't think so. Those cubes are rightfully ours. The Ministries are gone, and we are their legacy." As he spoke, another hit on the door and it began to buckle.

"Fluster... get ready to move." I whispered behind me, unsure if the Rangers could hear us.

"Oh, I wouldn't suggest that." Of course they could hear us. Broken Arrow waved the barrel of his grenade launcher at us warningly.

Then, I knew what would catch the Rangers off guard. The hits on the door were coming at regular intervals, and I knew that I could probably time when the big dweller was going to punch through. "So you know about him, right?"

"What, Hate? Small pony playing with tech he doesn't understand. No big deal." Broken Arrow shrugged, his weapons bobbing with the motion.

"No. Him. The thing in the cubes." Wham. Another impact. Only one or two more.

Arrow tilted his head, eyeing me warily through the visor of his helmet. "In the cubes?"

I had something over on him. I grinned at that, and the timing in my head that I had been tensing for regularly came. The door behind us slammed open, breaking chunks of the wall that had been weakening and throwing the slab of metal into the room. I was already hooking a fetlock around Fluster and diving to the side to dodge the door.

It skipped once, missing the three and skidding across the ground in a shower of sparks. They must have been preparing for another swarm of dwellers, because the huge dweller barreled through their non-explosive fire and hit the group, catching them with shouts of alarm.

Slamming his shoulder into Notches, the dweller threw the armored pony across the room. Arrow got a kick to the side, demolishing the grenade launcher perched there and sending him tumbling.

The third was backing away, firing a minigun into the creature's chest. I was painfully reminded of how Ivory would have reacted to it, but shook it off. We had to keep running, and hope that the dweller killed the Rangers before it kept after us.

Two of those grasping limbs found purchase on the Ranger, and hauled him off of his metal hooves. He, or she, there wasn't any way to tell, was lifted above the thing, where the other legs all came together and grasped on.

The creature turned to us, even as fire from Notches and Arrow tore into its sides, blowing holes and vaporizing chunks. It started bearing down on us, and I let out a frustrated sigh. We were still this thing's top priority.

Above it, the pony began to scream. I saw the legs begin to dig deep, and then it peeled the Ranger like an orange. I could see a light blue coat underneath, but when the limbs had peeled the armor back enough, I saw that the Ranger was a stallion. The creature seemed to sense this too, and reacted rather violently. The sharp limbs plunged into the Ranger's belly, punching deep. Blood sprayed into the air as the limbs pierced in, and found purchase within his chest cavity. It was like watching a rib spreader in surgery, and I wasn't sure how I knew what that looked like.

Oh, that's me. I liked to watch Epiphany test stuff on Messy. Fucking brutal, but oddly fascinating..

With a sickening crack, the pony was split open. His insides were launched with the force of the motion, sending a shower of gore into the air. The pony was very, very dead at this point, and the dweller just dropped the armored corpse to the ground. I remembered all the burst open mares in the basement, and now I knew that when it came to males the bursting happened much earlier.

This was a father. It couldn't be allowed to live.

I drew Broken, standing my ground. "Fluster. Lay low."

It was barreling towards me, but stumbled as heavy buckshot and bolts of light tore into it from behind. Both Arrow and Notches had recovered from the blows that had sent them scattering, and they were standing side by side near the middle of the room. After seeing it rip one of their own apart with such ease, their priorities had shifted away from me.

As it charged me, the Dash was still flowing through my veins. It was moving slowly, like the air was thick and the daddy dweller was pushing his way towards me. I aimed, hoping for a wound that would take longer to heal. The bullet holes were filling in with dark flesh already, but the energy wounds were remaining unhealed. Like the scar that had started the roadmap of injury that was the left side of my face.

I had to get Notches to kill this thing, but I doubted he would play along with me to do it.

Pulling the trigger, I fired. I was so glad that this thing was stupid, or it would have seen the shot coming. A tried and true method; I blew out its knee as I jumped to the side. It kept going surrounded by an aura of gunfire as the Rangers continued pouring hell into it, and I had to roll and run as some of it followed me. If I got close enough to it, they had no qualms about killing both of us.

It slid past me on a slick of blood, slamming into the wall. While it lay there, working to get up, the two

Rangers really unloaded on the thing, turning its side into a cratered wreck, geysers of black blood and chunks of meat splashing across the floor near it.

Slowly, almost painfully, it pulled itself to its hooves and stared at me through the holes in its metal mask. It was dead set on getting me, and I knew now that it wasn't some random encounter. Epiphany had sent this thing after me. Blood was pouring out of it as quickly as the creature could regenerate, and yet still it stood. It began taking steps towards me, muscle and organs flexing and pulsing visibly through its shredded hide.

"Come on, go to dust you fucking freak!" Notches' voice rang through the hall over the din of fire. Arrow had ceased firing and was trying to get his grenade launcher working. It was a twisted mass of metal that I doubted he'd be able to get working, but at least he knew that they'd need some serious firepower to get rid of Daddy Dweller.

As I backed away from the beast, I pulled a few shells out of my bag. I took this chance to reload Broken. The creature had lost most of its speed, and was only shambling towards me. Much of its menace was gone, but I knew not to underestimate it. The dead Ranger was lesson enough.

It must have been waiting for an opening, because as soon as I decided to reload my hoof guns, it surged forward. It had been faking and we'd fell for it, letting our guards down. Slashing chitinous legs missed my face by inches as I backed rapidly away from it.

I fired Broken, catching one of the limbs in the shot. The deceptively strong, but still thin, limb blew apart and spiraled away on a ribbon of black blood. It roared, and lunged forward. I did what I could to dodge the blow, but its heavy front hoof slapped me hard enough to throw me a good distance. I bounced off of a stone planter filled with dust and rot that sat in the middle of the room.

I rolled a few times, having gone limp out of experience. If I tensed up, I'd be much more likely to break something. I knew that the hard way. I groaned and lifted myself up slowly, finding that nothing was broken but I hurt all over. This thing was going to kill me with bruises if it didn't do it some other way.

I glanced back the way I came, but couldn't see over the stone planter. It was backlit by red flashes as Notches continued his attempts to kill it, but without the roar of Arrow's shotgun the room was almost quiet.

It was short lived. The planter shifted suddenly, and then was pulled into the air. The creature was holding the stone construction over its head with its seven remaining limbs, staring down at me with a mindless, murderous rage.

"Oh fuck!" I shouted, almost certain that it was Two Kick slipping through. All the drugs, the adrenaline, and the mental anguish must have been breaking down my barriers. He was being quiet, I hoped to allow me to concentrate, but for him to be able to speak through my mouth was not a good sign.

I rolled to the side quickly as the large stone smashed into the ground, splintering and cracking where I had been a second before. I rolled into a run, and started putting distance between myself and my pursuer. I kept glancing behind me to make sure I knew where it was, and sure enough it was lumbering after me, rapidly picking up speed.

Looking ahead, I let out a little yell of shock and tripped, which saved my life. I hit the ground as Broken Arrow fired his shotgun, aimed right at where my head had been. Some of the oversized buckshot tore through my already ruined ear, and at least two skipped off of my bare flank in sprays of blood. I tumbled onto my back and slid, the pegasus vest offering less resistance than my fur would have. I slid right past Arrow, and our eyes connected for a brief second through his visor. He was glaring at me, and I just smiled back up at him.

He realized why I was smiling just a little too late, and the beast plowed into him at full speed. It knocked him down with the impact, and then reared up, its front legs kicking at the air briefly. It brought its full weight down on the Steel Ranger, his armor giving a loud crack in protest as it was crushed beneath the substantial bulk of the creature. It reared up again, stepping back a few paces.

Broken Arrow managed to stand, but the creature was already rushing forward for a second hit. The impact of the creature combined with the swatting motion of its leg threw the armored earth pony high and far,

sending him slamming into a solid wall with a shattering crack. The wall splintered, and he dropped to the floor motionless. Blood ran from cracks in his armor, and I was sure that he was dead.

“Star Paladin!” Notches yelled. He’d been firing for effect until now, but he braced himself and hunched slightly. The dweller turned towards me, and that put Notches straight on with the thing. The long laser rifle slung along his side flashed once, sending the beam over me and through the left eye slit of the creature’s mask. A flash of pink, and a burst of flame, and the creature hit the ground.

“Can’t run with half a head, slimy piece of filth...” Notches growled, speaking under his breath but having it broadcast through the speakers in his helmet. He took a few steps towards me, speaking out loud. “Any Knights within range, reconnoiter at the primary facility’s primary meeting nexus. The Star Paladin is down, assistance requested.” He must have been transmitting from his armor. The thing was still twitching, and he fired again. The beam pierced into the creature’s head once again, and it spasmed once and fell still. “Bring explosives. Over.”

“Now before I check on the Star Paladin, I think I’ll get you out of the way. We never should have let you leave Orchard, and now I can fix that.” I hated these moments. When I was staring down the barrel of a weapon that should by all rights kill me immediately. As he aimed, I was sure that he was grinning behind his mask. They always grinned.

You got me killed. You stupid, incompetent fuck.

Right before the flash of light that took me out, I heard a loud bang. Probably my brain boiling over and exploding my skull.

“Kick. Kick, come on. I know you’re awake.” My face felt like it was on fire. I tried opening my eyes, but I could only see out of the right one. It took me a few seconds to focus on the shape that was in front of me, but I found that I was staring up into golden eyes. Predator eyes.

“Ash...” I spoke his name, my head still spinning. “I’m dead Ash.”

“Nah, Kick, not yet. You’ll be fine. Now get up, we gotta move.” He started pulling me to my hooves, his claws gripping the edges of my armor so he didn’t do any more injury. “Fluster, you have anything for his eye?”

“What’s wrong with my eye?” It wasn’t a concussion. I was back; fine except for the literally blinding pain in the left side of my head.

“It’s... uh, well, I can say your scar is gonna be bigger now.” He was being cryptic, and I could only assume the worst. A touch from my left made my jump, and as I swiveled my head I found that Fluster was holding a wad of bandages and a potion. That made me worry just a little more. I needed my eyes.

My eyes. You need my eyes. Well, at least you didn’t get me fucking killed. You’re still a dipshit.

I could feel that she was wrapping up most of my head, but the majority the bandage went directly over my eye. I didn’t want to go anywhere near a mirror. With my shredded ear, my scar, half of my face already missing around my mouth... I must look like a monster. I’d have to do my best to not scare Shade when I got back to her.

With the wrap job finished, Fluster turned and walked slowly away from me. I got to my hooves and looked around. Notches was dead, splayed out with a fan of blood on the ground originating from his head. The half nearest the ground was blown out, blood and shattered metal scattering the floor. A single hole was opposite of it, a clean puncture in the gray metal.

“I gave him his bullet.” It was all Ash said as he saw where my gaze was aimed.

Then, movement drew my attention. The big dweller was twitching, a bit more rapidly than right after it had been taken down. It was healing, and I had no idea when it would be back up. “Ash, that thing is Endless.”

His eyes went wide and he looked at it. He stood away from me, and walked over to the thing as he drew the

revolver strapped to his leg. Aiming briefly, he put six large bullets into its head at close range. Chunks of meat and bone flew, spraying a thick black fluid with them.

“That’ll keep it down for a bit longer.” He reloaded the gun and looked around. Broken Arrow still lay where he had been thrown, and I felt a pang of regret. I had wanted to kill him, but it looked like the twitching monstrosity had done the job for me.

Then, he brought up a question neither of us wanted to answer. “Where’s Ivory?”

Fluster let out a little sob, and I turned to face away from the griffin. “She... didn’t make it.”

I could hear the slump in his shoulders as he responded, and then the click of his claws as he dropped back to all fours. “Oh...”

When I looked back, he was looking softly at Fluster. She was sitting against the wall, silently crying with Fern clutched to her. She was mourning.

We didn’t have time for mourning.

Hate was waiting for us. Epiphany was hunting us.

I knew where they both would be. The vines were showing me the way.

Above, through the glass dome, I could see the continuation of the mountain peak as it rose above us. High up, there was a building constructed into the mountain and festooned with lights. Flowing from it were the vines that didn’t exist.

The Cubes were there. Pandemonium was there. Hate and Epiphany were there.

“Let’s go.” I made sure that my weapons were loaded, and started walking towards the end that was finally in sight.

Chapter 23: Hate

Stairs.

After my not-so-triumphant return to Neighwhere, I could have died happy without seeing another set of stairs. Here, though, I found myself trudging up even more. I let out an exasperated sigh.

“Kick, you know we couldn’t have taken the elevator. Probably trapped, even if the doors weren’t locked.” Ash shot back at me, several steps ahead.

I nodded, and the motion hurt. Everything hurt. My legs and chest hurt. Healing potions could only do so much, and I’d taken such an extreme beating in the last week. It was all catching up to me as we climbed the stairs to the top, where another round of pain was waiting.

Similarly, I could tell that Ash wasn’t as well as he wanted us to think. He was keeping up with us and putting up a brave face, but I could tell that he was hurt. Whatever had happened to him out there, he was feeling it now. He was limping from his old injured shoulder, and his normally bright eyes were dark and hooded. His feathers were matted with blood, and I spotted multiple fresh injuries that he’d hastily and sloppily bandaged.

Fluster brought up the rear, exposed wing a shock every time I saw them. Each was step a visible effort for the mare, even with no apparent injuries. Potions had healed her, but she was still soaked in the gore from numerous ponies: dweller, family, and friend. Potions couldn’t heal her emotional injuries though, and I doubted she’d ever be the same. Every now and then she let out a sad little laugh.

I had to admit that I had expected to be making this trip alone. Since that day I woke up in a puddle, I’d thought I was the only pony truly dedicated to this. I’d never thought that I would really have anyone next to me when I finally found Hate, and brought to him the reckoning that he so deserved.

Plans changed. Motivations changed, and I’d met other creatures that had as much of a reason to see Hate dead as I did. Through all of that, my end goal remained unchanged. This would all be worth the sacrifice, the pain, and all the devastation that had been caused by me, when I killed Hate and put his head on a fucking stick.

Lets see if we can keep him awake and alive for that. Oh, that’d be fucking great.

Yeah. Yeah, it would.

From somewhere beneath us came a loud cracking sound. A thump of pressure blasted up the stairwell, and I knew that the Rangers had gotten through the door we’d locked behind us. I’d been hoping that the Endless would have gotten back up by now, so either they had put it down again or it was still incapacitated. The door had never been meant to hold them for long, but the locked and jammed mechanism had bought us a little extra time.

Either way, it meant that they were coming after us. We had all stopped to look back, but as one we started moving again. We were faster than the heavily armored Rangers, even with our assorted mental and physical injuries. So long as we kept moving, they wouldn’t catch us.

“So Kick... do we have a plan?” Ash asked over his shoulder, probably to kill time more than anything. He should have known the answer.

“Do we ever?” I sighed to myself. Why did we even bother with actual plans? Vaguely outlined goals just seemed to work better. “Get to the top. Find Hate. Kill Hate.”

“Yeah, that’s about what I figured.”

I’m the luckiest fucking pony in the wasteland that you haven’t gotten us killed yet.

Yeah. I kind of am.

A short time after that, with the end of the stairs only a small distance ahead, the griffin stopped suddenly. He turned to me, a wide grin on his face, a hint of sadistic glee creeping around in his eyes. “Wait, I do have a plan.” He pulled open his bag and started digging through it.

“Well, explain as we walk. They’re right behind us.” I kept climbing the stairs, walking right past the occupied griffin. He didn’t follow, and Fluster actually stopped as well as she came up to him, not wanting to brush past him to keep going.

“I didn’t spend all that time running, you know.” He paused, mouthing off numbers as he counted something inside his bag. Reaching in, he pulled out several bulky disks. I knew what those were. One of the few weapons I’d encountered that I’d been lucky enough not to be hurt by: landmines.

“I got these off a Ranger I took out. Thought they might be useful.” As he bundled the explosives, he peered over the edge of the stairs, down through the middle. The gap ran all the way back to the bottom, filled with vines that weren’t, and I stopped to take a look as well. It was dark, but movement could be seen. The rangers were definitely coming up, but they were still a ways behind.

“Do you know how to place a mine?” Fluster had gotten past him, and was sort of cowering at the next landing. I had to admit that the question made me a little nervous as well. Messing with explosives if you didn’t know what you were doing seemed like a terrible idea.

“Yeah... learned how when I was a cub. Problem is, there’s no dirt to bury them in... Ranger’s would see them, and neutralize ‘em before they could trigger them.” He had an assorted number in his arms. Red lights, green lights, blue lights, I counted at least four varieties. There was one big one I wasn’t sure about, a black disk that was twice the size of the others.

“So, we improvise. Brace yourselves.” As he said it, he dumped them all over the edge. I let out a surprised little yell as the pressure sensitive explosives tumbled away, and hurried to catch up with Fluster. The landings were the thickest parts of the stairs, and would keep us from being exploded just a little better than the relatively thin stairs themselves.

It was only a few seconds before one of the mines hit a ledge. They had been falling in a group, and following a smaller blast came an incredibly loud boom as the rest went with it in one rippling detonation. The sounds overlapped into one single roar that filled our entire world for a fraction of a second.

I could see the blast wave as it punched through us, picking us all up and dropping us unceremoniously. All of my injuries hurt again, my ribs especially as the over-abused bones got a jarring reminder of how damaged they were. Luckily, it was more disturbing than damaging, and I was wobbling on my hooves in seconds. If we’d been much closer, that could have pulped our insides.

Through the ringing that was left in my ears, I could hear the sound of stairs collapsing. As I glanced back over the edge, I regretted my timing as a wave of dust and debris rode the shockwave into my face. I coughed and stumbled back, rubbing at my unbandaged eye with a fetlock. Through my watering eye I saw that Fluster had both wings over her face in a defensive position, and understood why she strapped them down when she was hiding being a pegasus. She had instinctively used them as a shield, and now I saw that Ash had as well. I resented the winged creatures for a few seconds as I worked on getting dust out of my eye and nose.

Lowering his wing, he gave a slight cough almost as if mocking me. His grin, despite everything, was genuine. He chuckled at me and started back up the steps. “That worked out better than I had hoped.”

As I successfully cleared my lungs of debris, I glared up at him. My voice was a little hoarse as I yelled up at him through the ringing in my ears. “A little more warning next time!?” I hoped there wouldn’t be a next time like that. I hated shockwaves.

As we reached the top of the stairwell, I expected to meet a wall of defensive lead. All we found was a door. Ash reached for it, but I stopped him. “Ash... remember the probably trapped elevator? Might want to check this door too.”

He looked at me briefly, nodded, and put his shoulder and ear up against the door. He was making a show of listening to whatever was on the other side. He knocked once, and then before I could move he put his shoulder into the door, popping it open. A lack of explosions or any other lethal trap brought a breath of relief from myself and Fluster.

No sooner had a similar sigh left his beak than gunshots rang out. A bullet tore across the side of his chest, sending a puff of blood and feathers into the air as it cut a path across his flesh. He let out a screech of pain and ducked back behind the wall, getting the structure between him and any more bullets. A stray shot whistled past and hit one of Fluster's pouches, exploding it in a cloud of medical supplies. She let out a short yelp and jumped sideways, getting out of sight. The shooters were beyond the door, and from the roar of gunfire it sounded like there were a lot of them. At least five, maybe more.

Probably more. There's always fucking more.

The crash of gunfire tapered off, and I heard a mare talking over the renewed ringing in my abused ears. "Hey Ripple, that you?"

I didn't know the voice, but that it wasn't calling me Two Kick told me something. It meant that the mare talking knew me, and my curiosity took over. Peeking around the corner, I saw what I needed before pulling back to the safety of the wall.

"Come on out, let us shoot you and make this quick."

Until now, I'd fought mostly raiders and slavers that had lived in the wasteland their whole lives. That sort of upbringing seemed to take the survival instinct out of a pony. Most of the raiders I'd slaughtered had always just rushed in screaming, even if it was a very bad idea to do so. Cover was something I was behind, not something ponies shot me from.

The ponies in the hallway were barricaded behind overturned tables, well maintained weapons aimed at us and waiting for us to make our move. Most distressingly was that from what I'd seen they all had PipBucks. These were Stable ponies. Ponies I'd grown up with, ponies that knew me and had the same benefits of good health, good schooling, and self preservation.

They know me. They know what I can do. Fucking use that against them.

With the Rangers and the heavily damaged stairwell below us, we didn't have many options. We had to push through.

Then, thinking on the scene before me, I realized I'd seen that hallway before. It wasn't some vague half-memory, like how Two Kick's experiences came to me. This was mine. I'd seen it in a memory orb. We were so close to the end, and I wasn't going to let a few ponies stand in my way.

"Did you use all of the mines?" I hissed across as Ash, where he was clutching at the bleeding slash across his chest. He looked across at me, nodding regretfully. I frowned, then turned to Fluster. "Do you have any explosives?"

She paused, thinking, then drooped her head a bit. "No... sorry."

I slumped my shoulders, and nodded. We'd have to fight our way through. "Fine... we do this the hard way." The griffin simply grunted as confirmation, coming to the same conclusion.

"Ripple, come on. Just come out and let us kill you. For old times sake." I didn't know the name of the speaking mare, and I really didn't care to. She was just another part of the sickness that had spewed onto the wasteland from my Stable. She had to die. They all did if Equestria was going to get any better.

Daisy Day. Dumb as a stump, never let me between her legs. Hit her sweet tail hole more than once, though. Fun mare, if a little weird.

Shut up, Two Kick. I don't need to know who she is.

I drew Broken, checking that it was fully loaded. Ash did the same, checking his revolver and placing it back in its holster before popping the magazine on Sight. Grimacing at how much ammo he must have left, he

slapped it back in and nodded. “Okay, so here’s how we do this. You rush them, I pick off any that stick their heads up.”

I thought briefly about how many bullets were still lost in my body. I’d been shot more than I cared to think about, but if a few more bullet holes were the price I had to pay, I was willing to do it. Ash was a good enough shot, there was always the chance that I would make it through relatively unscathed.

Ash drew the revolver from where he’d just placed it, and whispered across at me. “When I start firing, move. I got six shots, then I’ll switch to the rifle. Got me?”

I nodded, psyching myself up for the suicide run I was about to make. My every muscle burned from overexertion, withdrawal, countless injuries, and exhaustion. Everything hurt, but I was as ready as I was going to be. “Okay, let’s do it.”

I fucking hate you. We’re both gonna die and I can’t even muster the energy to be angry at you.

The griffin looked me in my eye. “Kick some ass.”

Then, he wheeled out with the revolver and began snapping off shots. I was through the door, running hard. The Stableponies ducked behind their barricade made of overturned desks as the shots impacted near them, snapping off of walls and the metal barricade. That was what I’d hoped would happen. By the time the sixth shot had gone off, they were beginning to raise their weapons to return fire.

I was already in the air above the barricade. Their faces were filled with shock and rage as they saw me entering their space, and the timeslow of SATS let me see every detail as I soared over their barricade. Vines crawling on the walls and weapons slowly raising towards me, murderous intent filling the hall. One of them had a bullet going through his head from Ash’s rifle, the moment perfectly captured by SATS. I had shot a fair few ponies in the head before, but I’d never seen the skull imploding in such fine detail.

There was only one mare amongst them, Daisy Day, and she was the one that had been taunting me. I killed her first. Broken fired, the barrel only inches from her face as she screamed in rage. The buckshot tore through her lower jaw and neck, shredding her windpipe and spine in a spray of blood and meat. She was dead instantly.

Awwww.... Bye Daisy. We had fun.

I landed, immediately kicking backwards with both hooves. I hit one of them in the side, caving in rib and shredding organs as my ballistic hooves turned his insides to meat jelly. The other kick hit one in the rear, blowing that unfortunate stallion a new hole.

That left two. One of them moved faster than it seemed possible, and I realized how stupid I’d been. I grimaced as the PipBuck glinted on his foreleg. They had every advantage that I had, including SATS.

The cone of shot hit me in the side. Most of it was stopped by the pegasus vest, but several pellets punched through the material or went through the wing hole. Pain flared through my side as I took the close range shotgun blast, and it knocked me off of my hooves in a spray of blood.

With his magic he reloaded the sawed off shotgun he had just all but killed me with, and leveled both barrels at my head. The other was leering down at me, a pistol gripped in his mouth. Our plan had just failed spectacularly.

“Hate’s gonna reward me for this one.” The unicorn took a second to taunt me, and it proved his undoing. The heavy bullet from Sight to the Blind went in one ear, and out the other. Half of his head just exploded outwards, a surprised look on what was left of his face as his cranial cavity was literally blown empty.

The pony with the pistol’s jaw dropped open, the weapon clattering out onto the ground. Using all of my focus, I shot him in the face.

Then I did what I did best. I lay on the floor bleeding, trying to keep breathing.

I’m fucking shocked. I didn’t think there was a chance in hell we’d survive that. But now we get to bleed out like a bitch. I fucking hate you.

Ash hopped the barricade, followed shortly by Fluster, and kneeled next to me. “Shit.. Kick...”

I coughed, tasting blood, and grinned up at him. “What... I’ve had worse... help me up, will you?”

Fluster gave me one look, and started tearing into the bags that the stable ponies had with them. I knew she was looking for any medicine she could, but I honestly wasn’t worried. I’d survived much worse than this.

I very shakily got to my hooves, Ash seemingly unwilling to help, and I staggered against the wall for support, sinking into the vines and sending a pulse of red through the illusionary foliage. Where I laid was an impressive pool of blood. Ash had started joined in the hunt for supplies as well, and I decided I might as well see what the fuss was about.

Turning my head, I saw that the vest was all but shredded off. I could see ribs in a few places, and my white coat was no longer anything resembling white along my entire side. Blood was sheeting out of the blasted crater of flesh. My blood. I needed that blood.

The open bottle of potion was rammed into my mouth so fast that if my jaw wasn’t already hanging open, I was sure that I would have lost some teeth. “Drink!” Fluster was holding the potion with her mouth, and it was almost like she was trying to give me a kiss.

You’re getting delirious, that cunt’s a marelicker. Snap the fuck out of it, and keep us alive you stupid shit.

I gulped down the potion, and immediately started feeling better. That was all relative, because I was pretty sure that I had buckshot in my lung. It was hard to breathe. I took as deep of a breath as I could when she pulled out the bottle, one of my lungs filling with fire. She jammed in another bottle and I drained it in a second.

“Shit... shit... I think that’s all there is... Fluster, he gonna be alright?” Ash was digging through a blood-soaked bag, tossing aside ammunition and food as he looked for anything to help me. I still had a few meds left myself, and pulled out some Med-X. It was a blood thinner, true, but I felt like I really needed it right then.

As I stuck myself, I saw that most of the bullet holes in my side had already closed up from the two rapid potions. My insides still felt wrong. Every breath was like I was inhaling metal shards. I was messed up bad.

I had to get to Hate fast. I dropped the needle and hauled myself off of the wall. I began taking a few steps, but Ash stopped me. “Kick, you need a few minutes.”

I shook my head at him. I didn’t have a few minutes. “We need to stop them... no time to heal.” I burst into a coughing fit, and took a few more steps. The potion was still working on me, and it was getting easier to breathe but it still hurt like a bitch.

I stumbled down the hall, the two of them following me like a tail made of complaints. They wanted me stop, to rest, to give it a few minutes. I kept shaking my head, muttering “No.” Not gonna happen. I knew I wasn’t feeling right, but I had to get Hate. The missing blood from my short stint as the Visible Pony model didn’t matter. The blood and buckshot bouncing around in my lungs didn’t matter. I paused to cough, and actually hacked up a pellet. The vines curled around the lump of lead in a pool of blood, and that didn’t matter either.

I rounded a corner, and found the hall that I had walked down as Hopeful Leap in that first memory orb. Copper’s voice echoed in my head, a memory I hadn’t thought about in a long time. “..There are enough built in safeguards to make sure that nothing bad can come of this.” Nothing bad, my ass.

At the end of the hall was a faded yellow door with pink butterflies. Past that door was Pandemonium.

I did my best to forget the injuries burning in my side and chest, and pushed on. “Kick... talk to us.” Ash stepped in front of me, barring my passage. He placed a claw on my chest, stopping me. “Kick, you need to stop.”

The pressure of him touching me caused me to burst into another coughing fit, spattering him with blood. I was hurt bad. I needed surgery, or the mask, or to just get this over with before I bled out from the internal injuries I knew I had.

I heard a click further down the hall, but didn't have the mind to pay attention to it.

"Kick, you're going to die before you even get there if you keep pushing yourself. I saw the hit you took, it wasn't a good one. You need to let us help you here... you need to listen to me." I knew he was right. We stood a much better chance if we stuck together.

I nodded at him, blood still leaking from my mouth. "Yeah... okay." I dipped my head a little, slightly ashamed at how I'd just acted. These two were my close friends, and they were going to be with me every step of the way.

I'm gonna be right here too, you fuck. And I'm going to take my body back.

"We'll just finish up here and get you back to Shade. Maybe Miss Knife or Doc Care can fix you up, and then we'll be in the free and clear. Just watch; once we kill these ponies, life's gonna get much better around here." He was doing his best to cheer me up, and it was sort of working. Maybe this wouldn't be as hard as I expected.

Ash gave me a winning smile through the blood and dirt, holding his hands apart in a reassuring gesture. Then, turning, he took a step into the kill zone of the two gun turrets that had stood constant vigil over that door for two hundred years. The click I'd heard earlier had been their hatches sliding open as they detected movement, and they'd just been waiting for one of us to step past a faded yellow line on the ground.

"Ash!" As I remembered the weapons and called out, they opened fire simultaneously. The bullets slammed into the griffin, one burst into his shoulder and the other tearing his leg off at the knee. He spiralled backwards in a spray of blood and feathers, hitting the ground with a shriek of pain and rage. The weapons kept firing, knowing their target, and he took several more hits as Fluster and I dragged him back into the safety of the corner.

"Fuck!" Ash yelled, clutching at his ruined leg with his good arm. He'd only taken a few hits to the chest, but they were bleeding heavily. I didn't know how much medicine we had left, but I knew we'd be using it all now. I also knew that without a leg, he was in no shape to come with me, or to be left alone.

"Ash! You okay?" I asked a stupid question. He was bleeding everywhere, even as I forced our last potion to his beak and made him drink it. Like me, he still had the bullets inside, but he hadn't been hit in the torso. I just needed his leg to stop gushing blood into the rapidly growing pool under us. "Ash, hold on!"

His eyes locked onto mine, and he narrowed them. "You're gonna do something stupid..." He whispered as Fluster was busy using one of her belts as a tourniquet on his severed leg. I could only nod, knowing that he knew I intended to leave him and Fluster here.

What?

"Yeah... I can't kill Hate and drag you around at the same time." I smiled, trying to convince him I was going to be okay. No. I knew that I needed my friends to survive, but I needed even more than that to end what Hate was about to do. I had to go ahead, even if it meant I was probably going to die. "I'll see you later."

YOU FUCKING IDIOT!

I looked to Fluster, who had staunched the flow of blood, and then back to Ash. He'd passed out, from either shock or blood loss. I sort of hoped that he hadn't heard the last thing I'd said, in the event that I couldn't carry out that promise.

"You're going ahead?" Fluster was looking at me, her eye bright as it stared into mine. She looked hurt, but I had the feeling she was still in shock over the loss of her friend. Seeing Ash and me hurt that badly must have been devastating for her. If we died, she'd be alone again. I had to make sure that at least Ash survived, so that Fluster wouldn't lose everyone.

Fuck that cunt, I'm gonna lose ME! We're done, you stupid fuck, let's get out of here!

After a few seconds of staring, I nodded. The movement hurt, my insides still on fire. "Yeah, I am. I need you to take care of him... don't let him die. Just... find someplace safe." Her eye widened as I told her to go back. That she couldn't come with after all this way. That I couldn't risk any more of my friends lives fixing a

problem that was my fault.

“When he wakes up... run. Get both of you out of here. Go back to Shade and Viola and the others. Be safe.” I looked away, at the unconscious griffin.

“I’ll catch up when I can.” I lied.

I trotted away briefly, back towards where the barricade was. Blood coated everything, but I reached down and picked up a mouth-grip pistol. The taste of blood was overpowering, but I didn’t really care. Using my magic, I checked that it still had ammo, then returned to the pegasus. I dropped it at her hooves. “Just in case.”

She stared up at me, then glanced down at the pistol. I knew she knew how to use it. Any pony that had lived in the wasteland their whole life had to. Her eye looked up at me, and she nodded.

Then, without another word, I turned and headed back towards the hall with the turrets and the door. I felt a tug, and glanced back. Fluster had grabbed the end of my frayed tail in her teeth to stop me. “Ripple... be careful, okay?”

I gave her a smile that despite how ruined my face was, I knew she would understand. “I’ll do my best.”

Best to get us dead, you shit-sucking idiot.

Nodding, she turned from me and started lifting Ash’s form onto her back. I would have helped, but I had someplace to be. If there had been other ponies up here, we would have encountered them by now, so I was certain that Fluster and Ash could find someplace safe while I finished what I was there to do. Two Kick made clipped noises of utter rage and terror in the back of my head.

I returned to the corner, glancing around it cautiously. The two turrets were still tracking back and forth, hunting for any more targets to enter their kill zone. I spent at least a minute looking for a way to turn them off before my eyes settled on Sight for the Blind, which lay in the middle of the hall where it had fallen when Ash had been hit. It was too far away to risk going out to get it, so I concentrated on using my telekinesis.

Again, as always, range was an issue. I had maybe a distance half my body length around my horn that my magic was good in, but past that it was spotty at best. The rifle lay at least three body lengths away. If I could even do this, it was gonna suck.

I holstered Broken, and concentrated. Wisps of blue tinted magic formed around end of the barrel, being the nearest part to me. Emboldened by my good start, I gave it a tug. The weapon slid across the ground a few inches, and I grinned. It took another minute to retrieve the rifle, and I let out a sigh of relief when it finally got within reach of my more powerful grip.

I was drenched in sweat and exhausted. It probably wasn’t just the effort of sliding the weapon. I still had a fair amount of buckshot inside me, and I could still only take half breaths without bursting into a coughing fit. But I had in my possession a weapon I could use to kill the turrets and get to the door.

Sight was not designed with a pony in mind. Sweeps had made it specifically for Ash, and it showed. Every part of the weapon was designed for use with hands. If I was an earth pony, I would have been completely screwed.

I peaked around the corner, holding the weapon tight to my side with magic. I just had to imitate a battle saddle, and this shouldn’t be too hard. Not that I’d ever used a battle saddle before, but the theory was simple enough.

Just line it up, brace, and...

Fire.

The rifle tore itself from my grip with the shot, to no real effect. The bullet dug into the wall vaguely near the left turret, endangering it as much as one of my coughs would have. Sight went skittering across the ground as it flew free, the recoil so much greater than I had expected.

I picked it back up, and tried again. I racked the bolt, loading in another round. This time, I took longer to

aim. I positioned the gun differently. I tried breathing as regularly as I could.

My next shot tore into the center of the leftmost turret. It sputtered sparks and smoke into the hall, then its barrels dropped to the ground as it died and slumped into a mechanical death.

The third shot was just as true, now that I had the feel of the weapon. With both turrets out of the way, I stepped into the hall as I unloaded the empty casing from the weapon. When I slid the bolt back in, the weapon made a different sound than before. I'd heard it reload countless times, and this was the first time it had sounded hollow. Checking, I found that I'd only had three shots to start with. If I'd missed either of the second two, I'd have been completely fucked.

Then you could have just gotten us shot more. That's about the only thing you're really good at, isn't it. You worthless piece of shit.

I slung Sight over my back, securing it. Even if it didn't have any ammo, having Ash's weapon with me was comforting somehow. A little part of my friend for company.

You're just ignoring me. Fuck you, I'm here too.

I walked down the hall, limping as I went. I was so close. I just had to push on a bit farther, and then this would all be worth it.

I came to the door, which was closed firmly. It had just slid open in the memory, and I realized I had no idea how to get it to do that. As I stood there, unsure of my next move, my PipBuck made a whirring sound, and then a beep.

An automated voice played into the hallway. "Identity verified. Welcome Sweeps."

The door slid open with the subtle grind of unmaintained machinery. The vines parted, and gave way to the chamber within.

As I limped through the threshold, I pulled Broken from my side and made ready. The room had changed in two hundred years. It had been crowded with equipment before, but now it was much more so. Rust and thick wires filled the room, but it was obvious some of the machinery had been brought in more recently. The ceiling had fallen in in some places, spilling cords and wires from service ducts above into the room.

The room was still dominated by Pandemonium's holding tank, but I couldn't help but notice that the glass was shattered at the top where part of the ceiling had crushed it. Time hadn't been kind to the once-sealed unit, and the once rich orange liquid inside was now a sickly black. The form within couldn't be seen, and I briefly wondered if he'd rotted away entirely in the long years. Movement around the base of the tube snatched my attention away though, and I caught a flash of white between two large consoles.

Epiphany.

I picked up the pace. I didn't know where Hate was, but I knew he was in this room, or close. If I could stop whatever Epiphany was doing, and kill Hate, this would be over. I could make my deal, and fix everything.

You stupid fuck. You're still thinking about making a deal with that monster? Just kill them all and burn this place to the fucking ground. Be done with it.

I rounded a corner, aiming Broken. Epiphany looked up at me with a little smile, and I went to pull the trigger. Something hit my weapon, something moving too fast for me to see.

"What!?" I yelled reflexively, my eye following where the weapon had went. It was dangling from a metal rod that was imbedded deeply into a concrete wall. I'd seen weapons like that before, and I knew how fucked I was.

My gaze shot to the side, and I saw the red pony a split second before he fired another rod. It hit my left leg in the shoulder, punching in deep. The metal tore through muscle and shattered bone. I suddenly knew what it felt like to have a limb removed, and my leg flailed wildly on scraps of tendon as I collapsed in a spray of blood.

"Fuck! Hate!" I yelled through the intense pain tearing through the previously numb parts of my chest. I

reached for Broken, but my magic fizzled and sparked weakly.

A hoof dominated my vision, and I looked up through a haze of pain and tears. Hate was standing over me, looking down at me with a triumphant grin.

“Ripple, my brother, I should have known that was you shooting at my door. The Rangers would have been much less subtle, and then you just walked in. Curious, how you managed that, but not important.” He gripped my jaw in his magic and drew my gaze up to his, lifting me off of my ruined leg which dangled painfully. I was feeling faint, and knew that I’d lost entirely too much blood. I was going to bleed out, and that would be it.

“You must be devastated. You got so far, with so much against you, and you’re dying at my hooves for a second time. Tragic. Truly.” He looked away, towards where Epiphany was. That direction, the whiteness was threatening to consume everything. The vines were flowing freely. And I was losing the fight to stay awake.

To stay alive.

He hit me upside the head with a hoof, snapping me back to the present. “Now, my friend, don’t go falling asleep on me. I want you to see this, the moment that I’ve worked so hard for. All the sacrifice, all the evil, it will all be worth it in a few minutes.”

“Epiphany, how goes the project?” Epiphany was busy working at a table, and I could feel what was on the table. The stasis must not have been as effective as those that had held the Cubes I’d found earlier, because I could definitely feel their effect, but Pandemonium wasn’t forcing his way into my head as he seemed fond of doing.

Good. That fucking monster doesn’t belong in here.

Epiphany turned, clearing my view. All four Cubes were on the table, wired together into a thick feed running up towards the black, broken tube. The containment field was a haphazard conglomerate of metal and blinking lights, crude and rough compared to Epiphany’s usual designs. He must have been hurried.

“Yes yes, it is nearing completion.” His eyes met mine, as if he was just now aware that I was there. “Oh, so you survived. Odd, few escape my little friend’s embrace. Bravo.”

“You knew he was here? You didn’t tell me.” Hate sounded less annoyed than he could have been. I had been hoping for a fight between the two. “No matter, the issue is past us. Please begin the merging process.”

“Oh, with pleasure.” Epiphany grinned an uncharacteristically wide smile, as though this was a crowning achievement in his life. He turned, and flipped a toggle set into a generator next to him.

An electric hum filled the room, and half of the machinery clustered around us kicked to life. A few sputtered and died, kicking out sparks and smoke. This didn’t concern Hate, who now had a triumphant look on his face.

“I’ve done it.” He spoke softly to himself, stepping away from me towards the cubes.

A flash, and the whiteness consumed everything.

I was standing in a great plain of nothing. There was nothing as far as I could see, just that ever present white.

“Ah, and it finally comes together.” The voice hissed in my ear, and Pandemonium did his snaking wrap around me. I realized I was looking at him out of my left eye, and he was coiling around all four of my good working legs.

“Just like you, my messy pony. This isn’t your reality, so you don’t have to be on the edge of death. At least, not while you’re here. With me. And our mutual friend, of course.” With a flourishing gesture, he indicated towards where I found Hate. He was standing there, closely watching us.

“Pandemonium, enough with the theatrics. I did what you wanted, now grant me my wish.” Hate put his hoof

down, eager to get on with it. He was giving me a weird look, like he honestly hadn't expected me to be here.

Pandemonium popped into existence next to Hate, running a claw through the red pony's mane. "Patience. You've both been through so much to get here, how about we just take a breather."

He floated away from Hate, scratching at his chin. "As it stands, I have a quandary here. Separate parts of me cut deals with both of you to bring me back together, and you both did your parts. Equally, in fact. So now, I just have to choose..."

So this was where he betrayed me. All that work, and it was up to him if he even gave me my reward. I really should have seen it coming. Two Kick had told me not to trust him. Told me at every turn to run and leave Pandemonium behind. I should have listened, but I hadn't wanted to listen to him. He was the one that got us into this mess in the first place. From what Fraya had said, he had tried stealing Pandemonium for himself. He'd gotten himself shot and left for dead, and I'd been made to clean up his mess.

If I'd just taken the cubes and left when I'd had the chance, I could be halfway to Canterlot by now. Away from all of this, and ready to start a new life.

I'd be abandoning all of the ponies in this city then. Blank was destroyed because of me, its populace killed or homeless. Underhoof couldn't stay hidden forever. If I had left, I'd have condemned them all.

I had to make an attempt. I owed it to all the ponies that had suffered for the Stable opening.

"Your proposal... to kill my enemies, and leave me free to live my life... there are only two left." I knew he wanted to get out of Equestria. He'd been here long enough, and I figured he'd want the fastest way out. "Hate wants you to do so much more. You'll be here forever, stuck with us ponies."

Pandemonium appeared to be pondering what I had said, but Hate cut him off mid chinstroke. "Think of the chaos. I know what you live for, Pandemonium. Death, suffering, chaos. If you help me in my goal, you shall have all of that as we burn the raider scum from this land. A cleansing flame, to make room for those they preyed on."

Pandemonium curled around me like the snake he was, popping into existence with me in his grasp. "For too many years, I was trapped in four little rooms. I could see, I could hear, and nothing happened. Then, I got to see the outside." He let out a laugh. "Oh, what you ponies did to your world. Death, carnage, all of my favorite things."

He flourished a claw outwards, and the images of ponies appeared. I recognized them instantly. Every pony I'd killed since I had woken up in that field, as well as many that had died near me or because of me. Outfield and his little gang. Holepunch and Massacre. Sweeps. Willow. Bone Black. Ivory. Some of them were smiling, but I knew it was just an image to mess with my feelings. I wouldn't fall for that.

He came face to face with me, a malicious grin that I hated. I would have killed him there if I could. I knew he was about to betray me, just from the look in his eyes.

"Seeing all of that; being carried around by you as you murdered and bled and hurt. It made me rethink my want to leave this all behind. Maybe a little vengeance for how your kind treated me... killing off a great deal of ponies sounds like a good use of my time."

Without a sound, he was coiled around Hate, who had a triumphant grin on his face. The fucker had known this was going to happen. He'd let me walk in here, dragged me into this place, just so that he could watch me fail.

Again. Like he presumably had the first time Pandemonium had been involved between us. When I'd been shot and left for dead.

"No!" I stepped towards them, wishing I had a weapon. I couldn't do anything in this white realm of Pandemonium's, but I had to at least try and dissuade the creature.

"No? Always defiant. I do like that about you, my messy pony. So I shall grant you a boon. When you return to your body, you won't bleed to death. That end isn't fitting of somepony that helped me to such an extent as you." He looked at Hate, grinning widely. "Does that seem fair? *Partner?*"

Hate nodded, glaring at me with a smile. He'd won and he knew it. "Sounds good. I'll give him a quick death. I'll make sure this time."

"Oh, I'm sure you will. I staunched his wound the moment he came in here, anyways. You were always going to get your wish, anyways, I just didn't want to seem ungrateful."

His grin as the white faded to black was unnerving.

My eyes flickered open, and I found that I had collapsed on the ground. Hate was still standing where he had been before the hallucination, and I knew it had only been a second since it had started. No matter how much time happened there, it never seemed to match what was passing in real life.

What just happened? Where the fuck did you go? I had my body for a few seconds, and then you butted the fuck right back in.

I tried standing, but my left leg was still only hanging on by a few shreds. Pandemonium had made good on what he'd said though, and the pink of newly healed flesh was covering the wound, a grotesquely healthy sight contrasted with the bloody meat dangling below it. I felt incredibly weak, which meant he hadn't given me any of my blood back.

Our blood. It's still all over the fucking ground, you worthless sack of shit.

I looked around, expecting to see the coiled form of Pandemonium somewhere in the room, but it was still just we three ponies. Epiphany was approaching Hate, asking a rapid stream of questions. "Did it work? Where's the Draconequeus? Why hasn't he gotten out of the tank? What happened?"

Hate had his eyes closed, and a very pleased smile on his face. He twisted his head to the side, pulling a series of pops from his neck. Letting out a content sigh, he faced me and opened his eyes.

Where both had once been a cool silver in a white field, one was now reptilian and yellow. Pandemonium had eyes like that. He spoke, and his voice wasn't his own. It was Hate and Pandemonium's voices overlapping as one.

"Ah, it is so good to be back in a body, even if it is a frail pony body."

"Hate?" Epiphany sounded confused. I was as well, but I had a sinking suspicion that I wasn't the only pony that had just been betrayed.

Hate, or Pandemonium, narrowed his eyes. Two minds in one body I should have been used to by then, but it was still confusing to think about. My enemies glared at Epiphany from one body, and when they spoke next it was in a low hiss.

"You. Do you know what I hate more than anything? Being used!" His voice rose to a deafening yell, and several machines around us crumpled in a shower of sparks. I felt an immense pressure on my back, pushing me into the ground, but luckily I didn't share the fate of the machines.

Epiphany took a few faltering steps backwards before being yanked off of his hooves, drifting into the air. Looking at Hate, I didn't see a glow of magic. This wasn't unicorn magic. This was something else.

"You like to experiment? To toy with ponies' lives? I'm fond of that as well. Lets see how you feel about being split into pieces against your will." The creature that was my enemies snarled through bared teeth. Pandemonium had never shown this level of hostility when I'd talked to him, and I suddenly realized I'd been played. He'd been acting. This thing was a monster the scale of which I'd never conceived.

Epiphany started screaming as his legs pulled in different directions. His muscles twitched and jerked under his coat as they pulled and tore. Blood began running from seams that split open in his skin, and his scream cracked and gurgled as he tore his voice box. Still, he kept screaming, a wet gurgling cry.

Run.

With an explosion of blood, he was torn into four chunks. The four chunks floated there briefly, his head hanging limply with a shocked expression from one of them, before the pieces dropped unceremoniously

into a wet pile of meat.

Run!

I was not looking forward to the death that had been promised me. I think I would have preferred bleeding out.

RUN!

Hate/Pandemonium turned to me, a pleased grin on his face. Then he paused, the look changing to a puzzled one. Blood began streaming from his eyes and nose, and he took a step back.

“What?” Using a fetlock, he wiped the blood from his face and looked at it. “Oh. Stupid, pathetic pony body... can’t take the strain. Useless, your entire species.”

He turned his blood filled eyes to the tube where his body was. “Time. I could never alter time... or I’d have my body back. Too decayed and damaged...” It was like he was talking to himself, like he’d forgotten I was even there.

RUN YOU STUPID FUCKER!

I only had three legs. Four if you counted the useless dead lump of meat and bone still tied to my shoulder. I couldn’t run if I wanted to. I could barely keep my eyes open.

I had to stop him.

I pulled myself to my hooves as best I could, and took a shambling step forward. Moving on three was difficult, but it could be done. Pushing myself, I started moving faster towards him as he walked away from me, still talking to himself.

“Phenomenal cosmic power... and I can’t use it. I have to find another body. Maybe Discord... wherever he is. A hydra?” He tilted his head back as he worked through his plan out loud. He stamped a hoof in triumph, letting out a shout. “An ursa major. That would do the trick!”

“A teleport shouldn’t do too much damage.” He closed his eyes, concentrating, and I almost shouted in joy at the luck. The chance he’d just given me.

With Broken still nailed to the wall, I was still allowed my most potent weapons. The weapons I had been named for. What I was known for.

My weapons. My name. My body! Do as I fucking tell you, and run! Get out of here!

I had made a loping trot, going as fast as I reasonably could. The distance was short, but I was moving slow. I had to make it to him before he teleported. I couldn’t let him get away. I’d never find him.

I had to shed some weight. I slipped the strap of Sight to the Blind from around my neck, and the weapon clattered noisily to the ground.

He opened his eyes just in time, as I summoned the last of my strength and threw myself into that old pivot. The killing blow, so worn into my muscles. The pivot was off with only one leg to turn on, but my rear hooves stabbed out like my rage made manifest. The two shotguns hit at the same time, as Pandemonium screamed at me. “NO!”

There was a roar, and a blinding white light, and then nothing.

Ash pulled himself into the destroyed room. The sun was coming up, bravely warming the rubble through the thin clouds. The walls and ceiling were gone, along with the a chunk of the peak, cleared by the blast that had shaken the entire mountain a few hours earlier.

The griffin was supported on Fluster’s back, using her as an impromptu crutch. The two of them gazed around the destroyed room, looking for any sign of their friend. Blood was pooled everywhere, scorched to a congealed stickiness by the heat of the explosion.

“Kick! Kick, where are you!?” Ash called, his voice hoarse and weak in the thin mountain air. If anypony could have survived, it was his friend. His best friend. He’d been through so much, a little explosion wouldn’t have been able to put him down.

“Ash... look.” Fluster’s voice was small and scared as she indicated towards the shattered remains of a wall. Ash was afraid of what he would see, but looked anyways.

There, against a blackened outline on the wall, hanging from a metal spike, was Broken. Ripple’s shotgun, the weapon he always had with him. Pristine. Untouched. The one thing in the entire room that hadn’t been destroyed in the explosion.

Ash stumbled forward, pulling away from the pegasus and hopping unsteadily to the weapon. He fell down right before it, and pulled himself up on the wall. He reached for the weapon gingerly, as though not wanting its existence to be true. Reaching out, he pulled it from its place on the wall and stared at it, disbelieving. He fell again, but slid down against the wall in a braced position.

“No. He said he’d come back...” Tears ran from Fluster’s eye as she stood there, watching the griffin cradle the shotgun like a wounded infant.

After a few moments, the griffin pulled himself back up, Broken held in one hand. “Damnit Kick... damnit.”

Following the blast to its source, the griffin spotted his rifle laying beneath a small chunk of wall. Pulling it free, he propped it under his arm, using the weapon as a crutch in place of the pegasus who was following him, muttering “No...” to herself.

Reaching the center of the blast, he only saw a space on the ground that was clear of any blackened marks, a rounded section of floor dug out in a smooth bowl. Spotting something under a broken console, he reached down and snatched it up.

In his claw he held a PipBuck, the scorched and severed leg of a pony within it. Seeing it, Fluster burst into tears, wailing and beating her hooves on the ground. Ash comforted her as best he could, staring at the chunk of pony in his grip. It wasn’t enough, as far as the griffin was concerned. He needed more.

“Where are you, Kick?”

Epilogue

“Ash is back?!” The blue pony entered the room so quickly she slid when she stopped. Bright eyes of blue and violet quickly scanned across the faces in the room. Rail Spikes, Traffic, Raw Deal, and Vigil stood looking at her, but her attention was firmly fixed on the griffin standing amongst them.

Her face fell as he shook his head. “Sorry Shade... nothing.”

Her eager stance fell into a dejected slump, and she turned. “Oh...” Turning, she left the way she had so eagerly entered.

Ash excused himself. “Miss Traffic.” A nod to the others, and then he followed the mare outside.

The streets had been cleaned up in the last year and a half. The ponies from Blank, escaped slaves from Neighwhere, and pockets of survivors scattered about Hornsmith had rallied. The area directly above Underhoof had been cleared out, shored up, and occupied. Jokingly, Ash had called it ‘Hoof’, and despite all the complaints and jokes, it had stuck.

Shade was leaning on a wall near the door, out of the rain. As Ash got closer, he could see that she was crying. He put a claw to her shoulder, trying to soothe her. “Shade... I’m sorry. I looked... but its crazy up north. The ‘Clavers, Red Eye’s scattered mob, its just not safe. It’s crazy... finding one pony in all that is not easy.”

“I know... I know I shouldn’t get my hopes up, but I just so want him back. I want him to meet her... to be there for her.” Her eyes were sad. He had rarely seen them any other way since he’d come back down the mountain, half dead and without Ripple.

“Where is she?” He knew that the one thing that could take Shade’s mind off of Ripple was her daughter. That foal was her everything now that Ripple was absent, which was the word Shade insisted everyone use instead of ‘dead’. Dead was final. Absent left that little chance that she clung to.

“She’s with Fluster. I’m... I know she’ll be happy to see you.” She turned away, hiding her tears from him. She never liked crying in front of anyone, never liked showing how hurt she was. Ash understood this, and gave her a light pat on the back. Her foal always reminded her of Ripple, so that even when she was happily spending time with the little filly, she had tears in her eyes.

“There’s always next time, and any news we get from traders. A guy like Ripple will stick out, we’ll hear something eventually.” Ash had really been doubting his own words. Every time he reassured Shade, part of him stopped believing just a little more. He went out with caravans, or as part of the greeting party for any travellers. A few questions here and there, all aimed at finding his lost friend.

He hadn’t found a single shred of evidence that Ripple was still alive. Not in a year of searching.

Shade nodded sadly, and left Ash her behind. From the look of the saddles at her side brimming with tools and scrap, she was working hard today. Her talent for repair had proven very useful in building this town, and her constant maintenance was required. Technically skilled ponies were hard to come by in the wasteland, especially now that so many had headed north to find the pony that had defeated Red Eye and killed off the Goddess. They saw it as a new life, a fresh start away from the memories of Hornsmith.

Ash had talked to ponies in the north. It wasn’t the wonderful utopia that was spoken about in taverns and around campfires. It might be. Some day. But it had a long way to go before then.

Walking down the street, he sighed and tilted his head back, letting the water run through his feathers. He’d just gotten back from a raider hunt up along the tracks running north, and was looking forward to a little down time. But first, he’d stop by and say hello to the only part of his friend he had left.

Pushing the door open, he heard a soft voice call out from inside. “Shade? That you?”

He grinned at the voice. She always sounded so happy when she was around kids. He was glad. Fluster had

been a complete wreck after the mountain. She'd been suicidal, and it was only thanks to Xiera and her foal that another part of their little group hadn't died.

Xiera's foal had brought Fluster back from the brink. The pegasus had an affinity for the young, and had spent much of her time around them. Even if she would never have any of her own body, she flourished and grew stable taking care of Xiera's and the town's children. When the little zony needed looking after, she made a natural caretaker. Shade's delivery had brought another filly into her fold. The children had been her greatest trust and saving grace.

"It's me. I'm back." He turned the corner into the main room, a converted office. The building that Shade and Fluster lived in had once been a travel agency, as far as they could tell, and had a spacious main room. Faded posters of far off lands lined the walls.

Fluster looked up at him, her scars shining in the soft light. She hadn't worn her robe in half a year, and was healed from her adventures. Her coat had a healthy shine to it, and her eye sparkled. Those fillies had saved her life. Her face darkened slightly as she looked past him into the hall, and she nodded. She'd been losing hope of ever seeing Ripple again, and was less and less sad when Ash returned empty clawed.

On a desk in the corner lay a minigun. Fluster had gone back into the tunnels one night, a few months after the event. She'd buried her closest friend alone, and come back with the hefty weapon strapped across her back. Ever since, it had sat in this room, a bulky, lethal memorial to Ivory's sacrifice.

A light bark from one corner drew his attention to Fern, who was now a full grown timber wolf. Despite being a natural predator of ponies, he sat vigil in the corner, watching his master play with the two children. He'd grown too big for the pouches Fluster didn't wear anymore, but he still followed her everywhere. He'd even killed in her defense once or twice. In the community, the fierce animal bought a lot of respect for his timid, scarred master.

"How are the kids?" Ash crouched down, his prosthetic leg creaking a little as he did so. The little white foal was playing on the ground, and she squealed with delight when she saw Ash. Making her way clumsily to the griffin, she hugged his outstretched talons, which he was careful to keep from stabbing her.

"Hey there, kid. How's my little gal doing?" The coo she gave was worth the week long trip he'd just taken to a warzone. He smiled at her, and then at the second foal that trundled over. The little zony scowled up at him, and he chuckled. "And my little ass kicker too."

"Ash, you know Xiera doesn't like you swearing around the little ones." Fluster scooped the little zony up under her wing, where she began kicking her legs in an attempt to get back on the ground. "Especially not around Ziel. She's already picking up enough bad language as it is."

From the feathery prison a small voice called out "Ass kicker!" and Fluster used her other wing to rub the bridge of her nose. "See? Now I have to explain that to her mother."

Ash shrugged. "Sorry. Just tell Xiera to yell at me." Then, tickling the little filly latched onto his hand, Ash looked evenly at Fluster. "How are you doing?"

Shrugging, she placed the kicking filly back on the ground and use her scarred wing to play with her. "I'm doing good. I really am." She smiled. "I don't think you need to worry about me anymore."

He chuckled. "Well, I'll never stop worrying. That's sort of my job." Ash shrugged, feeling the weight of Sight for the Blind on his shoulder. He gave the little filly a last tickle, his wicked talons gentle with the young zony. Standing, he tipped the edge of his hood like a hat. His tone formal, he bid them farewell.

"Ladies."

Back in the streets, the rain was beginning to let up, and ponies were coming out of their homes. There was always something to be done. Repairs to be made, dangers to be faced. Above and below. The wasteland was still a dangerous place, for everyone. Ash nodded at the Whitecoats scattered amongst the various refugees..

The griffin was a member in every way except officially. He'd never donned the white, as they called it. He'd just fought alongside them so frequently that they had come to see him as one of their own. He was friends with their head trainer, and had helped their leader Vigil pull them out of the ruin they had been in after the

Battle of Blank. They had a home now, a place to fight for. Some of them had started families. The wandering army they once were was gone, and they'd slid easily into the role of regional guardians.

Mostly. Some of the Whitecoats had been infuriated at the 'defection' from their nomadic ways. In the first days, about half of their number had left. There had been no word from them in over a year, and most folks had forgotten about them. Ash knew that Shade still worried. The leader of that splinter faction had threatened her, threatened Ripple, in the past.

"Hey, Ash! Look alive!" The griffin snapped out of it, and realized that a pony had been walking next to him. Looking down, he saw the shriveled flesh and melted gasmask of Viola. The mare was looking expectantly, like she was waiting for an answer.

"Sorry, what?"

She sighed, and repeated herself. "Did you hear about the latest attack?"

He stopped and turned to face her, putting his claws on the revolver at his side. "Attack? Where?"

Waving a fetlock, she motioned down his gun. He always got jumpy at the mention of attack. The smile in her eyes told him she'd worded it so that she could get a rise out of him. "Oh, it was three days ago."

The look in her eyes was then no longer one of laughter. It was grim, and it was serious. "Those things are getting more bold. Gnashers we can handle... but those things? They're just not right... not right at all."

"Dwellers? How many did we lose?" After Maremack, the monsters had come down the mountain. Without Epiphany, they had scattered, and made their ways into the deep, dark areas of Hornsmith.

"Just one. Cannon. Got pulled into an air duct while he was guarding a repair team." She sighed, but they both knew what that meant. A stallion got taken. That meant he was eaten, and not... used. They'd both seen what happened if a mare got taken. Eaten was preferable.

Griffin and ghouls shuddered in unison, and then kept walking.

"Torque came up with a plan though." Viola was smiling again. While she had settled down, that mare still jumped emotions too fast to follow. "We send another salvage team up into Maremack. Take a few wagons, and focus on stripping every turret we can find. Wire them up, provide ammunition, and we could really put a dent in their attacks." She stamped a hoof for emphasis. "Let them go off and eat somepony else for a change."

"Neighwhere?"

"Here's hoping. Let them burn and eat each other to their hearts' content." Viola shrugged, clearly hoping that her job would get a little easier. Rail Spikes had given up the security life, instead helping to manage the merging of the Underhoofers and the ponies from aboveground. Viola had been in charge of security since, and the job took up most of the mercurial mare's time. Ash pitched in where he could, but he was a busy griffin. He knew that Viola hadn't just brought this up to get him up to speed.

"Okay Viola, I'm in on the scavenger hunt. Keep me informed." She nodded happily that he had accepted her unasked request, and thanked him. The ghouls disappeared into a side street, headed towards one of the ways underground.

"Just so long as I don't have to go into the tunnels..." He muttered under his breath. Walking the streets, he greeted ponies he recognized, and eyed warily the ones he didn't.

He came to a large building, one of the few that was still serving the same purpose it had before the war. It was a storehouse. Weapons, food, supplies of all sorts. Almost everything the town was kept here, and it was easily the most defended building in the entire settlement. Two Whitecoats in heavy barding stood near the main door, support weapons slung on their sides. They wore gas masks, to add to the intimidation as faceless sentinels. It worked; there hadn't been a single attempt to steal since the guards had been implemented.

Ash nodded at them, and they let him through. The space inside was cavernous, but cluttered. Piles of supplies scavenged or traded were stacked to the roof in some places. Rows of weapons were in neat stacks

along one wall. Most of their armory was what they could salvage out of the ruins of Neighwhere before the surviving raiders pushed them out.

A rustling to his side made Ash jump, and an unamused Gristle walked past him. "More stuff for me to catalog? I'm busy. Torque has me looking for a samophlange. I'm pretty sure he made that word up... but I gotta look anyways. Just dump the bag over there and go."

Ash took the bag of supplies off his shoulder and dropped it on the table, watching the little blue buck rifle through a cabinet filled with mechanical parts. Ash knew what Torque would be working on before he even looked towards the back of the warehouse.

The severed head of one of those giant robots the Rangers had used, its optics crudely removed at some point in the past. It had been about a half a year after Maremack that Ash had run across the robot, trapped in a gully. It had run out of power some time before he'd found it, and had sat there inactive. He'd only spotted it because he'd been flying. The robot itself was far too cumbersome to get out, but they had removed its head to try and make use of the heavy weaponry set into it.

Ever since, the head and its weapons had lurked at the rear of the warehouse. Torque had made it his pet project, trying to understand how it all worked, just in case the Rangers ever decided to turn the other two of its kind on the town.

The Rangers had taken what they could and retreated back to Orchard. They'd mostly taken the bodies and armor of their fallen comrades, but they'd torn quite a bit of hardware out of the facility before Ash had led the first salvage team back up the mountain. Since then, the Rangers had been practically a non-entity in Hornsmith. If anypony was dumb enough to go near Orchard, they'd be killed on sight, but other than that there had been no activity.

Torque was half inside the head through a maintenance hatch, and his humming could be heard reverberating through the machine. Ash didn't like interrupting him when he was working though, so turned to leave. He'd done what he had come to do. Gristle had disappeared into another pile of equipment, so Ash just made his leave without saying anything to either stallion.

Outside, past the guards, he looked up at the cloudy sky. It was getting late, and he felt that he'd earned some rest. Mind set, he turned and walked down the street towards the main gate.

Ash stopped under an awning, watching each face as they passed by him. Coming through the front gate was a caravan from the east, if he had to guess at their origin. As he watched, he ran a talon along his hand, where his friend's daughter had clung earlier. He sighed, opening the door he'd been leaning against and heading up the stairs. The top floor was where he called home. The room held a few mementoes and prizes the griffin had accumulated over the years, but the most important thing was what he had hidden away. Wiping moisture from Sight for the blind, he hung the large rifle on its stand.

In the fading light he lit a candle, preferring the flickering firelight to the hum of the lamp he had propped in one corner. He dropped his bag on the ground, intending to deal with it later, and took off his travelling cloak. Slicking the feathers on his head back with one claw, he scanned the room. He didn't lock the door while he was gone, in case the girls had any reason to come in. Everything was in its place, as usual.

He flopped onto the nestlike assortment of mattresses and blankets he'd accumulated, letting the last few weeks of stress slip away. Reaching into a hidden place under the table next to him, he pulled out a beaten book, bound in fading leather. The quill and ink on the table sat ready for him, and he was writing in seconds.

Hey, Kick.

Your daughter looks ridiculous. Just like you. She reminds us of you... she has one of your eyes. Wish you could meet her, but let's face it... you're dead. This will be the last time I do this. I have to move on... I have to face facts. It will never be the same without you, but I have to admit that you're not coming back. Ponies rely on me now. This used to be your job, and I really hope that I can make you proud here.

You did good. The wasteland is a better place now.

Goodbye Ripple.

He stared at the letter for a few minutes, letting it sink in. He had to come to terms. He had to stop writing to a dead friend.

Tearing the page out of the book, he held the message before him, reading it one more time. With a single motion, he dipped the page into the flame, letting it catch fire. The old paper went up quick, but he held on even as the flame danced around his talons. The burnt paper crumbled and drifted softly to the floor.

Closing the journal, he briefly considered burning the rest of it. Deciding against destroying history, he tucked the book back in its secret spot and blew out the candle. Night was setting in outside, and he let the darkness wash into the room.

Staring at the ceiling, he smiled sadly to himself. The sound of rain on the roof was all he could hear. Rain was one of the few constants in his life.